

ESOL Learners and Functional Skills English

This research was carried out by the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) in January-February 2021. It was commissioned by the Education and Training Foundation on behalf of the Department for Education.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was carried out for the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) by the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) in early 2021, to investigate the extent to which Functional Skills English (FSE) qualifications are used with learners with ESOL needs (English for Speakers of Other Languages)¹ and to explore the related issues.

NATECLA used a survey of providers that offer FSE qualifications and who also have learners with ESOL needs, followed by semi-structured group interviews with ESOL and FSE managers. Around half the 131 respondents were from Further Education (FE), the rest from a variety of adult and community settings. All geographical regions were represented and there was a balance of respondents from ESOL and English (representing FSE).

The study builds on qualitative research carried out in early 2019 by Learning and Work Institute (LWI)² into progression for ESOL learners into FSE, and was conducted in the context of the Department for Education (DfE 2020)³ review of Post 16 Level 2 and below qualifications, which has potentially crucial implications for ESOL.

Overview of features of FSE and ESOL qualifications

| ESOL | Functional Skills English |
|--|---|
| All levels - Entry 1,2,3, Level 1 and Level 2 | All levels - Entry 1,2,3, Level 1 and Level 2 |
| Designed for learners for whom English is an additional language and who are likely to be less familiar with the UK cultural context. | Designed for learners whose first language is English and who are familiar with the cultural context of the UK. |
| Three separate ‘modes’ can be taken at different levels - Speaking & Listening, Reading, Writing. This suits students with a ‘spiky profile’, who are more proficient in one skill than another. For example, a student may take Entry 3 Speaking/Listening, Entry 2 Reading and Entry 1 Writing. | Three modes must be taken at the same level - Reading, Writing, Speaking Listening & Communication. Must be passed at the same level, which means learner is placed at the level of their weakest skill. |
| 270 guided learning hours | 55 guided learning hours |
| Student part-pays for course and assessment (co-funded) unless 16-19 years old or unemployed. | Course and assessment fully funded for all students. |
| Focus on all aspects of the language - grammar, vocabulary, speaking and listening | Focus is on reading and writing , and improving accuracy. Target users are assumed to be fluent in English, so grammar, vocabulary, |

¹ ESOL is the term used in the post-16 sector for those learning English as an additional language, i.e. not their first or most fluent language. English as an Additional Language (EAL) is the term used in the schools sector. We are using the term ‘ESOL needs’ to mean any learners with English as an additional language whose English needs further development, whether or not they have studied in an ESOL class.

² Learning and Work Institute (2020) *ESOL Learners’ progression to Functional Skills*. Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ESOL-Functional-Skills-ESOL-Learners%E2%80%99-Progression-to-Functional-Skills.pdf>

³ Department for Education (2020) *Post-16 level 2 and below study and qualifications in England* A Government call for evidence. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/post-16-study-at-level-2-and-below-call-for-evidence>

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| skills, pronunciation, reading, writing. | speaking and listening skills are not taught with a language learner in mind. |
| Less widely recognised for admission to vocational courses, higher education and by employers | Widely recognised for admission to vocational courses and to some extent by higher education and employers. |
| Tutors have the knowledge and skills needed to teach a new language. | Tutors have the knowledge and skills to teach learners who are already fluent in English. They are less likely to have skills to teach ESOL learners. |

Key findings

1. Which English and ESOL qualifications are providers using?

- Almost all providers offer ESOL qualifications at Entry level.
- FSE qualifications are more likely to be used for ESOL learners once they have reached intermediate level (Entry 3). This is especially true with young people of 16-19. As a consequence, they may be more disadvantaged in their language learning than adults. This may be due to a lack of understanding amongst senior managers of the enormity of the task of learning an additional language.
- There are fewer opportunities to study ESOL Level 1 and 2 qualifications in adult learning and in prison settings than in FE.

2. What proportion of learners on Functional Skills English provision have ESOL needs?

- There are high numbers of ESOL learners in FSE classes at all levels. Over a quarter of providers reported high numbers of learners with ESOL needs (more than 60% of their FSE learners). Very few providers have no FSE learners with ESOL needs.

3. How appropriate are ESOL and Functional Skills English qualifications for learners with ESOL needs?

- ESOL qualifications are very much valued by learners and teachers, as they are considered the best vehicle for developing all aspects of learners' language competence. However, there are a number of important policy, funding and recognition issues that lead to providers and individual learners choosing FSE instead.
- Government policy in favour of GCSE and FSE for 16-19 Study Programmes and apprenticeships has led some providers to insist that all young people take these qualifications, regardless of language need.
- Adult providers may choose to offer FSE rather than ESOL as it is fully funded and they know that many learners are not able to pay for ESOL courses. However, FSE courses generally have too few hours to meet ESOL learners' needs.
- Learners and providers may choose FSE as they believe it is better recognised for future study and employment purposes.
- Respondents were clear that FSE qualifications are not the best choice for most ESOL learners because they are engaged in an entirely different endeavour from their fluent English speaking peers. The standard of English required at Level 1 ESOL (approx. B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference CEFR⁴) is equivalent to 'A' level competence in a foreign

⁴ B2 level is the second stage of the CEFR 'independent language user' category and represents the learner who is able to communicate in a more fluid and spontaneous way using more idioms and complex sentence connectors and tenses.

language such as Spanish. ESOL learners are unlikely to achieve this in English without enough learning time and specialist ESOL teaching. Research in Canberra, Australia⁵ forecast that 1765 hours of teaching was required for learners with no English skills to reach the level required for further study or employment. This equates to 350 hours per level, from Entry 1 to Level 2, whereas FSE is generally allocated 55 hours per level.

4. What are the needs of ESOL students on Functional Skills English courses?

- Almost all providers said that ESOL learners had difficulties on FSE courses. ESOL learners need comprehensive language development and most FSE courses are not designed to provide this. In particular, the grammar and vocabulary aspects need much more specific teaching, and the cultural contexts used in the texts and tasks can be a challenge for ESOL learners, especially in the exam where there is no one to explain.

5. What Professional Learning and Development is needed for practitioners to meet the needs of these students?

- There is a need for professional development for teachers of FSE on how to teach ESOL learners and for ESOL teachers on the requirements of FSE. There is also scope for development and networking between managers, to share effective practice.

Recommendations

The following are our main recommendations for the DfE, providers within the FE and Skills sector, and the ETF. They were endorsed by FSE and ESOL managers who participated in the group interviews.

1. Data collection

- Data on learners with ESOL needs should be collected in the Individualised Learner Record (ILR), so that government and providers can improve planning and monitor provision for this group of learners.

2. Awareness raising, to influence planning and policy

- There should be greater understanding amongst policy makers and providers of the time needed for learning a new language and the specialist teaching required for effective language development for ESOL learners, so that this can be recognised in curriculum planning and funding policy. Training on this could be offered by the ETF.

3. Funding and recognition for ESOL qualifications

- All English and ESOL courses and qualifications should be fully funded, as this would avoid the current distortion in course choices for reasons of cost. This would also improve the status of ESOL qualifications.
- ESOL qualifications should be retained at Levels 1 and 2, as they are the only qualifications that are designed for the learning needs of ESOL learners.
- ESOL should be available at all levels for all who need it, including in prisons, and an ESOL strategy for England would support this.
- Providers should recognise the achievement involved in ESOL qualifications and accept them alongside FSE for access to other courses.

4. Professional support for teachers and managers

⁵ Cited in Schellekens, P (2001) 'English Language as a Barrier to Employment, Education and Training'. DfES. Available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268412244_English_Language_As_A_Barrier_To_Employment_Education_And_Training/link/5971b269aca2721b09791aac/download

- A range of professional development is needed for practitioners and managers, including in prison education, such as supporting ESOL learners with vocabulary and grammar in FSE classes, and raising managers' awareness of the demands of learning a new language.

INTRODUCTION

This study was carried out for the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) by the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) in early 2021, to investigate the extent to which Functional Skills English (FSE) qualifications are used with learners with ESOL needs (English for Speakers of Other Languages)⁶ and to explore the related issues.

Under the Skills for Life strategy (2001)⁷ ESOL was promoted in a similar way to English/literacy and maths/numeracy, and until 2007 was fully funded for all learners. Since then, there has been a decline in funding for ESOL provision and this is in part responsible for the increase in enrolments of ESOL learners on fully funded English qualifications, such as FSE and GCSE. In 2017, when FSE qualifications were being reformed, ESOL specialists and stakeholders were consulted and some adjustments were made to better suit ESOL learners. However, the reformed FSE qualification is still primarily designed for fluent speakers of English who have been educated in the UK, and not for those learning English as an additional language.

In 2019, LWI carried out research into the use of FSE with ESOL learners and reported on this in 2020⁸. Our research aimed to take a further snapshot of the situation, now that the reformed FSE qualifications are in use, and with an additional focus on determining the extent of the use of FSE with ESOL learners and the scale of the need for teacher development.

