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Inspecting provision for children and adult learners who use English as an Additional Language



Executive summary

This briefing covers the inspection of the provision for learners who do not have English as their first language:

- In primary and secondary schools: English as an Additional Language (EAL);
- In further education and skills (FES) provision: English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for 16+ adult learners (including provision for 14–16-year-olds in colleges);
- In prisons: general education provision for speakers of English as a Second or Additional Language (ESL), including English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) education.

Many learners who need to learn English while attending school and FES provision experience educational, social and economic disadvantage.

While the Education Inspection Framework in principle provides a good basis to inspect EAL and ESOL, the focus on this type of learner needs improvement. The proportion of learners whose first language is not English in education and training provision is high. This means that all inspectors are likely to encounter second language speakers on a regular basis. Yet most inspectors do not have the tools, knowledge and skills to evaluate the quality of EAL and ESOL provision.

Ofsted has a key role to play in ensuring that the quality of EAL and ESOL is good, that learners make good progress and thrive in education and training; and that they progress to further education and employment and are able to play an active part in society. We argue that an improved inspection focus with appropriate subject expertise will bring dividends to individuals and society.

Inspecting provision for learners who use EAL

- Over one in five pupils in state-funded schools in England speak English as an Additional Language (EAL), many of whom have distinct learning needs. However, under the current Education Inspection Framework (EIF) inspectors are no longer required to make judgements on the quality of planning, teaching, learning and assessment of EAL. This is despite a large majority of classrooms being multilingual, and many areas welcoming new refugee communities.
- The gradual erosion of EAL support and expertise over time has left many education professionals feeling unsupported and learners without the effective provision they need to reach their educational potential. Anecdotal evidence from schools highlights a concerning increase in withdrawal interventions, which pull out pupils from mainstream lessons, and often consist of decontextualised English language learning which does not appropriately support language development in the curriculum.
- Anecdotal evidence, owing to a lack of data, indicates that further education (FE) colleges, Adult Education Budget (AEB) providers and independent training providers (ITPs) have as many as 50% of learners with English as their other language.
- Ofsted has a key role to play in driving system change by raising standards in education across all educational settings to improve the lives of these learners.
- To do so effectively, these recommendations include an increased focus on provision for EAL pupils and ESOL learners in schools and further education and skills inspections, better use of data, and training on EAL for all inspectors.

1 The numbers of EAL and ESOL learners

1.1 EAL

In schools, the number of school pupils who use English as an Additional Language (EAL) has more than trebled since 1997 and this group now comprises 20% of all learners. This includes refugees from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria and Hong Kong as well as children whose parents speak another language at home who have British citizenship and those who have migrated to the UK for employment reasons.

The English language skills of EAL pupils are hugely diverse, ranging from those who are new to English to those who are well on the way to fluency, sufficient to fully access curriculum content. While aggregated data for the EAL cohort typically shows a picture of above average attainment, this hides as much as it tells us, not least because the EAL cohort comprises children as diverse as a child of a wealthy French banker and a Syrian refugee. Behind the aggregated data lies a much more complex and nuanced picture and importantly, school practice is highly variable with regard to integrating EAL learners. Research evidence shows that proficiency in English has the greatest impact on EAL pupils' attainment: up to 22% of the variability in their achievement. This is much higher than the typical 3-4% attributed to characteristics such as free school meals (FSM), ethnicity, gender and other pupil characteristics ([Strand and Hessel, 2018](#)).

The Bell Foundation's research (jointly funded by the Education Endowment Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy) found that pupils who arrive late into the school system with low proficiency in English, or who are from certain language groups such as speakers of Portuguese, Somali, Lingala and Lithuanian, are at particular risk of low attainment ([Strand et al, 2015](#), [Hutchinson, 2018](#)). Recent analysis by the Education Policy Institute ([2023](#))

found that late arrivals, if they have not been schooled in the English medium, face an attainment penalty “*broadly similar in magnitude to economic disadvantage*”.

1.2 ESOL

Apart from adult learners who are on discrete English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Skills for Life provision, the Department for Education (DfE) does not collect data on ESOL learners in further education and skills (FES). This means that the sector and inspectors lack data on other types of FES provision, e.g., A levels, BTECS, apprenticeships, adult and high needs provision. As to the real numbers of ESOL learners in FES, anecdotal evidence indicates that FE colleges, Adult Education Budget (AEB) providers and independent training providers (ITPs) have as many as 50% of learners with English as their other language.

