

ESOL Qualifications and Curriculum Review

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Foreword

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

In the 2021 Census, more than one million people in England and Wales reported that they could not speak English “well” or “at all” – more than one-third of whom are British citizens with skills, knowledge, and experience that are going unrecognised and underutilised because of systemic language barriers.

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. This is timely given the Government’s mission-based agenda driving a focus on breaking down the barriers to opportunity while also seeking to promote economic growth – areas of policy which ESOL reform can help to address.

At The Bell Foundation, our work aims to overcome exclusion through language education by working with partners on innovation, research, training, and practical interventions. This report is driven by our commitment to collaboration and evidence. Following a consultation with practitioners and experts from across the ESOL sector, we explore current ESOL qualifications, the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum, and classroom practice. Respondents to the consultation expressed wide agreement that reform is essential for effective language learning, reliable and valid assessment, and regulation. We provide recommendations for improvement, so that ESOL provision is informed by the evidence of what works as well as the needs and priorities of learners.

Qualification and curriculum reform offers the chance to ensure that ESOL has a wider role to play in helping to meet the Government’s ambitions for growth. This was highlighted in the 2024 ‘Get Britain Working’ White Paper, which identified “residents without English as a first language [who] cannot speak it well” as a group whose upskilling would yield significant personal benefits to the learner and economic benefits to the country. We hope that our recommendations will be valuable and insightful to policymakers, regulators, and standards setters, Ofqual, and funding bodies* alike.

Finally, I would like to express our sincere thanks to the individuals and organisations who responded to the consultation that shaped this document, 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 this document.

1 Introduction and context

The target audience for this review is policymakers, regulators and standards setters, within Government, Ofqual, Ofsted as well as funding bodies and Further Education and Skills (FES) providers.

The review is about the provision for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), its core curriculum and exams. Its context is specific to FES provision as it is delivered in England. However, many of the standards, curricula, and qualifications discussed in this review are also used in Wales and Northern Ireland, meaning that the content of this review may be relevant to other home nations. In terms of access and eligibility, providers are required to check learners' residency status, as access to ESOL provision requires learners to have British citizenship, refugee/asylum-seeking status, migrant-settled status or a work visa.

The purpose of the review is threefold:

- To set out the impact of the ESOL core curriculum and qualifications on teaching, learning and assessment, learners' progress and progression to further study and employment.
- To shed light on the extent to which ESOL provision meets the language learning needs of people whose first language is not English: the need for language for daily life - which is covered in the ESOL core curriculum – and language for study and the workplace – which is not. Yet the latter type of language skills is important because second language speakers can make a significant contribution to the economy and the UK labour market, provided they have sufficient English language skills; and employment forms a major road to integration.
- To present practical proposals, informed by research evidence, to develop ESOL standards, qualifications and teaching methodology. The need for change arises because the Skills for Life ESOL curriculum and qualifications are 20 years old and in need of reform.

The structure of the paper is as follows:

- Section 2 sets out key facts on ESOL learners and provision which underpin the rest of the paper
- Sections 3-10 provide an analysis of ESOL provision and an evaluation of its impact on learners' progress and achievement, accompanied by recommendations for improvement
- Appendix 1 provides detail on respondents' responses to the first version of this paper as well as an overview of their comments
- Appendix 2 records respondents' comments on important aspects beyond the direct scope of this paper, e.g. on funding and the need for access to ESOL provision
- Appendix 3 contains the data analysis of ESOL learners on regulated and non-regulated provision

This document is the second version of the ESOL Qualifications and Curriculum review. For the first version, published in May 2024, The Bell Foundation consulted the sector widely: over 130 individuals and groups of experts and practitioners responded, ranging from adult education providers, further education colleges, local authorities, awarding bodies, Government departments, charities, and mayoral combined authorities (as they were called

at the time). Appendix 1 shows very high endorsement of the paper and its recommendations, ranging from 85% to 97%.

The second version, published in March 2026, reflects recent Government policy changes, e.g. on the introduction of the Adult Skills Fund, Tailored Learning, and the release of new DfE data on learners of ESOL.

2 Key information on learners, qualifications and course provision

This section sets out key facts and data on people who do not have English as their first language. This includes both adult learners, i.e. those 19 and older, and 16–19-year-olds who attend study programmes. While the two age groups are on differently funded programmes, they attend the same type of provision and take the same ESOL exams.

The information and data given in the box below underpins the content of the rest of this document.

The profile of migrants, refugees, and British citizens who have English language needs

- The language skills of learners who speak English as their second or other language vary enormously, from no English at all to high proficiency in professional domains. Their education, skills and experience also differ, from no or disrupted prior education in their country of origin/residence to post-graduate qualifications and very high expertise.
- The proportion of migrants and refugees with tertiary education living in the UK is high and rising. OECD data indicate that in 2021 50% were educated at tertiary level (compared to 39% of UK-born citizens); 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 (Office for National Statistics, 2021), 5.1 million people (8.9% of the population) 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 indicated that they spoke English well or very well; 19% of females and 15% of males that they did not speak English well; and 4% of females and 2% of males that they did 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; see the table below. Census data are self-reported and the number of adults needing English language provision in England and Wales to function in society and work may in fact be much higher. There is also evidence that second and third generations born in England may lack sufficient English language skills to handle day-to-day communication and find employment beyond casual work (Schellekens, 2005). For example, the 2021 Census showed that 23,000 people who were born in England and Wales did not speak English at all or did not speak it well.

Fig. 1: Male-female speakers of English as another language aged 16-64

Proficiency in English Language	Female	Male
Can speak English very well or well	1,543,177	1,495,687
Cannot speak English well	373,673	279,957
Cannot speak English	53,965	32,403

- The high level of skills and experience that very many 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: their highest priority by far is to learn English for work and study (Schellekens, 2001).
- Yet the vast majority of learners currently leave ESOL provision with too low English language skills 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 as a result, 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/previous residence need extra time to learn English. With adequate time to learn and the right methodology, many are able to overcome educational disadvantage and gain qualifications. For this group of learners, with long language learning trajectories ahead, evidence-based teaching and appropriate sequencing of content are especially key.

Provision and funding

- The funding of ESOL adult 19+ provision has seen major fluctuation from 2010 onwards, both in terms of the funding per learner and the number of places available. Between 2009/10 and 2017/18 the number of learners participating in ESOL provision fell dramatically by 36% from 179,000 to 114,000 (Department for Education (DfE) 2023). Then from 2021/22 onwards the number of enrolments has increased, as the data in Figs. 2 to 4 and Appendix 3 show. However, the cut in adult ESOL funding announced in 2025 cannot but create negative impact once again on the number of places and hours of ESOL provision available to learners.
- Adult pre-Entry and Entry 1-3 provision continues to draw the vast majority of the Adult Skills Fund. Entry provision also draws most of the short-term Government project funding that is periodically released.
- Provision for learners who need to improve their English and maths skills is free; 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 British citizens: the 2021 Census shows that, of 759,000 people of working age who reported that they cannot speak English well or at all, 35% have British nationality. This means that ESOL learners do not have equality of access to provision as their peers who speak English as their first language.

