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Response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review

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Summary

The Bell Foundation has brought together a group of education leaders and practitioners with partner organisations to explore and propose evidence-informed recommendations for consideration by the independent Curriculum and Assessment Review Panel with a specific focus on disadvantaged learners who use English as an Additional Language (EAL) from beginning of KS1 through to KS5. The results of the nationwide survey conducted by The Bell Foundation highlight both strengths and challenges in supporting children and young people who use English as an Additional Language (EAL). Strengths include the benefits of phonics teaching at the primary level when paired with vocabulary support, oracy-rich curriculums that foster inclusion, and creative subjects like art and PE, which allow EAL learners to excel without relying heavily on English proficiency. Exam-access arrangements, vocational qualifications, and heritage language exams also provide valuable support. However, the curriculum often lacks flexibility to meet the needs of EAL learners, particularly late arrivals, and an early focus on writing and grammar can hinder progress. Standardised assessments frequently fail to reflect EAL learners' abilities, while rigid qualification pathways and outdated ESOL frameworks pose significant barriers. Recommendations include a more flexible curriculum, culturally responsive teaching, holistic assessments, modular exams, and updated ESOL qualifications, ensuring all EAL learners have equitable opportunities to succeed.

What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system, and c) qualification pathways are working well to support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

N.B. The Bell Foundation's response focuses on school pupils who use English as an Additional Language (EAL) in primary and secondary education, and disadvantaged speakers of other languages aged 16–19 in both school settings (such as school-based sixth-form provision) and further education (FE) settings. It refers to these groups as "EAL/ESOL learners" to include both pre- and post-16 pupils and learners.

The distinctive learning needs of this heterogeneous group need to be considered in the forthcoming reform. Data from the latest School Census (DfE, 2024) show that 1,770,160 pupils (20.8 per cent of all pupils) in state schools in England have a first language known or believed to be other than English. This continues a recent trend of increases. In primary schools, the percentage has increased from 22 per cent to 22.8 per cent, following the same pattern as the year before. At secondary level, there has been an increase from 18.1 per cent to 18.6 per cent, following further increases in recent years.

Research evidence identifies the following subgroups as being at risk of low attainment:

1. Learners who are new to English or at the early acquisition stage. These learners can join the education system at any age and at various points in the curriculum, and their likelihood of success will be strongly influenced by their mastery of the language of instruction. Research clearly shows that for children who speak EAL, English-language proficiency is crucial for academic success. In fact, proficiency in English accounts for 22 per cent of the variation in EAL pupils' achievement – far exceeding the 3–4 per cent difference explained by gender, free-school-meal status, and ethnicity combined (Strand, 2018). Given that English is the primary language of

instruction, students with limited English-language proficiency will likely struggle to access the curriculum without substantial additional support (Strand et al., 2015; Strand & Hessel, 2018; Strand & Lindorff, 2021; Lindorff, Strand & Au, forthcoming).

2. Learners aged 13–9 who have newly arrived in England – particularly refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people – seeking to access education late (from Year 9 onwards), and who have not been schooled in the English medium (Hutchinson, 2018). Within this so-called "late-arriving" group, among the most at risk are pupils who speak EAL and arrive during Key Stage 4, when preparations for GCSEs are underway. These pupils are at risk of low attainment because they have little time to settle into their lives in England, learn or perfect the English language, and learn the curriculum content for GCSEs in English and maths (Hutchinson, 2023). A new study (Lindorff, Strand & Au, forthcoming) highlights that relationships between EAL status and pupil achievement in summer 2023 suggest that a pupil's age is still an important factor.

3. At Key Stage 2, students whose first languages include Pashto, Panjabi, Turkish, Portuguese, Czech, and Slovak frequently fall short of national academic standards, even if they started attending English state-funded schools in early childhood. By Key Stage 4, those who speak Pashto as their first language continue to show particularly low achievement (Hutchinson, 2018). Research shows many of the lower achieving language groups have high levels of socio-economic deprivation, particularly Turkish and Albanian speakers. Portuguese, Lithuanian, Romanian and Polish (Strand, Malmberg and Hall, 2015). Over the period from 2003 to 2023, the ethnic minority population in England grew by over 20 per cent, with the largest increases seen in the "Any Other White" (5.2 per cent) and "Black African" (3.2 per cent) groups. These groups, which include significant numbers of EAL students, often experience the widest achievement gaps linked to EAL status (Strand, Malmberg & Hall, 2015)

The Foundation welcomes the current review of the national curriculum and statutory assessment system in England, including qualification pathways, as part of the new Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity. The review offers an important opportunity to advance greater equality by reforming the fragmented and inconsistent provision that currently fails many EAL/ESOL learners. Such reform represents a chance to design tailored learning in the most suitable subjects and pathways for these learners, building on their existing talents and skills, which is closely linked to success in their academic performance and integration (McIntyre & Abrams, 2021).