The 2021 Census data for England and Wales found that over 1 million respondents self-declared that they could not speak English well or at all. This is a substantial increase from the 726,000 recorded in 2011. The data also shows a significant correlation between low levels of English language skills and unemployment. In addition to unemployment, many are underemployed, working in jobs that are substantially below their educational levels, skills and experience. This is reflected in the FES sector where the vast majority of adult learners leave ESOL provision with language skills that are too low to make a successful transition to further education and to function in society and in employment.

Yet migrants and refugees provide a significant potential demographic dividend: the proportion with tertiary education is high and rising. In 2021, 50% were educated at tertiary level (compared to 39% of UK-born citizens) ([OECD, 2023](#)); and the percentage of migrants with degrees increased by 8% in the decade leading up to 2020.

2 Recommended changes to EAL and ESOL inspection

As the data presented above show, EAL pupils and ESOL learners make up a significant proportion of state-funded education provision. They have great potential, often considerable prior skills, learning, knowledge and experience. This potential can be unlocked if learners receive the support they need to develop sufficient English language skills and fully access the curriculum. At the moment, too many learners experience educational, social and economic exclusion. This includes not receiving the effective support required in the classroom, and their progression to further education and training, and ultimately employment, being severely hampered by too low levels of language skills to understand lesson content and participate fully in learning activities.

An explicit inspection focus on provision for learners for whom English is an Additional Language is needed to ensure that they make the progress of which they are capable, both in terms of language and subject-specific skills and knowledge. The sections below set out aspects which apply to these learners specifically in the context of the Education Inspection Framework (EIF). The requirement to explicitly inspect this aspect of provision was removed from the EIF when it was most recently reformed.

2.1 Effective inspection of provision for EAL pupils and ESOL learners

During inspections, inspectors should explicitly review and report on provision for learners whose first language is not English. They should evaluate schools’ and providers’ application of the 3 Is, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment as well as outcomes for learners and the progress that they make. In other words, inspectors should assess how education settings:

- Assess learners' levels of proficiency in English and identify their language development needs in the context of subject-specific provision and the language demands of discrete subjects and courses.
- Use assessment outcomes to plan learning of subject content and language.

In addition, in schools' inspections, inspectors need to be aware that pupils who are new to English and who arrive late into the school system, and therefore do not have the six years it takes to become proficient in English ([Strand and Lindorff, 2020](#)), face a severe attainment penalty. Inspectors should therefore review how well schools and sixth form colleges:

- Establish the prior learning and experiences that pupils bring during admission.
- Make active use of the information gathered during initial assessment to plan learning and support.
- Explicitly address the language development needs of all learners, including late arrivals in their curricula.
- Monitor the impact of planned interventions to ensure that EAL pupils learn effectively in mainstream lessons. For example, in-class support, the implementation of buddy systems.
- Integrate EAL learners into the mainstream, not using "withdrawal" practices which fall foul of Equality Act requirements and are widely regarded as discriminatory and inappropriate practice.

In further education and skills provision, inspectors should evaluate how well providers:

- Establish the prior skills, knowledge and experience that adult learners have and the equivalent level of qualifications in the UK on enrolment.
- Make active use of this information to plan learning and establish progression routes that get people back into employment.
- Provide appropriate careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) which takes into account that learners may not be familiar with the culture of education and study options in the UK.
- Monitor the impact of planned interventions to make sure that learners learn English effectively in the context of the subject that they are learning. For example, language for academic and vocational subject domains, such as for GCSEs, T and A levels, engineering and health & social care.

2.2 Data and the use of data

2.2.1 Data on EAL

Until 2019, EIF inspectors had access to data on attainment and progress by pupil group produced by the DfE through Analyse School Performance (ASP), produced specifically for Ofsted inspections, and Inspection Data Summary Reports, but these have since been discontinued. This means that no progress or attainment data on pupil groups is visible to inspectors.

GCSE outcomes in 2023 still show disparities for some minority ethnic groups, especially Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) pupils ([DfE, 2023](#)). Also, there are still huge anomalies in exclusions (e.g., Black Caribbean, Mixed Black Caribbean and GRT pupils) with widespread variability across schools, multi-academy trusts and local authorities. It is likely that if inspectors were able to see FSM data by ethnicity on ASP, more disparities would be apparent.

A greater focus on inspection on data and outcomes for disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils within the EAL group would ensure that these learners' attainment and integration and school performance is more visible. We recommend that data on EAL should be reinstated, so that inspectors can identify trends in progress and outcomes, use these to plan inspection activity and report on the impact of provision for EAL pupils appropriately.