The hours needed to learn English

The funding and hours of tuition available for ESOL study are not sufficient to enable learners to make the progress required to function in society, education, and work (see also the summary of sector feedback in Appendix 2). Research on language learning that most closely reflects the experience of ESOL learners who are migrants or refugees was conducted in Australia. Canberra Technical and Further Education data, subsequently verified by the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade, found that it takes on average 1765 hours for learners to gain independence and employment (Schellekens, 2001). On the basis of **four hours' language lessons a week, the average learner in England would need 14.5 years to use English well enough** to get a job or attend and complete a vocational course. A study by the National Center for ESL Literacy Education in 2003 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. Otherwise, studies on learners of ESOL and the length of time to learn another language are thin on the ground.

LSIPs and Accountability agreements as planning tools

Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) and Accountability Agreements provide excellent opportunities to plan language provision which makes best use of ESOL learners' prior skills and experience. However, the focus on ESOL learners and their progression towards labour market opportunities remains an area for development.

Ofsted enhanced skills inspection

Ofsted's enhanced skills inspections have the potential to identify and monitor the skills development of learners beyond discrete ESOL provision and the contribution that they make to meeting local, regional, and national skills needs. However, despite the valuable skills and experience of many second language speakers, Ofsted does not identify progression to mainstream provision and employment as a focus for inspection.

Data on second language speakers' participation, enrolment and achievement

- The Government has recently made significant changes to the recording of adult ESOL participation, enrolment and achievement. This has resulted in a much fuller picture of access to provision and achievement.

Up to 2022/23, the DfE data reported on 19+ ESOL Skills for Life qualifications for Entry 1-3 and Levels 1 and 2, as well as some formula-funded non-regulated provision. Community learning and some formula funded non-regulated aims ESOL aims were not included in the statistics.

From 2023/24 onwards, the DfE included data on ESOL community learning along with data on education & training (i.e. Skills for Life ESOL). As a result, pre-Entry ESOL is included in the data for the first time, i.e. learners who are at the very first stage of language learning and who need extensive support before they can move to accredited Entry 1 provision. The second major change came in 2024/25 with the replacement of community learning with Tailored learning.

Thus, the new DfE data sets from 2023/24 provide a much more comprehensive picture of adult ESOL learners' participation, enrolments and achievements. They make visible

for the first time the considerable numbers of enrolments, participation and achievements of learners who benefit from non-regulated ESOL provision.

- Please note that, to create consistency across the DfE 2019/20 to 2024/25 reports, the data and tables prior to 2023/24 have been retrofitted to the new calculation principles. This means that the DfE data tables produced before 2023/24 are not compatible with the current release.

Figs. 2-4 below show the DfE reporting format by three categories:

- **Participation:** this is the number of learners who took part in at least one ESOL course in a given year. Learners are counted once in the total participation figures, regardless of the number of courses on which they enrol. However, if learners study for more than one learning aim at different levels (i.e. a mixture of Entry, Level 1 and/or Level 2), these learners are counted once against each level that they enrol for.
- **Enrolment:** the total number of ESOL learning aims for which learners enrol in one academic year. For example, if a learner on Skills for Life provision enrolls for the three modes of speaking/listening, reading and writing, these would count as three enrolments.
- **Achievement:** the number of learners who have passed one or more externally set exam(s) and/or met internally set and assessed outcomes, e.g. under Tailored Learning. As with the participation category, learners achieving more than one outcome are counted once per level and once in the total achievement data.

DfE ESOL data analysis

Figs. 2-4 below set out the combined total numbers for adult 19+ ESOL provision by the three participation, enrolment and achievement categories explained above. For a breakdown by regulated and non-regulated provision, which will be of interest to those with an interest in Skills for Life and community-funded learning, please see Appendix 3.

Fig. 2 Participation: Adult ESOL combined regulated & non-regulated provision

	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24	24/25
Total	124,640	103,090	133,710	155,070	168,030	168,730
Entry	103,580	84,690	113,840	133,460	144,500	143,980
	83%	82%	85%	86%	86%	85%
Level 1	19,270	17,380	19,200	22,210	23,860	23,850
	15%	17%	14%	14%	14%	14%
Level 2	6,700	6,410	6,570	7,400	8,080	8,470
	5%	6%	5%	5%	5%	5%

Fig. 3 Enrolment: Adult ESOL combined regulated & non-regulated provision

	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24	24/25
Total	242,870	215,380	275,560	333,080	368,040	368,660
Entry	196,090	169,850	226,330	275,810	303,930	303,360
Level 1	34,320	32,890	36,370	42,670	47,940	48,100
Level 2	12,460	12,650	12,850	14,600	16,180	17,200

Fig. 4 Achievement: Adult ESOL Combined for regulated & non-regulated provision

	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24	24/25
Total	107,310	90,240	116,010	136,470	148,320	149,280
Entry	88,960	74,040	89,800	117,360	127,320	127,380
	83%	82%	77%	86%	86%	85%
Level 1	15,940	14,750	16,050	19,050	20,380	20,290
	15%	16%	14%	14%	14%	14%

Level 2	5,640	5,420	5,480	6,240	6,890	7,180
	5%	6%	5%	4%	5%	5%

Analysis of adult participation, enrolments and achievement

- Fig. 2 shows that in 2024/25 almost 169,000 learners participated in ESOL provision. Of these, 105,000 attended regulated provision and 97,000 non-regulated (see Appendix 3). This means that 33,000 learners attended both regulated and non-regulated provision, as learners' participation at the combined level is only counted once in the amalgamated table. The new DfE data reports also provide us with new insight into the nature of the ESOL learning population: similar proportions of ESOL learners attended regulated (105,000) and non-regulated (97,000) provision in 2024/25.
- Fig. 2 on participation shows that the proportions of learners' participation at Entry, Level 1 and Level 2 have stayed the same over time: 85% of adult ESOL learners enrol on pre-Entry and Entry 1-3 provision, after which numbers taper off markedly to 15% for Level 1 and 5% for Level 2. This is despite the recent inclusion of data on community/tailored learning in the data tables. This indicates a continuing imbalance of provision, with the vast majority of ESOL learners leaving ESOL with too-low-level English skills to function in society and employment and undertake further education and training.
- Figs. 2 and 3 on participation and enrolment show that in 2024/25 almost 169,00 learners enrolled for 368,660 learning aims between them. Learners on non-regulated provision (e.g Tailored learning), typically enrolled for 1.6 learning aims in one year; while learners on regulated Skills for Life provision enrolled for 1.9 out of the three modes of speaking/listening, reading, and writing at the same level. This indicates that one third of ESOL learners on Skills for Life courses do not complete the full qualification in one academic year.
- Figs. 2 and 4 show that of the almost 169,00 learners in 2024/25, 149,280 or 88% achieved at least one outcome. The same trend is seen over time: the percentage of achievement for regulated and non-regulated types of provision is consistently at 88%.