Our research was carried out in the context of a DfE consultation (Nov.2020 – Feb.2021) into the use of qualifications at Level 2 and below⁹, where the data suggests that ESOL qualifications are more often used at Entry levels than Levels 1 and 2 and which asks whether ESOL qualifications are still needed at Levels 1 and 2.

Approach

The research set out to answer the following questions:

1. Which English and ESOL qualifications are providers using?
2. What proportion of learners on Functional Skills English provision have ESOL needs?
3. How appropriate are ESOL and Functional Skills English qualifications for learners with ESOL needs?
4. What are the needs of ESOL students undertaking Functional Skills English courses?
5. What Professional Learning and Development is needed for practitioners to meet the needs of these students?

NATECLA designed a survey to collect both data and views from English and ESOL managers in the FE and Skills sector on the topic of FSE and ESOL. We distributed this by email via a range of ESOL and English networks across all nine England regions in January 2021, and received 131 responses from 110 providers. These included the following provider types:

⁶ ESOL is the term used in the post-16 sector for those learning English as an additional language, i.e. not their first or most fluent language. English as an Additional Language (EAL) is the term used in the schools sector. We are using the term 'ESOL needs' to mean any learners with English as an additional language whose English needs further development, whether or not they have studied in an ESOL class.

⁷ Department for Education and Skills (2001) *Skills for Life strategy*

⁸ Learning and Work Institute (2020) *ESOL Learners' progression to Functional Skills*. Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ESOL-Functional-Skills-ESOL-Learners%E2%80%99-Progression-to-Functional-Skills.pdf>

⁹ Department for Education (2020) *Post-16 level 2 and below study and qualifications in England A Government call for evidence*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/post-16-study-at-level-2-and-below-call-for-evidence>

- FE colleges (52)
- Adult learning settings (58), made up of
 - Adult community education services and adult colleges (38)
 - Voluntary sector organisations and charities (13)
 - Independent learning providers (3)
 - Prison education (2)
 - Adult provision within sixth form colleges (2)

All regions of England were represented, with 23% of responses from Greater London and between 5 and 15% of responses from each of the other regions.

Survey respondents were asked to volunteer for further group interviews, and 76% were willing to participate, showing a keen interest in the topic. 30 registrations were received and 25 managers participated in 9 online semi-structured, small group interviews. They represented 10 FE colleges, 11 Adult Community Learning (ACL) and adult colleges, 1 charity, 2 prison education providers and 1 independent learning provider, covering all nine England regions. The interviews were used to confirm the accuracy of the themes generated by responses to the survey, to gain further detail on the reasons behind providers' programme planning and student placement practices, and to identify managers' priorities for change and development in this area.

Those participating in the discussions included 11 managers of ESOL, 2 managers of English/FSE and 12 who manage both areas, so there was good representation of all viewpoints.

We decided to separate the adult learning and FE college managers for the discussions, as only the latter generally have 16-19 provision. However, it also proved to be a useful distinction when analysing the data, as we found some clear differences between the adult provision in colleges and adult learning providers.

1. WHICH ENGLISH AND ESOL QUALIFICATIONS ARE PROVIDERS USING?

We collected data on each provider's total enrolments for both ESOL and FSE qualifications in 2020-21, in order to gain a picture of the provision available in organisations across England. The tables below show the reported enrolments in the providers surveyed. Not all the providers supplied FSE data. The 'Providers' column in each table shows that, of those providing Entry level, not all offer Levels 1 and 2.

Figs.1-3 Enrolments September 2020 - January 2021 on ESOL and FSE qualifications.

Fig.1 16-19s in FE colleges surveyed

| ESOL qualifications | Enrolments | Providers | Average enrolments per provider |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Entry 1-3 | 3,919 (i.e. 1,306 per entry level) | in 43 providers | 91(30 per entry level) |
| L1 | 798 | in 25 providers | 23 |
| L2 | 221 | in 12 providers | 18 |
| FSE qualifications | Enrolments | Providers | Average enrolments per provider |
| Entry | 2968 | in 22 providers | 135 |
| L1 | 3083 | in 22 providers | 140 |
| L2 | 1754 | in 14 providers | 125 |

Fig.2 Adults in FE colleges surveyed

| ESOL qualifications | Enrolments | Providers | Average enrolments per provider |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Entry 1-3 | 29,250 (i.e. 9,750 per entry level) | in 45 providers | 650 (217 per entry level) |
| Level 1 | 6,776 | in 45 providers | 150 |
| Level 2 | 2,559 | in 38 providers | 67 |
| FSE qualifications | Enrolments | Providers | Average enrolments per provider |
| Entry | 3187 | in 19 providers | 168 |
| L1 | 2357 | in 19 providers | 124 |
| L2 | 1999 | in 19 providers | 105 |

Fig.3 Adults in adult learning providers surveyed

| ESOL qualifications | Enrolments | Providers | Average enrolments per provider |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Entry 1-3 | 13,919 (i.e. 4,640 per entry level) | in 57 providers | 244 (81 per entry level) |
| L1 | 2,481 | in 46 providers | 54 |
| L2 | 1,038 | in 36 providers | 29 |
| FSE qualifications | Enrolments | Providers | Average enrolments per provider |
| Entry | 2183 | in 31 providers | 70 |
| L1 | 2108 | in 29 providers | 73 |
| L2 | 1669 | in 23 providers | 73 |

ESOL provision data

All of the providers surveyed offer Entry level ESOL Skills for Life qualifications apart from one FE college and one adult learning provider. These two offer no ESOL qualifications at all, using only FSE even at Entry levels, and the reasons given for this were the cost of ESOL qualifications to learners, and, to some extent, the better recognition of FSE. All the FE colleges offer Level 1 and most offer Level 2 ESOL qualifications to adults. However, in the adult learning settings, only 80% offer ESOL Level 1 and even fewer (63%) offer ESOL Level 2 qualifications.

There are differences between what is offered to the 16-18 age group, who are almost all in FE, and to adults in either FE or adult learning. Only a quarter of colleges in the survey offer Level 2 ESOL to 16-18s whereas a majority of them offer Level 2 ESOL to adults. This would suggest that FSE and GCSE are being used to a large extent with the 16-18 age group, instead of ESOL, and this was supported in the discussions with managers. As a result, progression to Level 2 ESOL over all providers is lower than progression between other levels of ESOL.

FSE provision data

All the FE colleges surveyed offer FSE from Entry level to Level 2 to adults, but fewer offer Level 2 FSE to 16-18s, probably because of the importance of GCSE for this age group. Again, this assumption was supported by the manager discussions. In adult learning providers, Level 1 FSE is offered by almost all and Level 2 FSE by 74% of providers. However, this does leave a small minority of adult learning providers with apparently no Level 2 FSE or ESOL provision at all (4 providers of the 21 without Level 2 ESOL). We did not explore GCSE provision, which they may offer, but this leaves these learners with very limited options for English/ESOL at Level 2.

Discussion

The enrolment data gathered in our survey is only a snapshot of the situation in early 2021, but it does illustrate the relative numbers. However, most ESOL departments enrol throughout the year and

therefore the numbers in January will be less than the full year total, whereas FSE courses generally enrol only once a year, usually in September. In addition, 2020 has been an extraordinary year, with many ESOL providers using more non-accredited programmes than usual, with correspondingly fewer enrolments on ESOL qualifications. However, the total enrolment data in the surveyed providers was fairly close to DfE historical data, which has remained stable over time, so it appears to be typical of the provision as a whole (see Figure 4). The somewhat lower proportion of Entry level enrolments this year may be explained by Covid, as providers may have found Entry level learners less able to cope with online learning than those at higher levels, and therefore not enrolled them on qualifications.

Fig. 4 Enrolments on ESOL qualifications in 2020-21 (up to January 2021)

| | Survey data | % of total | DfE historical data |
|------------------|---------------|-------------|---------------------|
| Entry 1-3 | 47,088 | 77% | 85% |
| L1 | 10,055 | 16% | 10% |
| L2 | 3,818 | 6% | 5% |
| Total | 60,961 | 100% | 100% |

There are far more enrolments on ESOL qualifications at Entry level than on FSE, because many ESOL learners start at the early stages of learning English, and typically take 3-6 years to complete Entry level (that is, progressing from no English to an intermediate level of ability). On the other hand, there is less demand from fluent speakers of English for FSE Entry 1 and 2, so Entry 3 FSE tends to be offered most often to this cohort. Some of the FSE enrolments are, of course, ESOL learners, in those institutions where FSE is used in preference to ESOL qualifications.

Further background on interpreting enrolments on ESOL qualifications

In its consultation document on qualifications at Level 2 and below¹⁰, the DfE identifies the sharp fall in enrolments for ESOL qualifications between Entry level and Level 1, and on this basis, asks whether the Level 1 and 2 ESOL qualifications are still needed.