The following aspects are working well to support and recognise educational progress for the cohort of children and young people discussed above:

a) Curriculum

In the primary curriculum:

- A focus on phonics, particularly when it includes meaningful vocabulary teaching and learning, and with the caveat that for the diverse EAL pupil group, the process of acquiring and developing literacy skills can be more complex than simply focusing on word reading and language comprehension. While synthetic phonics teaching and the development of phonological awareness will contribute to EAL learners' English reading development, this should not supplant EAL language development work within the integrated classroom, as the ability to decode (a skill that many EAL learners develop rapidly) is often not accompanied by the comprehension skills necessary for achievement within the educational system. Research studies on the

impact of synthetic phonics on the reading attainment of bilingual pupils highlight the need to be alert to the comprehension needs of those who are learning to read in an additional language (Purewal, 2008; Murphy, 2015). Care must be taken to ensure that the teaching of phonics does not displace other activities that support the language and literacy development of multilingual children who use EAL. Providing additional phonics instruction through intervention groups is not recommended for learners who are new to English. This type of support becomes relevant only after these learners have developed sufficient oral language skills in English. Rather than focusing on extra phonics practice, these students would benefit more from opportunities to expand their working vocabulary. This can be effectively achieved through EAL-friendly strategies integrated into the mainstream curriculum. Phonics instruction should not be administered by placing learners into a lower year group. For children who are in the early stages of English acquisition and beyond, it is better to offer individualised or small-group phonics sessions with peers of the same age and comparable cognitive ability, and using age-appropriate resources.

- The emphasis on spoken language, and on how it underpins the development of reading and writing. There is strong evidence that a carefully implemented, inclusive, oracy-rich curriculum has the potential to support learners who use EAL in building solid foundations – in both their home or preferred languages and in English (Gibson et al., 2020) – and in promoting social, academic, and linguistic inclusion across the curriculum (National Literacy Trust, 2020; Sylva et al. 2004; House of Commons Education Committee, 2020; Cummins, 2008). See The Bell Foundation's recent briefing on oracy https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/what-we-do/policy/oracy-and-eal-briefing/.

- Some of the foundation subjects, such as music, art, design and technology, and PE, which allow EAL learners to demonstrate learning and showcase their skills in ways that do not rely solely or mostly on their current proficiency in English.

- The focus on retrieval, which provides frequent opportunities for children to remember what they have learned, so that it becomes embedded and eventually takes less effort to recall. Retrieval practice helps EAL learners by embedding language into the context of subject learning, building confidence, supporting memory, and promoting active participation.

In the secondary curriculum:

- The inclusion of creative and practical subjects, such as music, art, design and technology, PE, and computing, as these tend to involve learners watching demonstrations, listening, and picking up social norms. This lessens the language barrier within the class and allows the student to physically demonstrate understanding and learning.

- The teaching of heritage languages and modern foreign languages, as multilingual pupils' foundational home-language skills (such as vocabulary and syntactic/grammar knowledge) can be easily transferable to learning other languages (Vettori, Casado Ledesma, Tesone, et al., 2024).

- The explicit focus on teaching spoken language and literacy, with a strong emphasis on active vocabulary development.

b) The current assessment system

Overall, exam-access arrangements as set by the Joint Council for Qualifications help to level the playing field and ensure fair assessment for the EAL cohort. Particularly helpful aspects include the provision of bilingual translation dictionaries, glossaries, or translators to help EAL learners understand questions and instructions in certain exams, and the allocation of extra time to EAL learners to allow for processing and translating information into English.

c) Current qualification pathways

GCSEs and A-Levels can be challenging for EAL learners, particularly those most at risk of underachievement, as these qualifications often demand a high level of English-language proficiency. However, there are some positive aspects in the current qualification pathways, such as:

- Where these are available, the possibility for EAL students to take alternative English qualifications, such as IGCSE and ESOL and GCSE exams from their home/heritage language(s);
- The option to take exams in alternative languages in some subjects;
- The availability of entry-level qualifications for newly arrived learners, which allows for progression to higher-tier papers when they are ready;
- The availability of BTECs and most of the vocational qualifications that allow for adaptation and include a small exam component.

What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

a) The current curriculum

The national curriculum can be particularly challenging for EAL learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who may require additional support to access it fully. A one-size-fits-all, highly prescriptive curriculum is not the most appropriate mechanism to promote learning in diverse multilingual and multicultural classes or to serve a diverse society. Therefore, greater flexibility within the curriculum is needed; schools should be allowed to tailor learning to the needs of disadvantaged pupils who use EAL, and to provide bespoke education that is both more personalised to the individual pupil and more relevant to the local communities they serve.

Currently, there are no government guidelines, standards, or frameworks to guide schools and teachers in how to adapt teaching and learning to ensure an accessible curriculum for learners using EAL. The revised curriculum should provide more explicit guidance on teaching and learning for EAL learners, including evidence-informed strategies for supporting language development and content learning. The Bell Foundation has produced evidence-informed principles to guide EAL pedagogy, which can provide valuable insights into the most effective approaches for supporting EAL learners. Further information can be found at https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/resources/guidance/classroom-guidance/effective-teaching-of-eal-learners/.