Analysis of young learners' participation on study programmes

The DfE do not publish headline data on ESOL learning aims for 16-19 young learners on study programmes. However, data are available in DfE underlying files for enrolments and achievements across age groups. These data show that there were approximately 33,500 ESOL enrolments for young learners in 2023/24 and approximately 27,300 aims achievements.

The total number of learners who have ESOL as a main qualification aim

The DfE data on the total number of learners with an ESOL main qualification aim indicates that nearly 169,000 adult and 33,500 young learners fall into this category. This means that **202,500 adult and young learners enrolled for ESOL as main learning aim in 2024/25.**

Second language speakers' participation in FES mainstream provision

The sector has no data on second language speakers who have English language needs and who are studying on non-ESOL programmes: study programmes, vocational training, apprenticeships, skills bootcamps, GCSE and functional skills English as well as provision for learners with high needs. (See also Section 7 on the need for data on learners across FES provision).

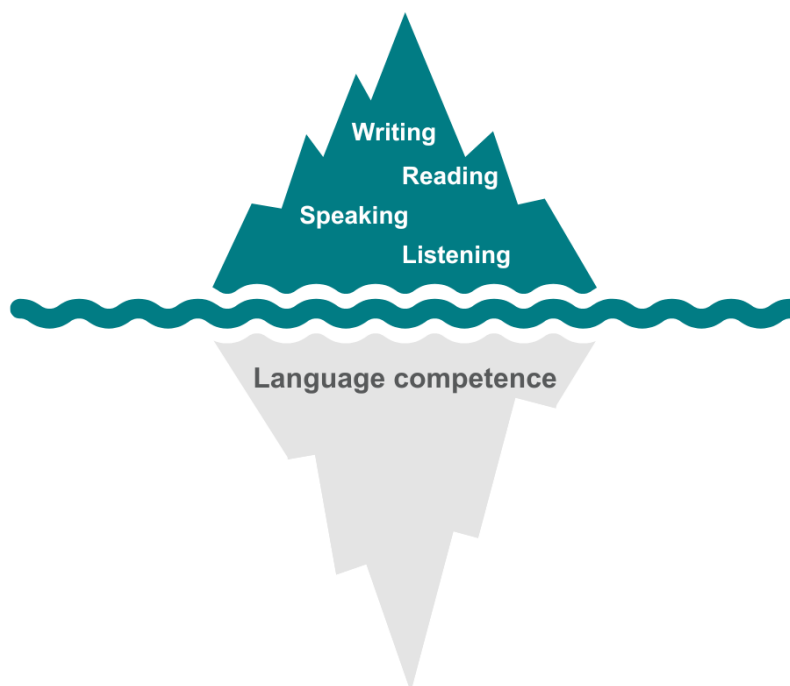
3 Revision of the ESOL core curriculum and the use of the National Standards for Adult Literacy

The ESOL core curriculum is 20 years old, its linguistic framework is out of date and no longer in line with research evidence on second language acquisition. Instances abound of inaccurate sequencing of language development, which are out of line with e.g. Ofsted's FES Toolkit 2025 criteria for curriculum, teaching and training: 'Plan learning logically and systematically, sequencing content so that new concepts build on prior learning'.

Secondly, key and well-attested aspects of language learning are barely covered. For example, vocabulary learning is limited to only a handful mentions in the curriculum descriptors to describe likes, dislikes and feelings, and in formal and informal contexts. More importantly, the curriculum descriptors lack a systematic focus on the learning of vocabulary and word building skills. A second example of the limitations of the ESOL core curriculum is the combined treatment of speaking and listening, derived from the adult literacy standards. This has led to an inadequate focus on the development of listening skills.

These and other misalignments have resulted in a negative impact on the quality and impact of teaching and learning on the progress that learners make. As a result, learning time and ESOL funding are not spent as effectively as they could and should.

Fig. 4: Language competence and the four language skills



The decision in 2001 to base the ESOL core curriculum on the adult literacy standards has had a negative impact on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. It has imposed learning objectives designed for first language speakers (who are fluent in English but mainly work on developing their reading and writing skills) on ESOL learners (who need to develop the underpinning English language competence as well as the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The iceberg picture in Fig. 4 above visualises these in terms of observable and unobservable parts of language use. The modes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing form **tangible** evidence of language production and reception. By

contrast, the language competence to understand and produce language is **invisible**, e.g. grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

Schellekens (2011) sets out in detail the differences between the language profiles and learning needs of first and second language speakers. For example, the Functional Skills English curriculum contains a strong focus on recognising text genre, which is not key to learning to read and understand text in a new language. Rather, speakers of other languages need to learn about underpinning language skills in English, such as understanding the meaning of words, phrases and tenses. For example, the use of 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.

Last, the ESOL core curriculum format has allowed too much inconsistency between awarding bodies’ exams. As the 2022 Ofqual study on ESOL exams indicates, this has resulted in an insufficiently robust framework to ensure parity of qualifications and language levels. The Ofqual study also shows that the degree of language demand across the ESOL levels is not evenly calibrated. This study confirms concerns in the ESOL community that the learning load of the levels and qualifications varies significantly. This has had a negative impact on completion and achievement rates. **This in turn has made providers hesitant to offer ESOL levels which have high learning loads as they face a financial penalty for non-completion and failed exams.**

Recommendations

The recommendations below set out key priorities for the revision of the ESOL core curriculum. They include new language learning priorities which are critical to achieving effective ESOL standards, provision, and learner outcomes.