There is a clear explanation for this. There are 3 sub-levels at Entry level, and in the case of ESOL qualifications, each of these is further divided into three modes that are enrolled and assessed separately. One learner may therefore enrol consecutively on 9 different Entry level ESOL qualifications. This means that only a small proportion of those enrolled in any given year on Entry level ESOL would be eligible to progress to Level 1 at the end of the year, possibly only around 20%, i.e. those completing the final mode of Entry 3.

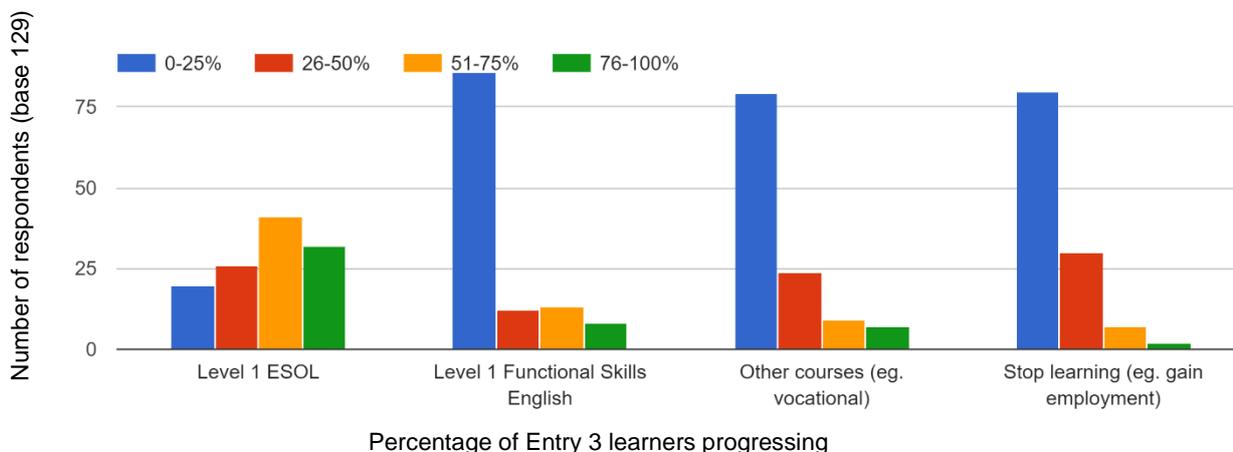
Progression from Entry 3 ESOL

Responses to our survey indicate that the most common progression route from Entry 3 ESOL is to Level 1 ESOL. Two-thirds of providers have 50-100% progression (orange and green bars) from Entry 3 ESOL to Level 1 ESOL, the majority being FE colleges. In contrast, only 18% of providers have over 50% progression from Entry 3 ESOL to Level 1 FSE.

¹⁰ Department for Education (2020) *Post-16 level 2 and below study and qualifications in England* A Government call for evidence. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/post-16-study-at-level-2-and-below-call-for-evidence>

Fig. 5 Progression from Entry 3 ESOL

What do your Entry 3 ESOL learners progress to? Please estimate percentages.



The chart in Figure 5 shows very clearly that in most providers, less than a quarter of Entry 3 ESOL students progress to Level 1 FSE, or to other courses, or stop learning (blue bars).

What is interesting is that in some of the providers with higher progression to FSE, progression to ESOL Level 1 and other courses is also high, revealing that FSE is packaged with other qualifications. This was corroborated during the discussions, where managers, mainly in FE colleges, described the ‘pathways’ that they have developed to allow students to gain a more recognised qualification (FSE) at the same time as remaining in ESOL provision and possibly also taking a vocational course. This strategy has the advantage of increasing the overall learning hours for ESOL/English and benefitting learners’ language development.

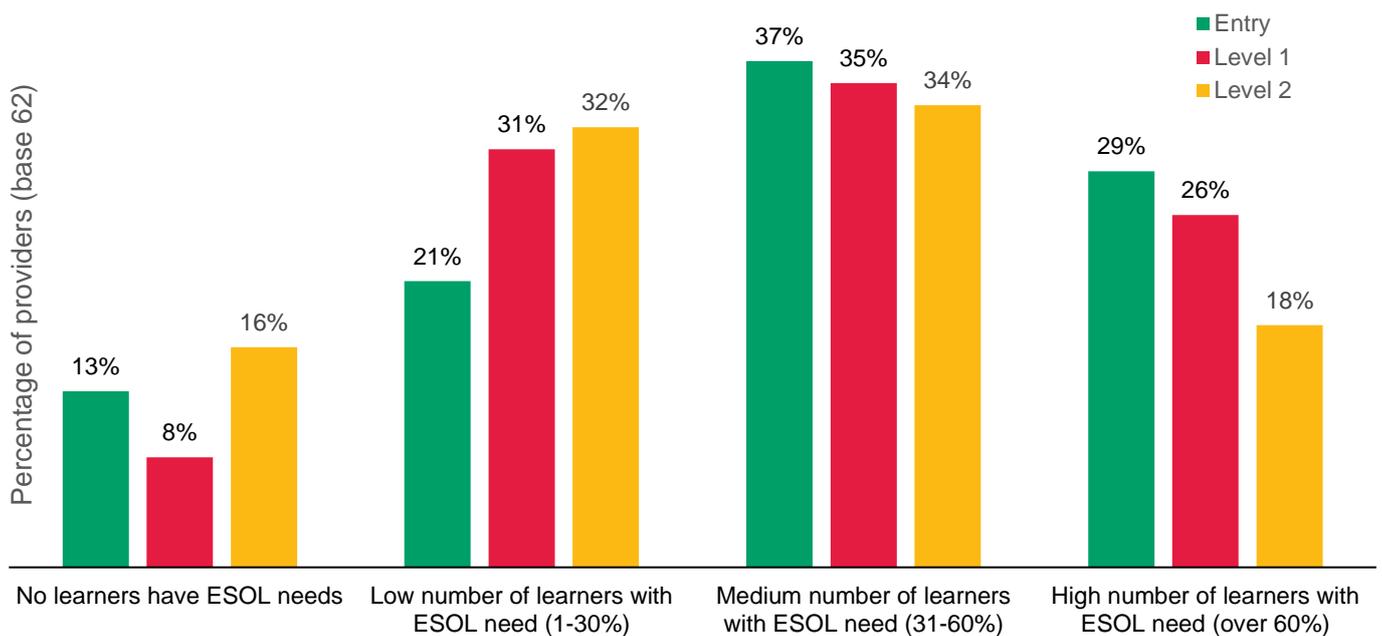
2. WHAT PROPORTION OF LEARNERS ON FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ENGLISH PROVISION HAVE ESOL NEEDS?

No data is currently collected nationally about learners with ESOL needs in the post-16 sector, unlike the schools sector, where English as an Additional Language (EAL) data is collected in the National Pupil Database. Without this data, it is very difficult to estimate the scale of ESOL need across the FE and Skills sector and plan to meet it. However, 80% of managers responding to our survey said that their organisation would be willing to collect data on learners with ESOL needs in the Individualised Learner Record (ILR). If this data were available, the strategy for ESOL that was planned for Autumn 2019 could be more easily targeted and monitored.

92% of the providers surveyed have learners in FSE classes with ESOL needs. This builds on the findings of the DfE’s 2019 research¹¹ that over three-quarters of the providers they surveyed used FSE qualifications for speakers of other languages. Our figure is likely to be higher as we only researched providers who have ESOL learners.

¹¹ Department for Education (2019) English for Speakers of Other Languages: Access and Progression. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-for-speakers-of-other-languages-access-and-progression>

Fig.6 Proportion of Functional Skills English learners who have ESOL needs



As providers do not have data on learners with ESOL needs, we asked them to estimate percentages of ESOL learners at each level of FSE.

- Two thirds of providers report a medium or high number of learners with ESOL need (over 31% of their FSE learners).
- 29% of providers report a high number of learners with ESOL needs (over 60% of their FSE learners).
- Figure 6 shows how the different levels are affected. Although there are fewer learners needing ESOL development at Level 2, over half of providers report medium or high numbers.

The survey showed that adult learning providers were twice as likely as FE colleges to report high levels of ESOL need in FSE classes. This may be because fewer adult learning providers offer ESOL qualifications at higher levels, and progressing students may have no other option than FSE, which has implications for the training needs of FSE /English teachers.