2.2.2 Data on ESOL

As stated earlier, the only data published by DfE are on 19+ ESOL Skills for Life provision, on which 123,730 learners enrolled in 2021/22. Otherwise, the DfE and Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) do not record how many ESOL learners are on other further education and skills programmes, e.g., on enrolment and achievement on study programmes¹, functional skills qualifications, vocational training/apprenticeships, high needs and non-ESOL adult provision. This means that neither Government departments, providers nor Ofsted have official DfE data on the vast majority of second language learners, their progress, retention, and achievement. The Bell Foundation is calling for improvements in national data collection to inform the delivery of effective and tailored ESOL provision.

In the meantime, lead inspectors can use information which providers, such as colleges and adult learning providers, often provide to plan how to inspect the quality of ESOL provision and progression onto other programmes.

2.3 Enhanced skills inspections and ESOL

In September 2022, Ofsted introduced enhanced skills inspections with a new sub-judgement on how well further education colleges, sixth form colleges and designated institutions contribute to skills needs at a local, regional and national level. The skills agenda has the potential to identify and monitor the skills development of second language speakers beyond discrete ESOL. This is much needed because so many learners of ESOL have existing skills, knowledge and experience, e.g., many are fully qualified doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers and skilled tradespeople. Yet so far there is limited evidence that skills and curriculum inspection teams look beyond discrete ESOL provision. A focus on learners' progression onto mainstream educational/vocational courses and employment is needed. This should also include ESOL learners' participation in specialist provision, e.g., delivered in conjunction with the NHS and other employers.

2.4 Withdrawal practice in schools

The Bell Foundation has also seen increasing use of "withdrawal practices" in schools, whereby pupils have reduced access to mainstream lessons; an approach contrary to stated Government policy and EAL good practice. Such practices were outlawed in the 1980s, after it was recognised that they were not conducive to an inclusive classroom, reinforcing an awareness of "difference", and restricting access to important educational opportunities (Commission for Racial Equality, 1986). Also, such practices disproportionately discriminate against EAL learners, and can result in unlawful discrimination, contrary to the Equality Act 2010. Recent research (DfE, 2023) found that school leaders *"described how they had had most success with immersion², as they had found that EAL pupils were previously taken out of the classroom, missed too much of the curriculum and fell further behind"*. Ofsted has a key role to play in ensuring EAL best practice is evident across all schools.

¹ DfE data tables for young learners: [Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18 and A level and other 16 to 18 results](#) Last accessed 26 Oct 2023.

² Immersion refers to an approach whereby pupils learn all subjects in the target language (in this instance, English).

2.5 Inconsistencies in inspection handbooks

There are anomalies in the inspection handbooks. All references to EAL have been removed from the schools inspections handbook, yet references to EAL still remain in the initial teacher education (ITE) inspection handbooks and Teacher Standard 5 still refers to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), high attaining and EAL pupils.

Although there are no references in the schools handbook or writing guidance, inspectors should not ignore integrating EAL learners in those schools where it is at the heart of all leaders do. However, too often inspection reports of schools are produced where the reader would have no idea from the text that they have any EAL pupils. It is recommended that references to EAL are reinstated in the schools inspections handbook.

2.6 Inspecting initial teacher education

More than 40% of school teachers work in multilingual classrooms ([OECD, 2019](#)). Teaching professionals have reported that they feel ill-equipped to support EAL learners, with only 37% of early career teachers reporting that their teacher training prepared them well for teaching in multilingual classrooms ([DfE, 2023](#)).

Inspections of ITE, the Early Career Framework (ECF), national professional qualification (NPQ) and further education and skills, should evaluate explicitly the extent to which ITE programmes prepare staff to assess and teach pupils and learners whose first language is not English.

This absence is compounded by a lack of reference to EAL in both the Initial Teacher Training Framework or the ECF. The removal of the ring-fenced funding in 2011 has also seen specialist local authority teams disappear, leaving schools without this support. The result has been the increasing invisibility of EAL learners from all key educational policy and regulatory frameworks, except for ITE inspection handbooks and Teacher Standard 5.

2.7 The inspection of 16-18 provision in schools and colleges

Ofsted covers 16-18 provision in schools and colleges. Since the delivery of EAL and ESOL is quite distinct, with language in the curriculum for EAL pupils and discrete ESOL provision in FE colleges, inspectors should evaluate the quality of CIEAG and how well the information provided enables pupils and learners to make a well-informed decision on the right type of provision for them.