- Underpin the revision of ESOL with **evidence-based research on language learning**.
- Work from a true language learning-centred focus. The new format should reflect the learning trajectory from the very beginner level of pre-Entry 1 onwards. It should include the development of English language skills as well as the contexts in which learners want and need to communicate. Schellekens (2001) found that beginner learners prioritised language for daily life *and* for work and study, whereas after two years learners shifted their priorities to language for work and study alone.
- Ensure that the ESOL learner-centred focus provides an **effective road map** for teachers to plan and deliver relevant learning, and for awarding bodies to structure **exams which ensure reliable and valid outcomes**. This should include test items and coverage of learning outcomes which result in sound judgements on learners’ knowledge and skills.
- Use the outcomes of the 2022 Ofqual research study on ESOL to **allocate learning content across the ESOL levels equally**, so that learners and providers are not disadvantaged from enrolling on course levels with currently overly heavy learning loads.
- **Create standards and exams which treat listening and speaking as separate skills**. This is because there are significant differences in learners’ development of listening and speaking, often referred to as ‘spiky profiles’. There is currently only one mode of exam with one score to report on both skills. Even though the ESOL core curriculum has sections for speaking and listening, speaking often features under descriptors for listening. As a result of the exams and the treatment of listening in the curriculum, listening is significantly under-examined, under-assessed and under-

taught, despite it being the most significant driver in learning a new language, especially at the early stages. A recent study by Hamnes Karlsen et. al. reinforces the notion that language learners typically have uneven language profiles. As they note, this should be 'reflected in the assessment of language proficiency' and 'measured separately in different parts of the test' (Hamnes Carlsen *et al*, 2023).

- Include the **skill of decoding spoken language** as a key part of teaching listening. The core curriculum lacks reference and advice to teachers on the teaching of lexical segmentation, i.e. learners' ability to identify individual words in 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 (Field, 2003 and 2008). Once learners can distinguish lexical units and word breaks in the English language, they are then able to transfer these principles into the speaking skills of pronunciation, linking words, stress, and intonation as well as vocabulary development.
- The **foregrounding of vocabulary development**. This aspect has risen in importance in linguistics research in the last 40 years (Nation, Carter and McCarthy, 2012) but as we saw above, the teaching of vocabulary is barely covered in the ESOL core curriculum (and in the national literacy standards). Research indicates that vocabulary development is key to language development for *both* first and second language learners (Quigley, 2018). As vocabulary size is predictive of general levels of language, vocabulary testing in ESOL exams would add a valuable tool to reliable assessment outcomes.
- For most pre-Entry and Entry 1 learners - i.e. those with no or very low English language skills - the **development of literacy, especially writing, comes too early** in the core curriculum. Research indicates that sufficient linguistic competence in listening, vocabulary, speaking and grammar needs to be in place before reading can be meaningfully introduced (Grabe, 2009; Perfetti and Adlof, 2013). And writing can only be developed once learners have mastered word decoding and reading for meaning. The future development of ESOL standards should take these research findings into account when planning the introduction of reading and writing for learners with no or limited English.
- The skills of **listening and reading for gist and skimming of written text** feature heavily in the ESOL core curriculum from Entry 1 onwards (Schellekens, 2011). This is premature, as research indicates that these types of listening and reading skills require high-level vocabulary and fluency in reading, typical of fluent first language users. For example, readers need knowledge of 95% of words to understand text (Nation, 2001; Weir and Khalifa, 2008), a finding which applies to first and second language speakers alike.
- The recommendations and application of the linguistic concepts outlined above can be expected to have a positive impact on the quality of learning and achievement of outcomes. They will 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

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, exam outcomes and regulatory capacity.** In the view of The Bell Foundation, there are three possible approaches, which are set out below.

Option one: Revise the ESOL core curriculum

While the advantage of revising the ESOL core curriculum is continuity, it is 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 learners' need for communication in home and family situations. Twenty years later, the change in Governments' and learners' priorities towards employment and further study creates a need for language learning in wider contexts. Third, the revision of the ESOL core curriculum would need to be very extensive. It would entail a major overhaul and addition of new material, not just of linguistic aspects but also a thorough revision of the sample language activities. Last, feedback from respondents to the consultation confirms that the core curriculum has fallen out of use. Teachers and managers hardly use the ESOL core curriculum, they rely on awarding bodies' exam specifications instead.

Option two: Update the ESOL exams

Revise the ESOL exams, as some respondents to the consultation suggested, because the exams are central to lesson planning, teaching and learning. However, it is hard to see how this can be done. Awarding bodies have applied their own interpretations of the core curriculum to their exams and, as the Ofqual ESOL study shows, their exam setting approaches and indeed exams diverge widely. There is also evidence that the ESOL exams have a negative impact on teaching and learning, e.g. extensive exam preparation to pass 'hurdle questions' on alphabetical ordering, which have little value in language learning but without which learners cannot pass the reading test.

Option three: Construct ESOL language standards

Construct ESOL standards which are language-learning specific, from which awarding bodies can derive qualifications and Ofqual can carry out its regulatory function to ensure that exams reliably reflect required standards of knowledge and skills. Secondly, providers need ESOL standards so that they can construct curricula for learning in a variety of contexts and types of learning programmes, such as discrete ESOL, adult provision which goes beyond discrete ESOL to include preparation for employment, study programmes for 16–19-year-olds, vocational training, apprenticeships, A and T levels, and high needs provision for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. This also opens the potential to set exams in different contexts, such as language for work, study, and daily life.

The ESOL standards should be underpinned by research on second language learning, including both ESOL and generic linguistics. This will enable learners to learn English in line with attested methodology, which in turn can be expected to create positive impact on classroom practice and learning. Existing framework models should inform the principles for development, such as frameworks used in countries such as Australia and Canada, the GCSE MFL specifications and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). While the CEFR was developed to describe European languages initially, it is now used all over the world, with many standards and tests aligned to the CEFR

levels. Indeed, the Ofqual ESOL study (2022) used the CEFR levels as a framework to investigate aspects of the ESOL Skills for Life exams. Last, research on language learning in the CEFR context has the potential to bring major benefits, of which the English Vocabulary and Grammar Profiles (Nation, Carter and McCarthy, 2012) are a good example.

Recommendation

The Bell Foundation has considered the merits of the options set out above. Our conclusion is that option three is the appropriate and most effective way forward. We urge the Government to adopt the development of ESOL standards as the best way to promote effective teaching, learning and assessment, and equitable examinations.

3.2 The focus on language for work and study

The ESOL core curriculum focuses almost exclusively on language for survival, such as home and family, shopping, the use of public services and health care. While this context is useful and relevant, especially in the early stages of settlement, it is not enough to enable learners to progress beyond ‘survival English’. 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. This aligns very well with the aspirations of learners, too. Schellekens research (2001) showed that adult learners’ key priority was to develop language for employment and study so that they could be financially independent and support their families. Employment opportunities as a key motivating factor for learning English were also identified in a DfE study on English for Speakers of Other Languages (2019).