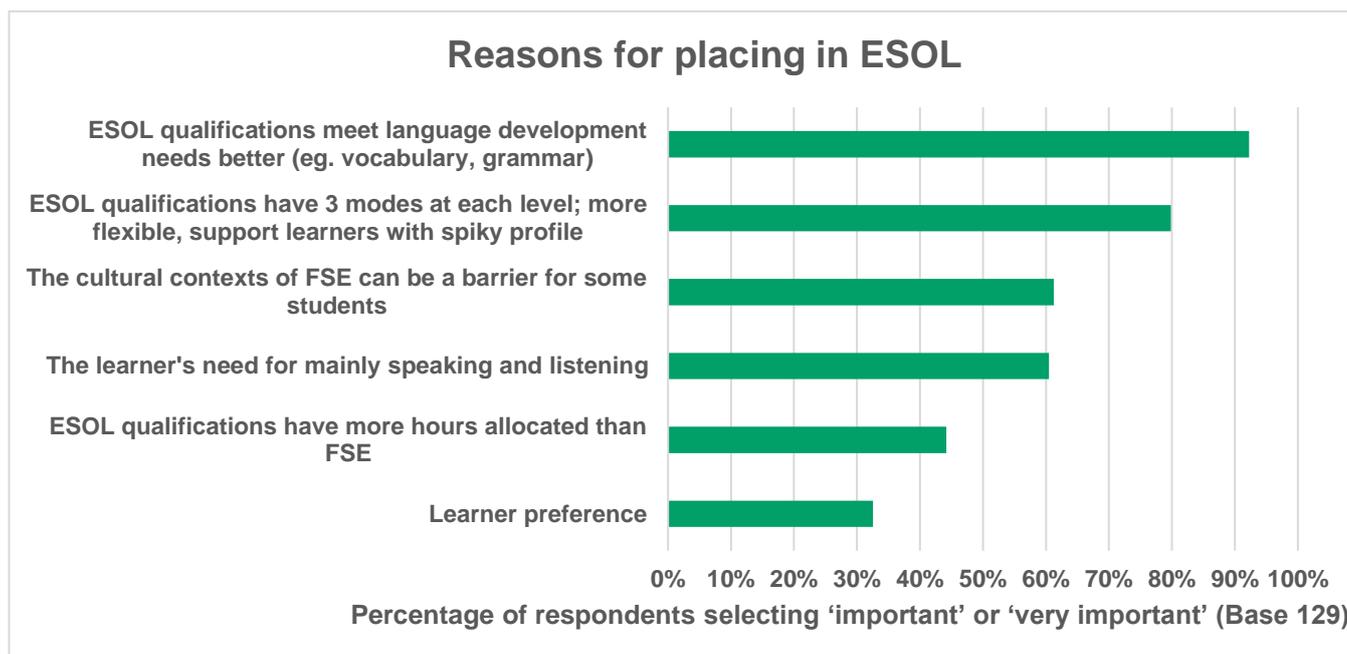
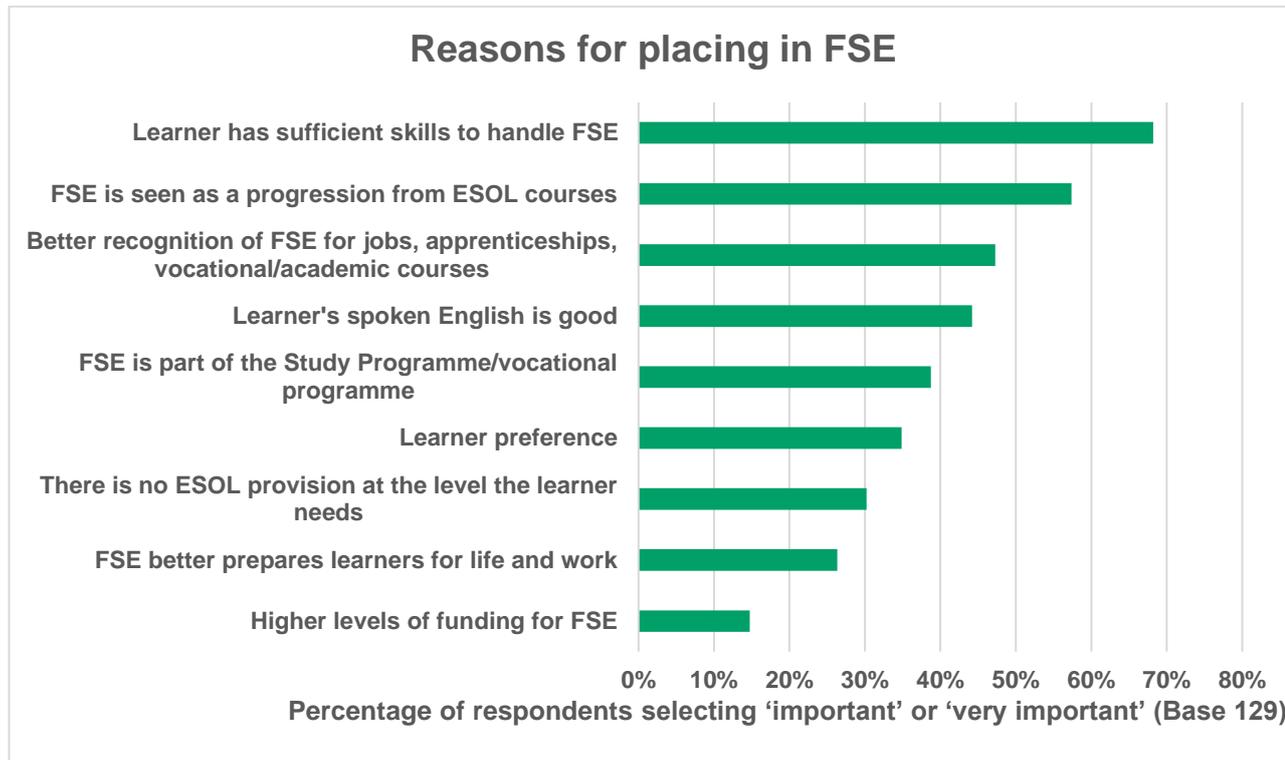
3. HOW APPROPRIATE ARE ESOL AND FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ENGLISH QUALIFICATIONS FOR LEARNERS WITH ESOL NEEDS?

Important factors in placing students

The survey investigated the reasons why qualifications are chosen for or by learners. One of the most significant moments is the start of the learner journey, when the student is placed in, or advised to

join, a certain course. In the survey we asked respondents to rate the importance of various factors, when placing learners with ESOL needs. Responses indicate that the most important factor in favour of ESOL qualifications is that they meet students' language development needs better than FSE. Almost all providers consider this very important. Views on placement into FSE were not so strong, with the most important factor being the learner's ability to cope with the course. Other factors are shown in the charts below, which are based on questions asking how important the various factors are.

Fig.7 Factors involved in class placement for learners with ESOL needs



The survey did not include an option on organisational policy, but from the discussions with managers it was clear that **college policy in favour of FSE (and GCSE) was the major factor for placing 16-19s. In contrast, the fact that FSE is fully funded was very important for adult learners.**

For both qualifications, learner preference was an important factor for only a third of respondents, which suggests that advice and guidance from enrolling staff are significant. However, when respondents were invited to expand on the issue of learner preference this revealed a tension for staff in balancing the learner's wishes and expectations with their assessment of the learner's needs. Reasons for learners wanting to do FSE were varied, such as being told by vocational tutors that there was no choice, wanting to be on a 'level playing field' with fluent speakers and affordability. Some managers felt that learners need to make their own choices, pointing out that this can motivate and result in better achievement, but **the majority view was that putting ESOL learners in FSE before they were ready was 'setting them up to fail'**. In the words of one manager, 'Students may have a specific career path in mind which requires an FS qualification, but it is not always in the student's best interest to let them join FS lessons where they may struggle and not achieve. Learner preference is very important, but they need to be fully informed about the differences between FS and ESOL'.

Appropriateness of FSE and ESOL

Overwhelmingly, the research indicated that the managers we surveyed view ESOL qualifications as most appropriate for the language learning needs of ESOL learners, but that FSE has other advantages such as greater recognition and no cost to the learner. This therefore leads to a dilemma about which qualification is actually best for the learner. Our survey and interviews corroborated the findings of the 2020 LWI study¹² in terms of the advantages and disadvantages of FSE and ESOL qualifications for ESOL learners.

We were impressed that, despite the pressures of busy management jobs, 88 (67%) of our respondents took time to offer additional written comments on the suitability of the qualifications, often at length. Their comments indicated a wish to amplify, clarify, state opinion and present solutions. Sometimes it was possible to detect frustration, such as 'FS qualifications, despite being reformed, are still difficult for ESOL learners to achieve', and 'we still need to battle to have ESOL recognised'. Also, 'We are aware of the proposal of withdrawing ESOL L1 & L2 qualifications, but we hope that sense will prevail'.

A thematic analysis of the 144 separate points allowed us to identify which aspects respondents considered most important. The strength of feeling that ESOL qualifications were more appropriate for ESOL learners was clear from both ESOL and English (FSE) managers. The majority of points elaborated what had been selected in the survey (Figure 7). In addition, respondents mentioned the points summarised below.

