

Briefing:

An Exploration of Language Practice in Selected International Contexts

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Introduction

This briefing explores a sample of international practice in Europe (Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland), Canada, and Australia to better understand how other countries approach language acquisition for those lacking proficiency in the language or languages of the country that they are seeking to settle in. The focus here is primarily on migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers with some reference to adults entering a country with spousal visas or on family reunification grounds.

From this pool of 11 case studies, there are some notable learnings that England may seek to consider in policy approaches to ESOL. Overall, what is striking is the fact that nine out of eleven countries facilitate language acquisition by making it free, or low cost as they see it as important for integration.

1. Language provision as a mechanism for integration

Each of the countries explored in this briefing explicitly recognise and acknowledge that proficiency in the language (or one of the languages) of the host country is central to integration.

Some countries take this a step further by embedding mandatory subsidised or free language learning as part of a wider integration policy. In France, we can see an agile response to the provision of language classes. Upon being granted residency, non-EU newcomers are required to sign an integration contract (formally known as *Contrat d'Intégration Républicaine*) which stipulates language provision if they are not proficient in French. Those who are eligible, but who have not received an invite to sign this are able to request to do so within three months of being granted a valid residence permit.

This ensures that individuals have the tools to navigate daily life and can be active participants in society. Additionally, increased language proficiency enables participation in the labour market thus minimising over-reliance on the state. Belgium, the Netherlands, and Norway are also key examples of this. However, caution is needed to ensure language requirements do not become a means for exclusionary practices whereby access to participation, services, or citizenship are conditional, and that integration is not conflated with assimilation.

2. Minimum entitlements in language provision

As well as offering state-funded language provision, some countries also have a minimum and maximum number of hours to which learners are entitled. Some countries preface this entitlement with a minimum expectation of achievement. For example, for learners who are new to French, Wallonia in Belgium mandates that at least 400 hours of French lessons are taken with the expectation that a learner reaches level A2, based on the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR), within three years of starting the course.

On the other hand, some countries offer a flexible approach such as Norway which offers a maximum of 225 hours, however, takes a learner's previous educational experience into account to determine the minimum expectation of achievement in Norwegian. Whilst a learner who has completed upper secondary school must reach B2 in oral proficiency and B1 in listening, reading, and writing, a learner who has not completed primary school must only reach B1 in oral proficiency and A2 in listening, reading, and writing. Since language

learning is a highly individualised process, there is a necessity for some flexibility when considering entitlement.

3. Targeted and tailored provision

Another notable finding is the provision of language courses that have a desired outcome for participants as well as being designed to suit varying levels of educational attainment that learners may bring with them, ranging from those with no previous experience of schooling to those who have completed secondary or tertiary education. Australia for example offers a range of levels in their English courses. Whilst on a Level 1 course learners focus on concepts like learning the alphabet, in Level 4, learners can engage with formal documents like job applications. An emphasis is placed on learners gradually building the language skills needed to enter further vocational training or employment.

In some EU countries, pathway systems are prevalent, for example in Sweden, which offers three core pathways, the first of which is tailored to those not yet literate in their home language. The second pathway is tailored to those who have completed compulsory schooling in their home country, and the third considers those who have completed upper secondary or tertiary education. The Netherlands takes a similar approach and even offers work placements for those with a higher language proficiency. Here we see provision being tailored to promote outcomes that benefit both the learner and country through social and economic participation.

4. Wraparound support

Both Australia and Canada recognise that some learners balance language lessons with parental or work-related responsibilities. Therefore, support such as childcare, which is funded by the respective Governments, is provided to minimise barriers in accessing in-person classes for these learners. Canada also offers transportation in extenuating circumstances. Furthermore, both offer flexible class times as well as offering part-time or full-time provision. Additionally, Australia provides a distance learning programme whereby learners can study at their own pace and attend virtual classes supported by teachers. Learners have the option to simultaneously take both in-person courses as well as the online programme.