Recommendations

- Include ESOL learning content which covers **both language for day-to-day living and language for work**. This will mean creating new content and learning activities for the latter, likely from end of Entry 3 onwards as at that stage learners begin to have the baseline of 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 note; and understanding health and safety regulations.
- Incorporate language for study into the ESOL standards. Many learners aspire to progress to mainstream* provision, such as health and social care, childcare, engineering, construction, IT and management. 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 in the context of their mainstream course aims**, so that they are able to make a successful transition from discrete ESOL onto vocational/educational courses.
- Establish the types of language skills and levels required for entry to and exit from mainstream provision (for examples of courses, see the previous bullet point) and use these to plan curriculum content.
- **Consider creating language provision for learners with prior work skills and experience**. This is because learners can be expected to be familiar with work-related concepts and their application in the workplace. Second language speakers and their skills should feature in Local Skills Improvement Plans and link to local, national and regional skills needs and employment trends.
- Ensure that **Ofsted assesses ESOL learners’ progression** onto vocational training provision and employment in the context of enhanced skills inspections. This should include ESOL learners’ participation in specialist provision set up as joint college-employer initiatives, e.g. to join the NHS workforce, engineering, digital, construction and health and social care.

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

4 Targeted advice and guidance

As evidenced in Section 2 on learner data, 50% of migrants and refugees who come to the UK have tertiary qualifications; and many others have technical skills in e.g. engineering, construction, IT, and care. Provided people have appropriate language skills, many are highly employable because of their knowledge, skills and experience. Yet there is little evidence that FES providers establish learners' prior qualifications and employment history; or that they use this information to plan learning and explore progression routes with their learners.

As a result, many learners are unaware of the level of language skills that they will need for further study or employment; or of further education options open to them to achieve their goal. In turn, providers lack valuable information on the language skills that learners will need in work in order to help them plan language learning content. This includes familiarising learners with UK job search and interview practice – which may vary significantly from their country of origin - as well as the use of online screening to process applications.

Recommendations

- Providers should establish learners' prior skills and experience as well as their short- and long-term aspirations. They should 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 English language skills needed as well as the most suitable course options available. As a result of CEIAG, learner 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 the Gatsby Benchmarks to learners whose first language is not English and that learners have a good understanding of career options and progression routes.

5 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 pre-occupied with the delivery of ESOL provision at beginner levels. As a result, and as the DfE data in Section 2 data show, the vast majority of adult learners leave ESOL provision with Entry 1-3 qualifications.

Policymakers, funding bodies and many providers have deemed that learners who have passed Entry 3 have sufficient language skills to make the transition to mainstream provision. However, many learners struggle and drop out because they lack the necessary language skills to cope with course content. They experience language overload while trying to understand teaching input and course content which keeps first language English speakers on their toes. Producing written assignments creates even higher demands. Many learners give up at an early stage of their course, before the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) October census. This indicates that Entry 3 is too low a level for learners to make a successful transition to mainstream education and training, e.g. to health and social care, functional skills and GCSE English, engineering and business administration courses, and ultimately to employment.

The overestimation of the capacity of Entry 3 achievers to communicate also affects daily life contexts. It is highly questionable that learners at this level are able to communicate sufficiently well in day-to-day situations. For example, when discussing their children's progress with a schoolteacher or understanding information given during a doctor's appointment.

Recommendations

- Abandon the approach of regarding ESOL Entry 3 as sufficient to communicate independently and transfer to mainstream vocational/educational provision and employment.
- Providers, employers and awarding bodies – in consultation with Ofqual, DfE, and Skills England – 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 **levels of English required for a successful transition** from ESOL to mainstream provision.
- Policymakers should consider whether ESOL Level 2 is sufficient for learners to cope with courses which require high level language skills, such as childcare, counselling, business administration, teacher training, access to higher education courses, and T and A levels. It is likely that the language load of a good proportion of vocational and educational courses is high and exceeds ESOL Level 2.
- Equally it will be important to review whether the current level 2 ESOL curriculum and exams match CEFR level B2, as this is proposed as the requirement for skilled workers' language levels in the recent White Paper: Restoring Control over the Migration System*.

*Home Office (2025). *Restoring control over the immigration system: white paper*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restoring-control-over-the-immigration-system-white-paper>

6 The appropriateness of FS English for learners of ESOL

In recent years, the number of ESOL learners who complete ESOL Entry 3 and move 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 free to all learners; whereas many learners have to pay to attend ESOL classes, even if they are British citizens. In addition, many providers perceive FS English to be more appropriate than Levels 1 and 2 ESOL.

However, this view is not borne out by experience in the classroom. Learners struggle with FS English content because the learning content does not meet their needs. The qualification lacks the focus and time allocation to work on language-specific aspects, such as grammar and pronunciation, which learners of ESOL often need but first language do not. Secondly, and with notable exceptions, English language teachers do not have the skills to teach ESOL and do not teach it well as a result.

The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) commissioned research in 2021 on the use of FS English for ESOL learners. Over 110 providers responded, with as key findings:

1. Learners of ESOL made up more than 60% of learners on FS English provision 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 did 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.
3. FS English teachers did not have the skills to teach learners of ESOL and, as a result, learners did not make the progress of which they were capable.

The ETF study confirmed that FS English does not align at all well with the needs of learners whose first language is not English. In addition, because the learning needs of first language English and other language speakers are so different, co-delivery to mixed groups, with its challenge of meeting very different needs, is often highly problematic.

Recommendations

- The Government should adopt a FES funding model which provides learners of ESOL with **access to provision that best suits their needs and goals**. This should enable them to make the progress of which they are capable.
- Unless there is a clear indication to the contrary, ESOL rather than FS English provision should be the option of choice.

7 Data on learners of ESOL

It is of concern that the DfE only collects data on learners who are on discrete ESOL post-19 provision. This means that Government departments, providers and Ofsted do not know how many learners with ESOL backgrounds participate in FES mainstream vocational and educational programmes: young learners on study programmes, young and adult learners (re)taking FS and GCSE English and maths, those on vocational training and 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 ESOL learners enrol, how they fare once on programme, how many drop out and at what stage, and how well they achieve.** It also means that it is impossible to demonstrate the positive impact of public funding on ESOL learner outcomes, progression and employment.

This is a major issue, as a substantial number of second language speakers enrol on FES provision. For example, some FE colleges in metropolitan areas have stated that the number of second language speakers on their programmes is over 50%. However, smaller towns and rural areas often also have higher numbers of second language speakers than one might expect. This is for a number of reasons, because of dispersal programmes, the availability of cheaper housing and employment opportunities, e.g. in hospitality, warehousing, agriculture and manufacturing.

In addition, the lack of data also hampers the recognition of a long-standing phenomenon: men are vastly underrepresented on discrete 19+ ESOL provision, with typically 70-80% of adult learners being female. The sector needs local and regional data on the proportions of male/female learners and their distribution in order to overcome barriers to learning.