The situation of 16-19 year old learners was highlighted by several managers, who stated that they are more likely than adults to be placed in FSE or GCSE, as a result of college policy for Study Programmes. Where these are standard FSE classes with fluent speakers, there may be serious implications for learners' language development and therefore their future prospects. Some colleges address this through providing additional language support to supplement the FSE classes, because these do not focus enough on underpinning grammar and vocabulary. As one manager said: 'Placing them in FS too early often leads to them reaching Level 1 but not Level 2 as they make too many grammatical errors in their writing. This then effectively holds the learner back and creates a barrier to certain types of employment or higher-level qualifications.'

There was a range of views on what level an ESOL learner should reach before moving to Functional Skills. For example, 'In our experience ESOL learners can fail Functional Skills repeatedly because of lack of grammar and vocabulary knowledge, even if their 'functional skills' of text types, layout etc

¹² Learning and Work Institute (2020) *ESOL Learners' progression to Functional Skills*. Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ESOL-Functional-Skills-ESOL-Learners%E2%80%99-Progression-to-Functional-Skills.pdf>

are fine. For this reason, we avoid enrolling students on FSE until they have completed ESOL Level 2 as it can be setting them up to fail'.

Several respondents pointed out that ESOL courses, containing learners with similar needs, are more relevant, build up confidence and prepare learners to integrate into society, whereas in FSE there is too much assumed knowledge of life in the UK, which can make the courses and assessments more difficult for learners who have not grown up here.

An additional point was that ESOL courses are able to accommodate very low-level learners, those who are learning to write in a different alphabet and refugees who may have suffered trauma before coming to the UK.

There was widespread acknowledgement that FSE qualifications generally had more currency than ESOL ones. Respondents told us: 'The [FSE] qualification is more useful in the real world and it provides them [ESOL learners] with a level playing field' and 'Achieving an English Functional Skills qualification gives our ESOL learners equity when applying for work'. It was felt that studying with native speakers could be motivating and there were some ESOL learners for whom FSE was more appropriate, particularly those with good speaking skills who needed to improve their reading and writing.

A large number of comments related to skills and knowledge of staff teaching the two qualifications. Whereas in ESOL classes grammar and vocabulary are specifically taught, in most FSE classes, knowledge of vocabulary and fluent use of grammar are assumed and therefore not taught, disadvantaging those learners with ESOL needs. Managers acknowledge that this is sometimes because FSE teachers do not have the skills and knowledge to teach what ESOL learners need, and sometimes because it is difficult to teach both fluent English speakers and ESOL learners together effectively. One manager sympathised with FSE tutors not qualified in ESOL, 'I feel that it would be unfair to expect FS English teachers to teach [ESOL] learners with significant gaps in their grammar'.

Providers' solutions

Provider managers understand that FSE is better recognised within FE (but not necessarily by higher education (HE) or employers) and that this is a benefit to students. Most of them are very active in seeking solutions to the dilemma of qualification choice.

Some of the most common solutions involve packaging qualifications and non-qualification learning together to increase learning time. For example, as one manager put it, 'Both our adult and sixth form provision use the 'English Skills' qualifications as stepping-stone qualifications to bridge the knowledge and skill gap between ESOL and Functional Skills. We find these qualifications tend to have better contexts within the exam and support development of literacy in preparation for Functional Skills quals. We would not progress an ESOL learner to FS if they were not ready.' Another strategy mentioned is to use FSE to provide more learning time: 'Sometimes, ESOL learners 'plateau' around Level 1 and while repeating ESOL Level 1 or progressing to ESOL Level 2 may not be an option, a year or two in Functional Skills can give them the extra time they need to develop skills and confidence before returning to ESOL'.

Another type of solution is to train ESOL staff to teach FSE qualifications, either teaching a mixed group of ESOL and fluent learners or creating discrete ESOL groups. 'Our FS class is taught by an ESOL teacher who is aware of their needs and that the "mistakes" they make are due to not understanding grammar.' However, managers were clear that without increasing the hours allocated to FSE, it is difficult to provide what ESOL learners need: 'In the past, our college have experimented running FSE for ESOL learners. These were taught by an ESOL specialist with Literacy training. Although successful from a language learning perspective, the lower GLH had a negative impact, as there just wasn't the time to do all the FSE learning and language learning'. As a result, some providers have experimented with increasing the hours despite the lack of funding for them.

However, it was very noticeable that almost all the suggestions connected with improving learners' experience in FSE involved making the course more like an ESOL course: increase learning hours,

use specialist ESOL teachers, split into 3 modes per level, focus on all aspects of language development. ESOL managers and teachers have an admirable capacity to respond to what is required of them by trying to make it as effective as possible for their students. The problems with ESOL qualifications are fewer, but more systemic: lack of full funding for all students and lack of recognition within FE, HE and the world of work, combined with a lack of awareness within education and government of the huge task involved in learning an additional language. Because these problems are less easily 'fixed', teachers and managers are extremely persistent in trying to fix FSE.

A note on GCSE English

This research was commissioned to investigate FSE and ESOL, but the question of GCSE English has arisen repeatedly within the research because there is some overlap with the issues around FSE. Both GCSE English and FSE are better recognised than ESOL qualifications, though only GCSE has universal currency, and both are fully funded. The government has promoted GCSE very heavily for 16-19s through its requirement that this should be the goal for most students. As a result, some of the colleges surveyed only offer GCSE to their younger learners, whether they have just completed ESOL Entry 3 and are new to GCSE, or a school-leaver taking it as a resit. Inevitably, those who have not studied it before, and who are also learning English as an additional language, will have greater - and different - difficulties from those who are resitting. Managers reported that gaining a grade 1 is very demotivating for young people who have just progressed from ESOL, as they know they will have to repeat the course several times. GCSE has data advantages for the college, in that learners can gradually improve their grades, and this counts as progress. Managers pointed out that this gives the college more achievements than in FSE and ESOL qualifications, where learners may fail, and may be creating perverse incentives.

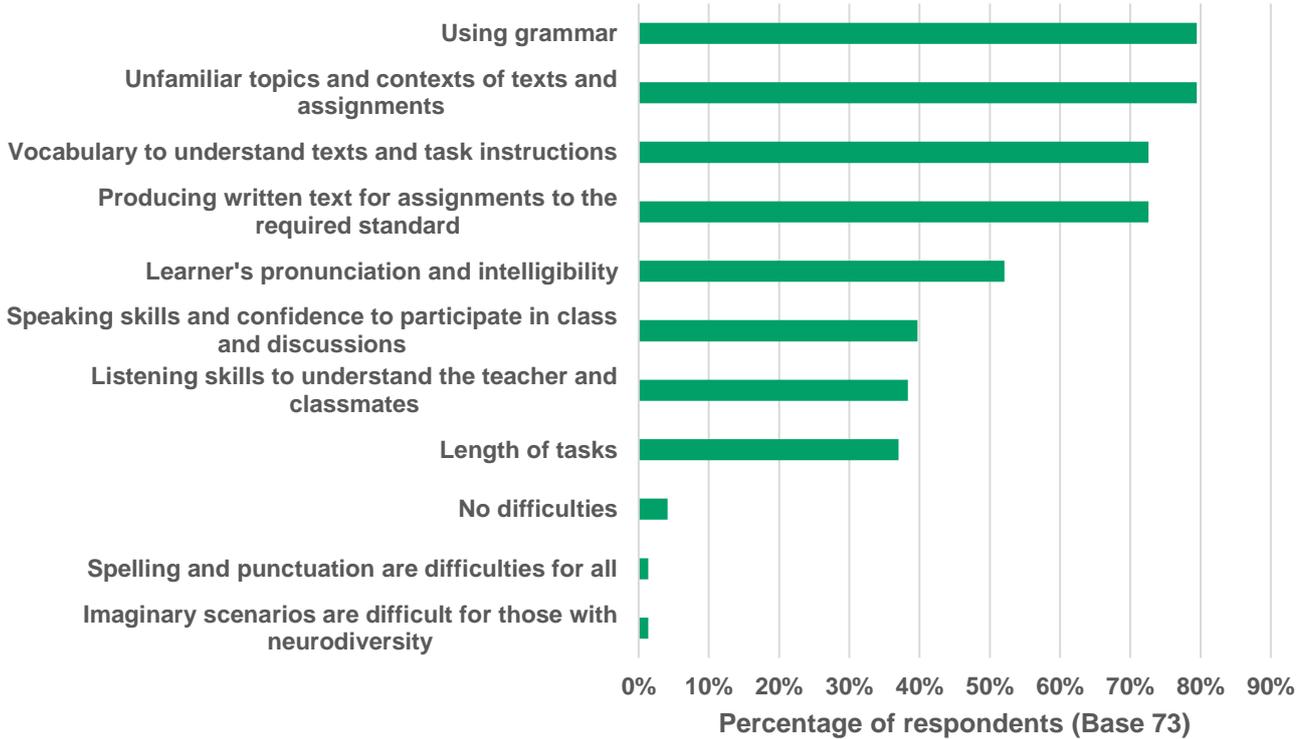
Managers and teachers accept that some learners want to progress to GCSE English eventually, but feel strongly that this should not be considered a norm, when ESOL qualifications meet their language needs much better.