Inspectors would also benefit from guidance on the two delivery EPYP models. It would be insightful to see a study on the impact of the two delivery models on learner outcomes and progression.

Ofsted has an important role to play in driving this system change and ensuring effective EAL provision is evident across all schools, including through its reinsertion in the inspection framework.

Explicit reference to EAL learners, particularly in the Ofsted inspection framework, is vital, to ensure that the needs of EAL learners are not overlooked, to promote widespread best practice, and to place effective EAL provision firmly back on the agenda.

2.8 The need for inspector training

As far as we are aware, HMI and Ofsted inspectors (OIs) have had no national training or updates on EAL since 2015, despite them inspecting some schools where over 90% of the pupils have an EAL background, and despite the vast majority of schools having pupils who use EAL. Given that the average HMI only stays an average of three years in Ofsted, it is likely that almost the entire HMI workforce will now be untrained on inspecting EAL.

While the specialist adviser role for SEND was maintained, there is no longer a specialist adviser role for disadvantaged, or EAL, although EAL pupils now represent over 20% of the overall school population.

In FES inspections, learners with ESOL backgrounds do not feature in skills and curriculum evaluations beyond a brief statement on ESOL Skills for Life provision. While it is good that specialist FES HMIs have been appointed recently, including for ESOL, there is a question over the quality and appropriateness of the training and guidance provided.

2.8.1 Conclusion on the need for HMI and OI training

The evidence set out in this briefing shows that inspectors encounter second language speakers across all the provision that Ofsted inspects. HMI and OIs need to have the capacity to review provision and make judgements which are fair and identify strengths and areas for development accurately. They need to consider the language development of pupils and learners in subject-specific contexts, e.g., mathematics, history and engineering.

As we saw, they also need to take into account the particular advice and guidance needs that people from other cultural backgrounds have so that they are fully aware of course options and their progression potential onto further study and employment.

The need for inspector training on the coverage of EAL and ESOL is even more important considering that EAL and ESOL are no longer mentioned in the EIF. Too often inspection reports lack any mention of second language speakers, their numbers, progress and achievements.

There is a real opportunity for Ofsted to improve the coverage and quality of inspection by providing HMI and OI training on inspecting EAL and ESOL.

Explicit reference to EAL and ESOL provision in the schools and FES handbooks will ensure that inspectors will consider the needs of EAL and ESOL learners during inspection and report on them in inspection reports.

3 ESOL in prisons

3.1 Effective inspection of prison education for speakers of ESL

As is well documented, including in the latest Ofsted annual report, the general state of prison education is poor, and has been worsening over recent years. This includes the provision of ESOL: although available data from the Ministry of Justice ([2023](#)) does not provide a specific number of ESOL learners, research commissioned by The Bell Foundation in 2019 found that education managers and teachers report a lack of capacity in ESOL provision, with demand often outstripping supply ([The Bell Foundation, 2019](#)). Not only does this delay learners' ability to learn ESOL, but it creates further barriers to access to other aspects of the prison regime, including other education provision. Additionally, ESOL needs are not routinely screened for, meaning that actual demand may be even higher, and that there are likely many speakers of English as a Second or Additional Language (ESL)

“slipping through the cracks” and experiencing significant isolation and educational disadvantage.

During inspections, inspectors should explicitly review and report on the quality and availability of ESOL provision, as well as considering how general education provision may be made accessible to speakers of ESL who do not require ESOL education:

- Is there routine screening for ESOL need?
- Is there adequate provision to meet the demand for ESOL education?
- Is the ESOL provision of sufficient quality?
- Where speakers of ESL are of a high enough standard to participate in general education, is there adequate support for teachers and learners to participate in multilingual classrooms?

We applaud the approach taken in inspections of gathering prisoner learner input. It is important to ensure that sufficient learners who speak ESL are included in this process, particularly those facing a significant language barrier who may be experiencing significant, unseen barriers or isolation.

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About The Bell Foundation

This briefing has been developed by [The Bell Foundation](#), a charitable, evidence-led foundation that aims to improve educational, employment and justice outcomes for people who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL). The Foundation collaborates with leading universities and think tanks to develop an evidence base and works with a network of schools to develop and deliver practical solutions to help improve the attainment of pupils who are at risk of underachieving. In 2022, the Foundation supported over 26,000 teachers and educational professionals to support children who use English as an Additional Language through the training of teachers and webinars.

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: [Policy - The Bell Foundation \(bell-foundation.org.uk\)](#)