Recommendations

- The rationale is clear: DfE and DWP policymakers and funding departments, strategic authorities, providers and Ofsted need to know how many second language speakers enrol on FES provision and how well they achieve. This information is key to understanding the size and nature of the ESOL target group, and their progression across different learning programmes and into employment. It is also key to informing the planning - and inclusion - of ESOL course provision and monitoring its impact at sector, provider, local, regional and national level.
- In order to collect data on people who need ESOL provision and language support, the DfE should **introduce a field marker to the Individualised Learning Record (ILR)**. This should enable the identification of learners with English language needs across their learning journey, from discrete ESOL to vocational training, apprenticeships, T levels and educational courses such as GCSEs and A levels; and into employment.
- The type of ILR marker should be for English language need rather than nationality. This is because, as Section 2 on the 2021 Census data shows, 35% of learners who reported that they could not speak English well or at all, had British nationality. A second reason is that nationality is not an indicator of a language learning need per se: many learners with another nationality are competent English language users and do not need help with their English.

- Once the ESOL ILR marker has been introduced, providers should use the data as they do with other categories of learner data: monitor enrolment, retention and outcomes, and the impact of provision on learning, learners' progress and progression, and to inform course planning and quality improvement. ESOL ILR data will also enable strategic authorities, LSIP partners and providers to align ESOL provision and outcomes to local, regional and national economic priorities.
- Providers should use data on ESOL learners to identify the proportions of female/male participation on adult ESOL provision; identify causes of imbalance, plan improvements, and monitor their impact.
- Ofsted should use data on ESOL participation to plan inspection activity in the same way as it does for learners with high needs. This should result in Ofsted inspecting and reporting on learners who attend discrete provision with ESOL as a main learning aim; and those who are on mainstream vocational and education programmes and the effectiveness of learning support.

8 The capacity of the sector to assess and teach effectively

Teachers have been teaching to an out-of-date ESOL core curriculum and exams which only reflect learners' needs and skills development to a limited extent. This has eroded teachers' subject knowledge and skills, and impacted 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 levels 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 and its use as key to the planning and monitoring of learning.

Recommendations

- Ensure that teachers have appropriate subject-specific knowledge of the English language system and the principles of language teaching. To achieve this, a review is required of teacher training so that it is informed by sound research evidence and strategies to promote effective learning and assessment across all levels of ESOL 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 formative and final assessment. The target should be assessment outcomes which have sufficient quality, breadth and depth to enable effective planning of learning, monitoring of progress, in-the-moment support and feedback during lessons. These objectives are especially relevant when learners' progress is internally validated.
- Develop appropriate tools to assess and monitor learners' skills development, especially for listening and speaking.
- Develop the capacity and focus of teachers to provide appropriate stretch and challenge in lessons, so that learners make the progress of which they are capable.

9 The economic argument for ESOL provision

The funding of ESOL provision has been a key issue for both policymakers and ESOL providers. However, it is not the only financial aspect to be considered. At least as important are the financial returns on ESOL investment, both for the individual and society. National and international academic evidence indicates that an individual's ability to communicate in the host country's language language(s) increases their probability of being employed (see Section 2 for 2021 Census data). It also enhances their earnings potential. Conversely, without sufficient English, those who have British citizenship, migrants and refugees are likely to remain un- or under- employed and to require long-term financial state support through benefits. Once in work, second language speakers can be expected to pay tax and to need less or no benefit support. 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. For more information on this topic, please refer to The Bell Foundation's briefing on [the case for increased investment in ESOL](#).

10 The need for national policy on ESOL

Since the launch of the Skills for Life strategy two decades ago, think tanks and the teachers' association NATECLA have produced a multitude of reports on the need for ESOL support for recent refugee and migrant arrivals as well as those communities which have been resident in the UK for many years (Kone *et al*, 2019; Pager and Stephenson, 2014). They have called for investment in ESOL and a national strategy. The reality has been very different: ESOL policy, strategy, and funding have lacked clarity and have been characterised by stop/start initiatives, cuts in funding, and multiple changes to eligibility criteria and funding streams. This has resulted in a lack of coherence and direction.

The introduction of the Mayoral Combined Authorities and now Strategic Authorities has led to the delivery of ESOL being increasingly decided at a local and regional level. This has created opportunities to shape ESOL provision so that it meets the needs of local communities and employers. At the same time, because each strategic authority defines its own approach, there is potential inconsistency in language learning opportunities and a lack of equity of access.

And last, Ofsted has recently revised its inspection framework, publishing new toolkits for its four remits in September 2025. One of the new overarching drivers for change is the focus on inclusion and the extent to which providers identify and support the needs of disadvantaged learners and apprentices. The FES Toolkit (2025) identifies those with special educational needs and 'those who may face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being, including those without Level 2 English and/or mathematics and apprentices who face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being'. There is no mention of 16+ ESOL learners. This is perplexing, considering the very large number of second language speakers, with 169,000 learners and 368,000 enrolments with ESOL as a learning aim in 2024/25. Second language speakers with low levels of English face a major barrier to learning educational and vocational content, to wellbeing and integration, and opportunities to engage in further study and employment.

An additional anomaly is that the school inspection toolkit contains guidance for inspectors on the inclusion of English as an additional language:

Guidance for inspectors in the school inspection toolkit (p20)

‘For pupils at the early stages of learning English as an additional language, inspectors consider the extent to which:

- leaders and teachers recognise that these pupils already speak at least one language, and do not lower their expectations of them
- teachers assess pupils’ English language proficiency accurately and regularly
- teachers recognise that providing opportunities for pupils to talk with staff and peers during lessons is particularly important; teachers help pupils articulate what they know and understand by scaffolding, modelling, extending and developing their ideas
- teachers focus on the vocabulary pupils need, including subject-specific vocabulary, to help them understand new concepts; they keep explanations clear and precise
- teachers develop and extend pupils’ language carefully and deliberately, with plenty of repetition
- teachers ensure that pupils learn to read using systematic synthetic phonics as soon as possible, so that they have access to a wide range of literature that will accelerate their understanding of English’

By contrast, there is no mention of guidance on ESOL in the FES toolkit. The lack of coherence across the FES and school remits is of concern as a matter of principle. It is especially perplexing, as the Ofsted toolkits contain different guidance for 16-19-year-olds who may attend study programmes in schools and in colleges.

Recommendations

- Produce and implement a **strategic plan for the delivery of ESOL** in England to ensure that learners have access to quality ESOL provision wherever they live. Cross-Government and strategic authority coordination is key, considering the very many departments and organisations involved with aspects such as policy, standards, qualifications, delivery, funding, examinations, teacher training, audit and inspection.
- Ensure that **Ofsted's inclusion agenda provides coherent guidance** on the inspection of ESOL and EAL across schools and FES.
- Ensure that the funding for ESOL and the conditions for funding are clear and enable learners to achieve independence and employability; and that instruments, such as teacher training, resources and exams, 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 monitor the impact of ESOL provision on learning, achievement and progression to mainstream provision and employment**. Review the effectiveness of the provision at regular intervals and make improvements where necessary.