4. WHAT ARE THE LEARNING NEEDS OF ESOL STUDENTS ON FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ENGLISH COURSES?

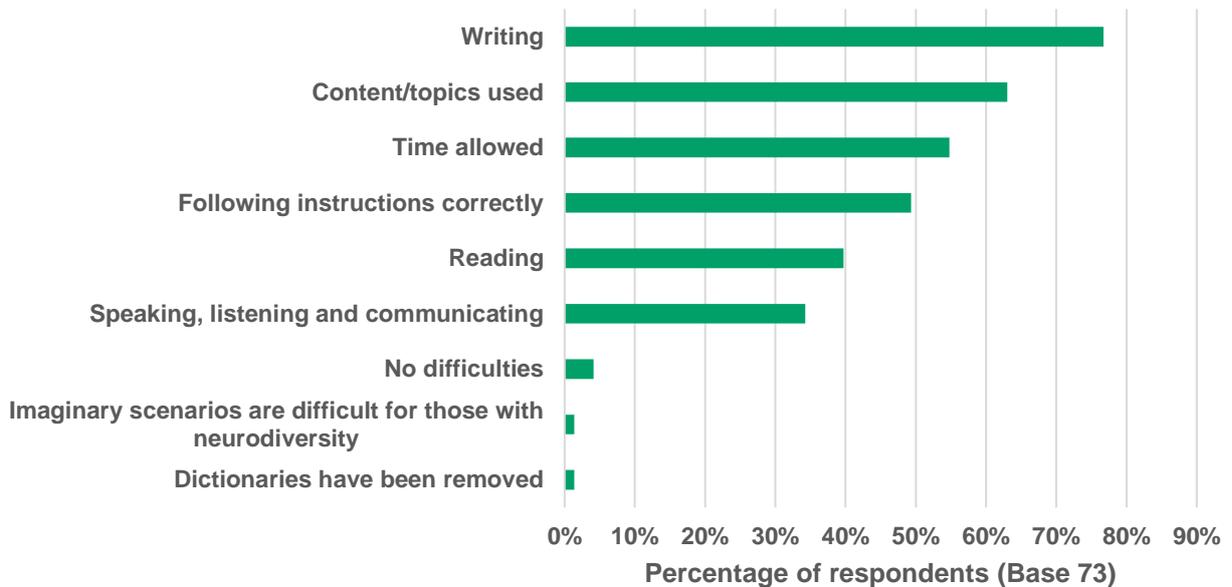
Our survey sought participants' views on the needs of ESOL students undertaking FSE courses. Almost all providers (96%) said that ESOL learners have difficulties both on FSE courses and in the assessment. The findings from the survey are shown below (Figure 8), and include open-ended responses.

Fig.8 The difficulties of FSE for learners with ESOL needs

Difficulties on the FSE course



Difficulties in the FSE assessments



All of these difficulties can be related to the fact that ESOL learners are learning in an additional language and also in a country that they do not know well. They therefore need to develop not only their language skills, especially writing, grammar and vocabulary, but also their knowledge of the cultural contexts of the UK. This means that they need more learning time and processing time than fluent English speakers. Managers reported that whilst some providers try to accommodate this by

increasing the taught hours on the FSE programme, the exam time is set externally so there is no potential for adjustment for ESOL learners.

Learning a new subject at the same time as acquiring the language it is being taught in and learning to interact with fluent speakers in the educational setting creates an additional load for the learner. This has been conceptualised as the ‘task’ for EAL learners in schools,¹³ where EAL learners are constantly trying to catch up with a moving target of peers whose starting

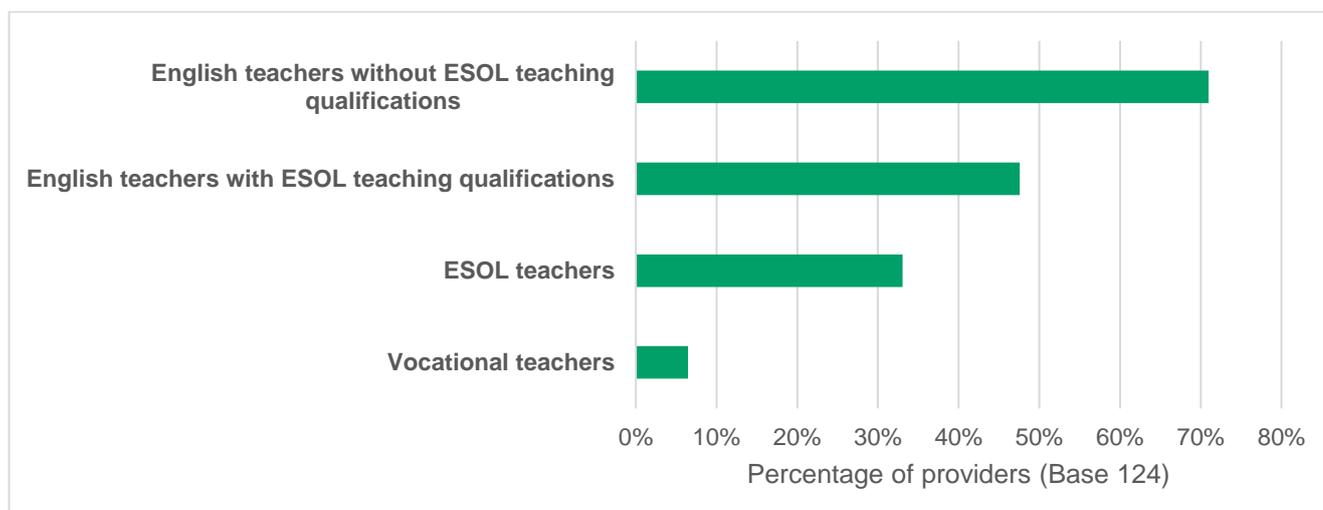
their fluent English peers, they will fall behind. This is a helpful way to view the task facing young people in FE who are studying vocational, maths and/or English courses alongside fluent English speakers.

In summary, the main difficulties that managers have when using FSE provision for ESOL learners relate to the fact that these qualifications are designed for fluent English speakers with a good knowledge of British culture. They therefore do not promote the broad language development and induction into British life and culture that ESOL learners need. If these learners need FSE as a qualification for further study or employment, the teaching time needs to be significantly increased and specialist ESOL teachers are needed. As one manager put it: ‘I was initially concerned at how the students would cope with three exams a year [in FSE], and having to pass all modes at the same level, however it has worked out and achievement rates are good. The secret of our success is that the ESOL learners are taught separately to the native-speakers, so we can cover all the language structures, tenses, pronunciation challenges and vocabulary that that they need to learn in the lessons.’

5. WHAT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IS NEEDED FOR PRACTITIONERS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THESE STUDENTS?

The survey investigated who teaches those Functional Skills English classes that may contain learners with ESOL needs. Two thirds of providers have these groups being taught by English teachers without ESOL qualifications (‘English specialists’).

Fig. 9 Who teaches FSE classes containing learners with ESOL needs?



¹³ Davies, N (2012) *The EAL learner's task: Explains the task facing EAL learners in UK schools*. NALDIC. Available at <http://www.naldic.org.uk/eal-teaching-and-learning/outline-guidance/task/>