More recently, France has moved solely to digital provision. The reasoning for this is to enhance flexibility so that those working or living in locations with limited access to language classes are not disadvantaged. Whilst this provision may be necessary for reaching those in more geographically isolated parts of the country, those with no access to devices or connectivity or with limited digital literacy are at risk of exclusion. Additionally, digital learning often assumes some prior understanding of the target language, therefore, unless provision is translated into a language the learner understands, barriers will be further entrenched. Essentially, in providing wraparound support suited to meet the diverse needs and competing responsibilities of learners, the accessibility of language courses is enhanced.

5. Regional implementation

Within this sample, a common theme is that the responsibility of language provision is not solely with the state but held at either a macro or micro regional level. We can see this clearly in Italy, Finland, and Norway whereby municipalities receive funding from the state for

language courses. The intention is that each municipality will have oversight on the number of people who require language learning as well as those already accessing it.

A similar model can be seen in Switzerland whereby language provision sits with cantons. However, unlike municipalities, cantons operate with greater legal and political autonomy. It is for this reason that in Switzerland, integration funding committed by a canton – which includes language provision – can be matched by the state, thus doubling the available funding. Here we see targeted provision being a collaborative effort of both the state and regional Governments.

6. International/national standards of language

Across the piece, we can see most countries following either national or international standards for language acquisition. The most popular in this sample is the Common European Framework Reference for Languages (CEFR). The CEFR is now used all over the world, with many language standards and tests aligned to the CEFR levels. This includes the UK, where a 2022 ESOL study commissioned by Ofqual¹ used the CEFR levels as a framework to investigate aspects of the Skills for Life exams. In particular, greater research into language learning in the context of the CEFR, with specific attention to the English Vocabulary and Grammar Profiles – which map the words and grammatical structures learners typically acquire at each CEFR level – has the potential to deliver considerable benefits.

There are various advantages of this alignment with the CEFR. Despite variation within provision and localisation to ensure that learning becomes situated in the specific contexts where the learners live, work, and socialise, language attainment of learners is mutually intelligible between countries. It also means various stakeholders across countries understand the desired levels of acquisition set by a state. The CEFR sets out a clear scale outlining what learners are able to do at each given level using descriptors. For example, a learner working at an A1 level of oral proficiency can use simple sentences to describe where they live. Since this works across languages, professionals in various global contexts have a shared and comparable understanding of a learner's language proficiency. Essentially, by adhering to a common framework there is greater coherence and portability with standards and practice in language learning.

Conclusion

In summary, this pool of case studies demonstrates a recognition in the importance of language provision as an enabler and a means for effective integration. Whilst there are a multitude of approaches in design and delivery, there are key shared principles that are worth highlighting.

One is that language provision is free or subsidised and readily available upon arrival to a country. Secondly, provision is subject to a minimum entitlement and is tailored to meet the

¹ Ofqual (2022) Understanding ESOL Skills for Life Qualifications. Available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-esol-skills-for-life-qualifications/understanding-esol](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-esol-skills-for-life-qualifications/understanding-esol-skills-for-life-qualifications-assessment-properties-comparability-core-curriculum-and-cefr-alignment) skills-for-life-qualifications-assessment-properties-comparability-core-curriculum-and-cefr-alignment (Accessed 18 May 2026)

needs of both the learner and the host country. Here previous educational attainment, wraparound support needed, and the long-term goals of learners is also considered. Finally, following internationally recognised frameworks such as the CEFR allows for greater coherence and comparability in language proficiency across global contexts and stakeholders.

In consideration of this briefing, England may seek to review how ESOL provision may be strengthened through a more integrated, equitable, and learner-centred approach that supports both social and economic participation.

Annex A: Key Frameworks and Reference Materials

1. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) – Self-assessment Grid

<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168045bb52>

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.

ABOUT

This briefing has been developed by The Bell Foundation, a charitable, evidence-led foundation that aims to improve educational, employment and justice outcomes for people who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL). The Foundation collaborates with leading universities and think tanks to develop an evidence base and works with a network of schools to develop and deliver practical solutions to help improve the attainment of pupils who are at risk of underachieving. In 2024, the Foundation supported over 22,000 teachers and educational professionals to support children who use English as an Additional Language through the training of teachers and webinars. A series of policy briefings about our three programmes, EAL education in schools, ESOL and post-16 English education, and overcoming language barriers in the criminal justice system, is available on our website here:

<https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/our-work/with-post-16-and-adults/evidence/>

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