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Abbreviations and glossary

ASF: Adult Skills Fund

The Adult Skills Fund replaced the Adult Education Budget in August 2024. The purpose of the new fund is to support adult learners gaining skills which lead to meaningful, sustained, and relevant employment, or enable learners to progress to further learning and employment. Within ASF, provision for tailored learning is also available. This supports wider outcomes such as improved health and wellbeing, equipping parents/carers to support their child's learning, and the development of stronger communities. Funding can be applied flexibly to respond to local needs.

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/educators/gatsby-benchmarks>.

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 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.

The framework is now used all over the world and many language standards and tests are aligned to the CEFR levels. The Ofqual 2022 ESOL study used the CEFR levels as the framework to investigate aspects of the ESOL Skills for Life exams.

DfE: Department for Education

Government department in England responsible for children's and adult learners' education and services, including early years, schools, further and higher education. It is also responsible for further education and skills provision for learners aged 16-18. Since 16th September 2025 responsibility for apprenticeships, adult further education, skills, training and careers was transferred to the Department for Work and Pensions.

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 in the context of the National Adult Literacy Standards

When the Skills for Life strategy project was conceived in 2001, the National Standards for Adult Literacy were also used as the blueprint for ESOL. 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 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 start 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, 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 (previously 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.

ILR: Individualised Learner Record

FES providers are required to collect annual Individualised Learner Records for all state-funded 16-18 and adult learners. The ILR records information on learners, their starting points, prior qualifications and learning outcomes. Providers and the DfE use this information to monitor learners’ retention and achievements as well as calculate funding earned.

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 education and training 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.

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

A non-ministerial Government department which inspects schools and further education and skills providers offering education and skills training.

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.

Strategic Authorities

Strategic Authorities are local authority and regional bodies that enable local planning and delivery on aspects such as transport, housing, education and skills. This includes the devolvement of responsibility for ESOL provision, through the Adult Skills fund, to respond to the needs of communities and employers in primarily local and regional contexts.

The introduction of the 2025 English devolution and Community Empowerment Bill has created two new levels of Strategic Authority:

- 1) Foundation Strategic Authorities: combined authorities and combined county authorities, and any local authority designated as a Strategic Authority without a Mayor.
- 2) Mayoral Strategic Authorities: the Greater London Authority, all Mayoral Combined Authorities and all Mayoral Combined County Authorities, i.e. Strategic Authorities with a Mayor in charge. Those that meet eligibility criteria may be designated as Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities. This unlocks further devolution, most notably an Integrated Settlement.

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.

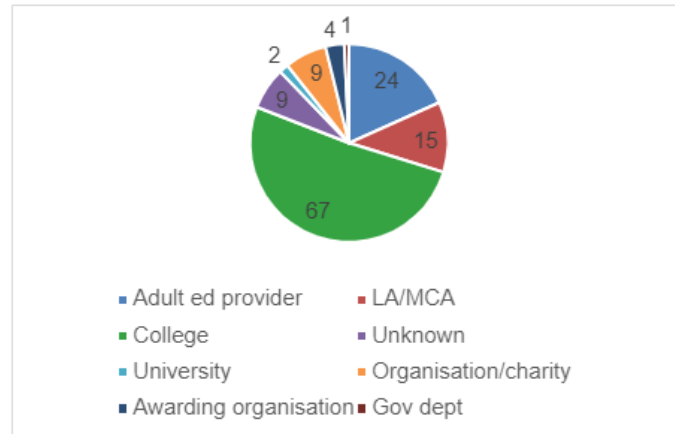
Washback effect

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

Appendix 1: Responses to the consultation

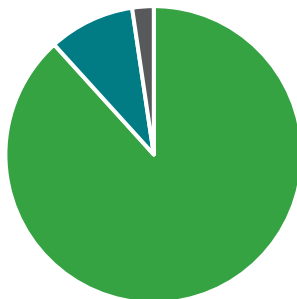
The Bell Foundation received 131 responses to the consultation from individuals and groups of respondents. The pie charts below show respondents' types of organisations and give an overview of the proportions of (dis)agreement and of those who did not reply.

Overview of types of consultation respondents



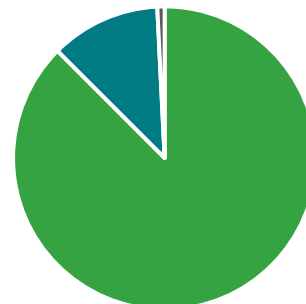
Overview of respondents' ratings to the proposals made in this document

Key information on learners, ESOL qualifications and delivery



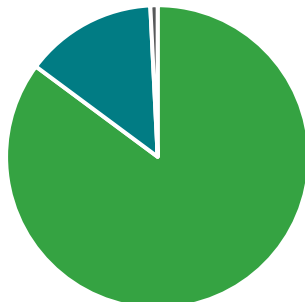
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not respond

The revision of the ESOL curriculum and link with national literacy standards



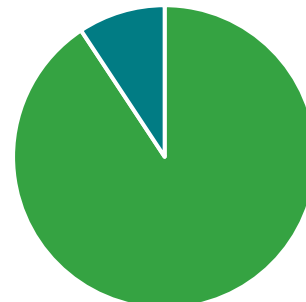
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not respond

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



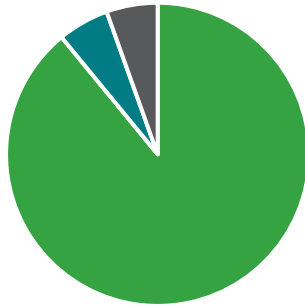
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not respond

Progress to further education and employment



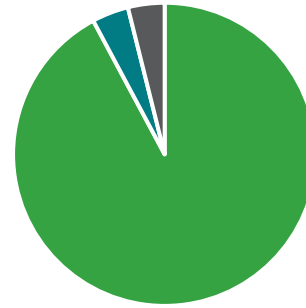
■ Agree ■ Disagree

The appropriateness of referral to Functional Skills English



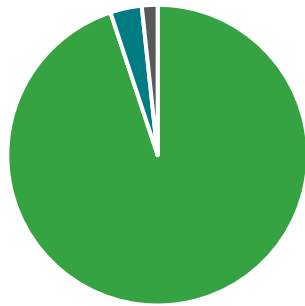
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not respond

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



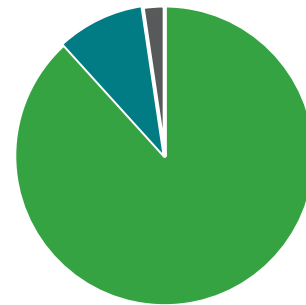
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not respond

The need for data on ESOL learners in FES



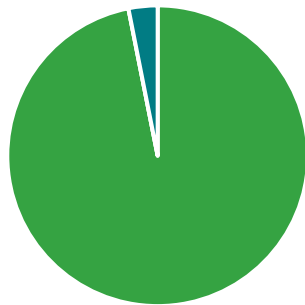
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not answer

The capacity of the sector to teach and assess ESOL



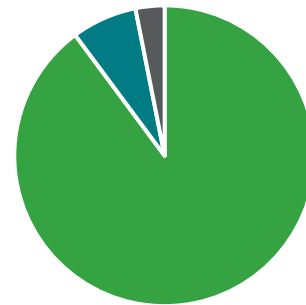
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not answer

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 and its rationale 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.”