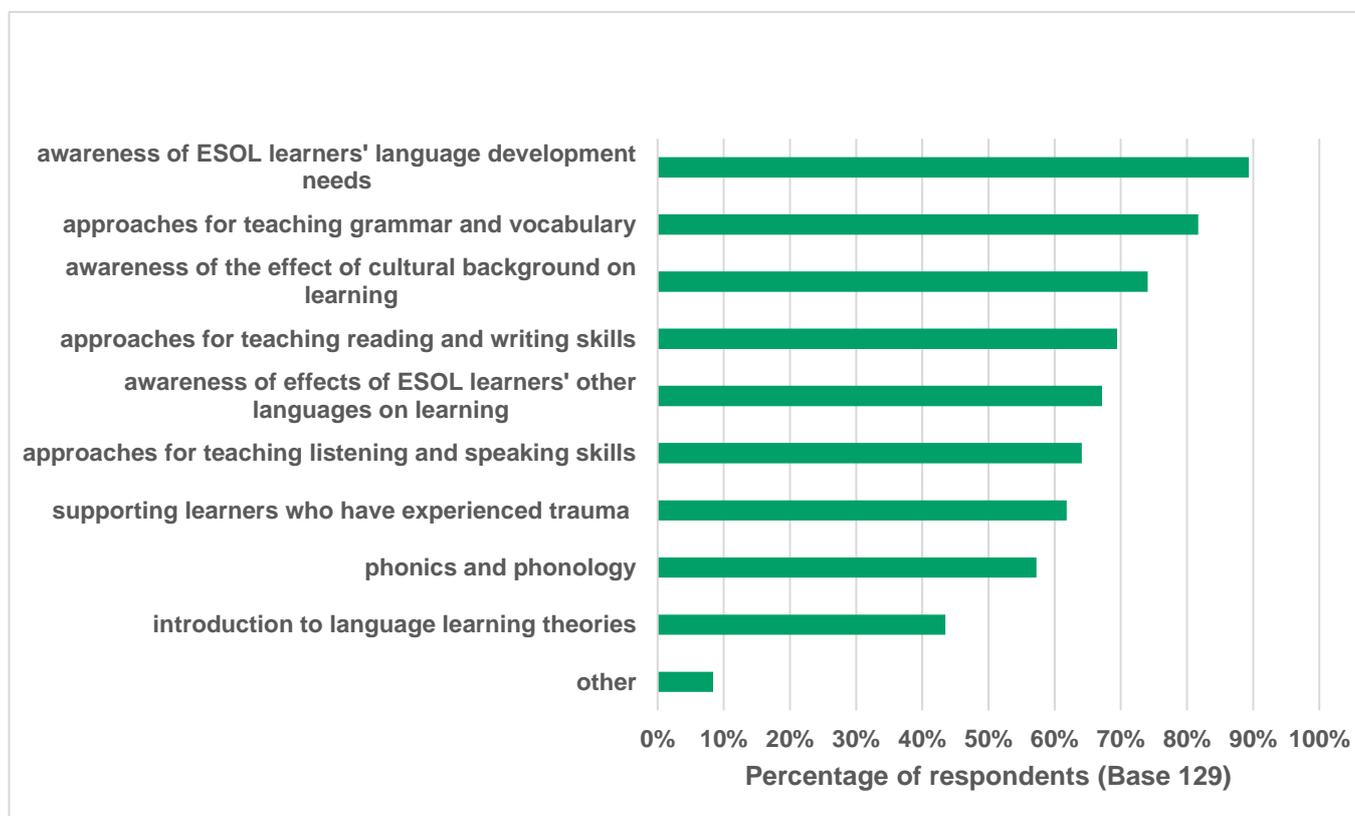
Where ESOL teachers are teaching FSE ('ESOL specialists'), this is most likely to be where there are discrete groups containing only ESOL learners. Very few providers reported that FSE classes are taught by vocational teachers.

This means that the professional development needs of FSE teachers are very varied. In the interviews, some potential for CPD for ESOL managers also came to light.

Development for English teachers

Survey respondents were clear that there is a need for a full range of professional development, including awareness raising and the development of specific teaching skills, for teachers of FSE. Almost all respondents stated that FSE teachers need more awareness of ESOL learners' language development needs, coupled with techniques for teaching grammar and vocabulary. Respondents also selected many other aspects of training, as shown in Figure 10 below.

Fig.10 Professional development needs of teachers working with learners with ESOL needs on FSE qualifications



In summary, respondents believe that FSE teachers working with ESOL learners need all of the skills that specialist ESOL teachers have, and survey responses show that providers do have ESOL teachers in this role. Although professional development sessions on specific aspects such as awareness raising would be useful for specialist FSE teachers, they would need to attend a full ESOL teaching course in order to adequately cover all the areas listed by respondents. This is unlikely to be feasible for most English specialist teachers, so using teachers who are already ESOL specialists is a much more straightforward option. Managers in our interviews were very clear that providing additional 'support' is not sufficient for learners with ESOL needs to make good progress on a standard FSE course. The size of the task that faces them when learning an additional language requires a much more comprehensive learning package.

Development for ESOL teachers

Specialist ESOL teachers in most providers are skilled at providing what ESOL learners need, whatever the qualification, but managers interviewed suggested that some development for ESOL teachers would be useful, especially for those not familiar with FSE teaching. This could cover both the requirements of FSE and its rather different focus, and also how best to prepare their students not only for the assessment itself, but also for the transition from ESOL courses to a FSE class.

Most of the managers interviewed did not consider it possible to teach fluent English speakers and ESOL learners effectively in the same class (e.g. FSE, GCSE), even with an experienced ESOL teacher who is familiar with FSE, as the needs of the two groups are so different.

Where ESOL learners are required by the college to join GCSE classes, as is the case for a significant minority of 16-19s, there is even more need for the teachers to be specialists in ESOL teaching as well as having a clear understanding of the requirements of GCSE. As GCSE teaching is a new area for many ESOL teachers, this would be a useful topic for professional development.

Development for managers and others

Interviews revealed a need for awareness-raising staff development for all managers in the organisation. Training and sharing of good practice for English and ESOL managers would enable more of them to improve their students' learning experience. This would link well with Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework¹⁴, which scrutinises the intent and implementation of the whole curriculum in relation to the broader needs of learners, rather than simply the need to meet qualification specifications, which has been the norm on some programmes in the past.

Awareness raising would be useful for all provider staff, as senior managers need to understand the size of the language learning task in order to set appropriate policies for ESOL learners. Managers report that many colleagues and students are not aware of the existence of higher levels of ESOL and/or do not understand the differences between English and ESOL courses. This leads to the situation where FSE and GCSE become the norm for learners who have completed Entry level, even though their language learning journey is far from complete. One manager said, 'My concern is that this situation is too easily accepted and that many organisers, etc don't really understand the differences that are important between native and ESOL FSE learners. What concerns me perhaps the most is that this message does not therefore even reach the ESOL learner themselves either. I have met many who are unaware of the existence of L1 ESOL. They have been 'told' that they should be doing FSE.'

It became apparent during the discussions with college managers that there is a wide range of practice in terms of programme planning for ESOL learners, with some managers more constrained than others by centralised college policies and some more aware of the options and funding available. One of the key themes when discussing planning for ESOL learners was the need to increase learning hours at the same time as keeping course costs low for learners. Some providers are adept at managing a range of qualifications, non-accredited options and top-up funding in order to provide overall packages for learners that increase the learning hours. Sharing these experiences in networking events with other providers could lead to improved provision across the country.

Finally, more could be done to incorporate awareness of ESOL needs and basic strategies for the support of ESOL learners into Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and to train ESOL teachers. All trainee teachers in FE are expected to work towards embedding some elements of English and maths development into their teaching, and there could also be more focus on strategies for supporting learners with ESOL needs. This would fit well with the new Ofsted ITE inspection framework¹⁵, which places more emphasis on supporting EAL learners than was the case previously. In addition, the recent rapid decline in specialist ESOL teacher training needs to be reversed. A study commissioned

¹⁴ Ofsted (2019) *Further Education and Skills Inspection Handbook*. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-handbook-eif>

¹⁵ Ofsted (2020) *Initial teacher education inspection framework and handbook*. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-education-ite-inspection-framework-and-handbook>

by the DfE in 2019¹⁶ into access and progression for adult ESOL learners found a shortage of qualified ESOL teachers despite high demand for ESOL classes.

6. FOCUS ON THE USE OF FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ENGLISH QUALIFICATIONS WITH ESOL LEARNERS IN PRISONS

An important cohort of ESOL learners, often neglected in research, study FSE and ESOL qualifications in prison. The information in the summary below was provided by two managers, from two of the four prison education providers in England, who attended group interviews and sent further information by email. One manager consulted her ESOL staff and collated their responses. She reported that staff were ‘very keen to get their voices heard and are very passionate about the needs of ESOL learners in prisons’. This staff group hoped that ESOL could be offered in all prisons and that more research into ESOL learners in prisons would take place.

Opportunities for ESOL and FSE in prisons

FSE qualifications are offered in all prisons in England. Tutors are employed and placed by four education providers, who are contracted by Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). All prisoners are required to study FS English and maths if they do not hold those qualifications, which sometimes results in challenging behaviour in the FS classes. ESOL classes are not always offered and are optional for the learner, so ESOL learners have different experiences and opportunities in each prison. They may have ESOL classes from pre-Entry to Level 2; there may be no ESOL classes at all; there may be non-accredited ESOL provision aimed at improving everyday prison life; there may be a mix or all of these. If numbers are low there may be as many as 5 levels in the same ESOL class. As courses are roll-on, roll-off the tutors have to deal with having some students coming up to assessment at the same time as coping with newly-arrived learners. These situations make planning for effective learning more difficult.

Prisons have recently started collecting information on the first language of prisoners. Although this cohort will include people who have been in the UK for a long time and are already fluent in English, this data will still give a clearer picture of the proportion of ESOL learners in prison.

Assessment, placement and progression

Allocation to class may be prison-led or college-led depending on the prison. A screening tool is available for prison staff to use and tutors carry out assessments once the learner is in class.

The majority of ESOL learners are in ESOL Entry levels. Some give up ESOL when they achieve Entry 3 and have to move into the Level 1 FSE class. Some prisons have a range of paid employment options but require a certain level of English before this is offered, which provides an incentive for prisoners to attend ESOL classes. Sometimes there may be waiting lists for classes, so the learner may not be able to enrol on the course they want. When a learner moves prison it is unlikely that their learning plan will move with them, so assessments have to be repeated. There are plans for a digital Personal Learning Plan which will be accessible to all providers and this will improve co-ordination of learning. The same awarding body is used by all prisons for ESOL qualifications, which adds consistency for the learners and tutors.

Engaging hard to reach ESOL learners often falls to the Shannon Trust, which offers educational mentoring to prisoners, although mentors are not trained in ESOL.

Professional development

Managers view training for FSE tutors in prisons on meeting the needs of ESOL learners as important. Training would be at the education provider site, or via webinars, since there is no opportunity for

¹⁶ Department for Education (2019) English for Speakers of Other Languages: Access and Progression. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-for-speakers-of-other-languages-access-and-progression>

training at the prison. One provider noted that there has been an increase in webinar training during the pandemic, when no prison classes have taken place. They hope that this will continue. Currently there is no collaboration between providers on training.

CONCLUSION

The context of this research is that of an educational landscape in which ESOL has become more marginalised in policy terms in England, in spite of being a significant part of the curriculum offer of many FE and adult learning providers. Under the Skills for Life strategy (2001)¹⁷ ESOL was promoted in a similar way to English/literacy and maths/numeracy, and until 2007 was fully funded for all learners. Since then, there has been a decline in funding for ESOL provision and this is in part responsible for the increase in enrolments of ESOL learners on non-ESOL qualifications, as English qualifications (FSE and GCSE) are fully funded and ESOL qualifications are not.

This study, looking into current provision for learners with ESOL needs and the needs of their teachers, is a timely call to policy makers, providers and others to address the issues raised here and thereby improve the learning of many thousands of students.

Summary of findings

- 1. The numbers enrolled on ESOL qualifications at Entry level are much larger than at Levels 1 and 2.** There are two main reasons for the difference in numbers. Firstly, the national data is distorted by the fact that Entry level is treated as one level, and many ESOL learners take several years to complete Entry level. Secondly, government policy and provider practices often mean that learners progress to other English qualifications such as FSE, not always because they are more suitable for their needs, but because of cost, policy or recognition factors.
- 2. Most providers with ESOL learners consider ESOL qualifications to be the most appropriate vehicle for good language learning,** alongside considerable use of non-accredited provision to top up the learning hours and support learners with poor educational backgrounds and/or other needs. They also give enough time to support the learners with aspects of daily life that they are finding difficult, ranging from finance and their children's education to recovering from traumatic experiences. Managers are shocked that these qualifications could be withdrawn (DfE consultation 2020¹⁸). However, issues such as cost and recognition often make FSE or GCSE seem preferable to the institution and/or the learner, and staff have to use their ingenuity to create pathways that support good language development.
- 3. 16-19 year old ESOL learners are more likely than adults to progress to FSE Level 1 once they have completed ESOL Entry 3, because of college-wide planning policy.** Whilst those with ESOL needs may benefit socially and linguistically from working alongside fluent speakers on a vocational course, they must be confident of their ability in English for this to work, and they need to be able to continue with intensive language development within their Study Programme. The hours allocated to FSE and GCSE are completely inadequate for this. Given the clear focus in Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework¹⁹ on curriculum planning to meet learners' broad educational needs and goals, many providers could consider whether more flexible Study Programme policies would better meet the needs of this group of learners.

¹⁷ Department for Education and Skills (2001) *Skills for Life strategy*

¹⁸ Department for Education (2020) *Post-16 level 2 and below study and qualifications in England* A Government call for evidence. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/post-16-study-at-level-2-and-below-call-for-evidence>

¹⁹ Ofsted (2019) *Further Education and Skills Inspection Handbook*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-handbook-eif>

4. **All participants agreed that the priorities are to ensure enough learning hours, specialist ESOL teaching and sufficient funding for ESOL learners, and to keep the existing ESOL qualifications at all levels.** Although it may seem desirable not to segregate ESOL learners from their peers, particularly young people, most respondents did not consider it possible to teach English effectively to fluent English speakers and ESOL learners in the same class. Specialist English/FSE teachers with no ESOL training cannot usually provide what the ESOL learners need, and learners either return to ESOL or require additional support from ESOL teachers. By Level 2, many ESOL learners can hold their own with fluent speakers in the class, but still need more intensive language development than their fluent peers.
5. **Almost all those surveyed have learners with ESOL needs on FSE courses,** and they experience a range of difficulties that stem from the fact that this qualification is not designed to promote language learning for learners of English as an additional language.
6. The majority of respondents said that their organisation would be willing to **collect data on learners with ESOL needs** in the Individualised Learner Record (ILR).
7. **A range of areas were suggested for professional development** for specialist English/FSE teachers, to enable them to promote more language learning alongside exam preparation. Training for specialist ESOL teachers on the requirements of FSE, would enable them to teach these learners themselves, preferably in discrete ESOL groups. Managers would also benefit from professional exchange on curriculum planning.
8. Overall, it was clear that **the choice to use FSE with ESOL learners is made more often for reasons of policy, cost or recognition than to best meet the English learning needs of the learner.** This leads to teachers and managers developing ingenious 'work-around' solutions, to provide the best learning experience, described by one manager as 'fitting a square peg in a round hole'.

The fact that busy managers took the time to respond, added lengthy comments, offered to be interviewed and attended discussions shows their strength of feeling on these issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this research, there are a number of recommendations for the DfE and for providers within the FE and Skills sector, as well as for the ETF, who commissioned the work. Managers who participated in the group interviews endorsed these recommendations and were keen that their voices should be heard, and that the report should have an impact on policy.

Data collection

- **Data on learners with ESOL needs should be collected in the Individualised Learner Record (ILR),** so that government and providers can improve planning and monitor provision for this group of learners.

Awareness raising, to influence planning and policy

- **Providers and government need greater awareness of the time needed for learning and the specialist teaching required for good English language development.** This was participants' priority recommendation, particularly for young people. Colleges should be more flexible in their approach to 16-19s and allow them to be taught by the most appropriate teachers, with sufficient hours devoted to language learning, on the best qualifications for their needs. They are already at a disadvantage because of needing to learn a new language and also to 'catch up' with their peers, so they need the best specialist ESOL provision to support them. Training on language learning could be provided by the ETF.

Funding and recognition for ESOL qualifications

- **All English and ESOL courses should be fully funded**, as this would avoid the current distortion in course choices for reasons of cost. This was participants' priority recommendation for adult provision. It would give ESOL learners the support they need and also raise the status of ESOL qualifications amongst other staff, employers, universities and the learners themselves.
- **ESOL qualifications should be retained at Levels 1 and 2**, as they are the only qualifications that are designed for the learning needs of ESOL learners, and which recognise the time required.
- **ESOL should be available at all levels for all who need it**, including in prisons, and an ESOL strategy for England would support this.
- **ESOL qualifications need better recognition by FE and HE course providers, as well as employers**, so that students' progression is not hindered. It was suggested that a set of 'can do' statements in a visual map for each level and type of qualification (ESOL, FSE, GCSE) would be helpful to show course providers and employers what they can expect from an applicant. Some universities require IELTS²⁰ from applicants whose education has not mainly been in the UK, so this also needs to be funded in order to give equality of access. One way to improve recognition with employers might be to work together with trade unions.

Professional support for teachers and managers

- **A range of professional development is needed for practitioners and managers**, including in prison education, which could be offered by the ETF. It would be naïve to suggest that isolated professional development sessions or self-access modules could give English teachers the same skills that ESOL teachers have, but some training for English and vocational staff, and trainee teachers, would be useful. Training events for ESOL teachers are most often run by NATECLA and could focus on familiarising teachers with qualifications such as FSE and GCSE. The ETF could facilitate professional exchange between managers, where good practice in programme planning for ESOL learners could be shared and professionals would become more aware of the scale of the language learning task that ESOL learners are engaged in.

Further research

Further research is needed in the following areas:

- The needs of ESOL learners in prisons.
- Ways of improving recognition of ESOL qualifications by FE and HE course providers, employers and universities should be explored, so that students' progression from Levels 1 and 2 ESOL into work and further study is not hindered.
- Working with trade unions could help to improve recognition of ESOL qualifications with employers.

²⁰ International English Language Testing System – this is the qualification most often used for university entrance for international students.

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