“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”.

Appendix 2: Aspects raised beyond the scope of the consultation

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

- Multiple calls from respondents for adequate funding, sufficient provision and hours for learners to learn.
- The postcode lottery of ESOL provision, e.g. major variation in classes, levels and the number of hours’ learning per week.
- 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 3

Fig. 5 below contains DfE data tables for ESOL participation, enrolment and achievement, with the data on regulated and non-regulated provision separated out.

This data table complements Figs. 2 to 4 in Section 2, which present the data on regulated and non-regulated provision combined. Fig. 5 below will be of interest to those with an interest in Skills for Life and community-funded learning as separate entities.

Fig. 5: Adult 19+ ESOL Regulated & Non-Regulated Participation and Achievement

Regulated Participation						
	<i>19/20</i>	<i>20/21</i>	<i>21/22</i>	<i>22/23</i>	<i>23/24</i>	<i>24/25</i>
Total	80,860	65,250	84,760	100,790	104,320	105,000
Entry	63,160	50,300	67,120	81,100	83,020	83,120
Level 1	14,480	12,660	15,010	17,290	18,690	18,910
Level 2	5,590	5,350	5,710	6,230	6,630	7,060
Regulated Enrolment						
	<i>19/20</i>	<i>20/21</i>	<i>21/22</i>	<i>22/23</i>	<i>23/24</i>	<i>24/25</i>
Total	140,760	126,470	164,310	202,930	207,030	209,770
Entry	107,240	94,080	127,130	159,600	159,970	162,080
Level 1	23,800	22,490	26,790	31,500	34,400	34,420
Level 2	9,710	9,900	10,390	11,830	12,670	13,280
Regulated Achievement						
	<i>19/20</i>	<i>20/21</i>	<i>21/22</i>	<i>22/23</i>	<i>23/24</i>	<i>24/25</i>
Total	65,150	54,200	71,300	85,610	88,470	89,520
Entry	50,490	41,610	56,370	68,630	70,020	70,700
Level 1	11,420	10,290	12,260	14,470	15,540	15,640
Level 2	4,560	4,390	4,720	5,150	5,570	5,880
Non-Regulated Participation						
	<i>19/20</i>	<i>20/21</i>	<i>21/22</i>	<i>22/23</i>	<i>23/24</i>	<i>24/25</i>
Total	68,790	58,700	73,210	84,390	97,510	97,060
Entry	60,140	50,320	65,730	76,440	88,250	87,240
Level 1	7,740	7,590	6,960	8,190	9,240	9,060
Level 2	2,160	2,090	1,860	2,140	2,710	2,810
Non-Regulated Enrolment						
	<i>19/20</i>	<i>20/21</i>	<i>21/22</i>	<i>22/23</i>	<i>23/24</i>	<i>24/25</i>
Total	102,110	88,910	111,250	130,150	161,010	158,890
Entry	88,850	75,770	99,200	116,210	143,960	141,290
Level 1	10,510	10,400	9,580	11,170	13,540	13,680
Level 2	2,750	2,740	2,460	2,770	3,510	3,920
Non-regulated Achievement						
	<i>19/20</i>	<i>20/21</i>	<i>21/22</i>	<i>22/23</i>	<i>23/24</i>	<i>24/25</i>
Total	60,720	52,900	64,180	75,400	87,390	87,080
Entry	52,950	45,290	57,660	68,270	79,060	78,060
Level 1	6,720	6,740	5,950	7,250	8,160	8,040
Level 2	1,880	1,860	1,540	1,870	2,330	2,460

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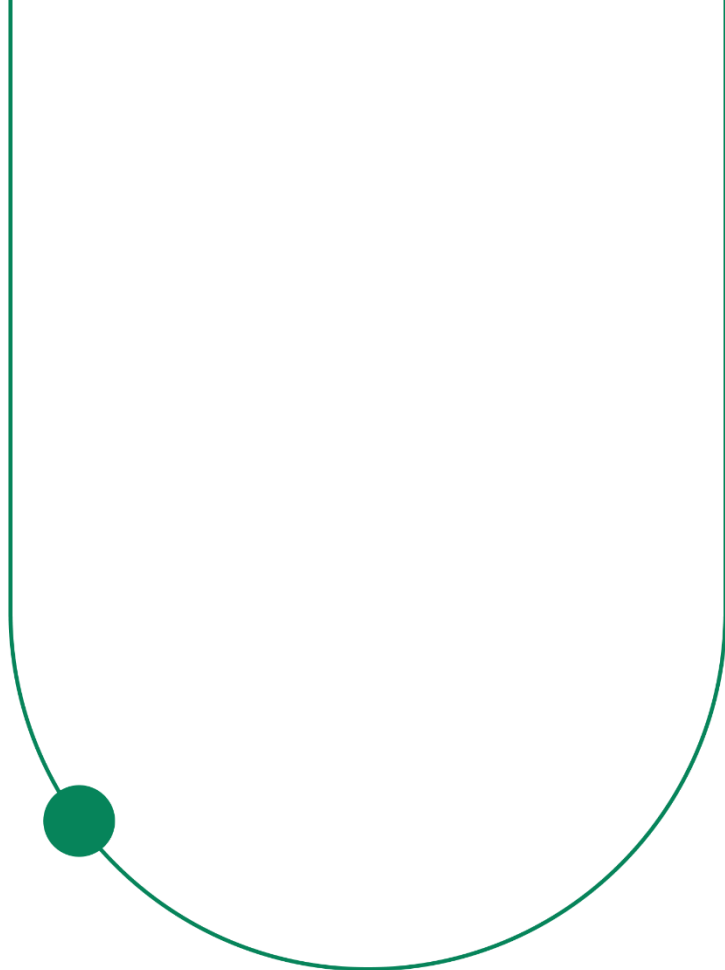
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