In the *primary* curriculum:

- There is too much of an early push on writing. There should be more of a focus on the development of oracy, and on the development and consolidation of receptive skills (listening and reading) first, before going on to writing.
- A focus on grammar in isolation is unhelpful for EAL learners. The study of grammar should be meaningfully contextualised and embedded while listening to, reading, and viewing texts.
- Key words for every subject should be included.

In the *secondary* curriculum:

- If the impact of a curriculum that is overloaded with content is felt by all learners, this is even worse for late arrivals who are new to the English education system. The pace at which units must be worked through – given the excessive volume of content – directly disadvantages EAL learners, particularly those who are new to English and at the early stages of language acquisition, as these learners usually require longer processing time, which cannot be provided. As a result, no deep learning can be embedded.
- More focus on oracy skills development is needed.
- English literature resources for Key Stage 3 should be included.
- There needs to be much more explicit focus on developing academic vocabulary in general for Key Stage 3 and 4. This is the role of all teachers and needs to be clear in all subjects and programmes of study.
- Phonics interventions for late-arriving EAL learners in secondary are often not appropriate if pupils are already literate in one or more home languages.

b) The current assessment system

Standardised assessments can be problematic for those EAL/ESOL learners who are developing competence in English, as they rely heavily on proficiency in English to demonstrate learning. Such assessments may not accurately reflect the learners' underlying subject knowledge and skills, especially when they are required to convey their learning through extended pieces of writing in English. Disadvantaged EAL learners are adversely affected by having to perform in high-stakes situations, in a language that they are still learning and of which they do not yet have full command.

The current assessment system, which over-relies on exams at the end of Key Stage 4 for most subjects, is not always suitable for late-arriving EAL learners. Many such students will not be entered for these exams – and are therefore invisible in current data sets – as it can be significantly challenging to pass GCSE exams when learners have not had a full secondary education in England or in English. This results in some schools moving newly arrived pupils to a lower year group when they arrive late in the GCSE year, or taking learners out of mainstream lessons to join withdrawal classes, which often lack connection to curriculum learning. A lack of flexibility in access arrangements for GCSE exams further exacerbates the challenges and barriers posed by the current assessment system.

The Bell Foundation endorses the following recommendations from the report *Striking the balance – A review of 11–16 curriculum and assessment in England (2024)*, as they are relevant to disadvantaged EAL learners – particularly those arriving late to the English education system:

- The length and number of assessments used at GCSE should be reduced.

- A more phased and proportionate approach to exams should be introduced, with an even assessment regime across ages 11 to 16, and less pressure on the "high-stakes" GCSE and vocational Key Stage 4 qualifications at 16, using a modular approach to spread the burden of assessment across a longer time period in some subjects.

This de-emphasis and reduction in the weight of high-stakes examinations should be accompanied by a greater shift towards:

- A more holistic approach to assessment, which considers the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of EAL learners. This should make use of a wider range of assessment models and methods, including non-exam-based assessments, such as observations, portfolios, and performance-based assessments taken at different times of the year. These teacher-implemented assessment models and methods are less stressful for the learner and can assess some things with more validity than is possible in an exam. They can also be rigorous when supported by internal standardisation and external moderation processes.

- More formative assessment to provide timely feedback and support pupils' curriculum learning alongside their language development. Assessment frameworks that are more suitable for EAL learners, such as The Bell Foundation EAL Assessment for Schools, should be adopted to assist schools in conducting meaningful assessments of learners' proficiency in English, and using this information to make judicious decisions about teaching and learning. This leads to individual target-setting and tailored support, so that learners can develop their English-language skills, fully access the curriculum, and fulfil their academic potential.

- Making greater use of examination aids to reduce stress and support learners in demonstrating understanding of curriculum content.

- Providing clear guidance and support to teachers in assessing EAL learners fairly.

- Requiring exam boards to provide visual glossaries for their subject specifications.

c) Current qualification pathways

The rigidity of the current educational stages does not adequately accommodate the disparate learning needs of EAL/ESOL learners for the following reasons:

- EAL/ESOL learners are a diverse group, who vary widely and fundamentally in many ways. They have differing degrees of proficiency in English (Strand & Hessel, 2018); speak different home and preferred languages; may or may not be literate in their home language and in English; come from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds; may or may not have experienced displacement, trauma, and a disrupted education; may have arrived either with their families or unaccompanied; and multiple other factors besides these. Such differences require a range of targeted accommodations and support that take those factors into consideration – and this is not possible within an inflexible system that makes explicit assumptions and has one-size-fits-all expectations about learners' levels of development and achievement at different ages. For example, a 15-year-old learner who arrives at the end of Key Stage 4, is new to English, and illiterate in both their home language and/or in the Roman alphabet, would not be in alignment with the assumptions and expectations of the current system.

- Learners who did not have access to education in their home country need extra time to learn both English language and the subject content. International research as well as studies commissioned by The Bell Foundation has found that it takes more than six years for learners who are new to English upon arrival to become competent/fluent in English (Strand & Lindorff, 2020).
- Time is experienced differently for young people whose lives and education have been disrupted, and many take a different, longer pathway to success compared to those born in the host country (McIntyre & Abrams, 2021). EAL learners who arrive later, particularly in Years 10 and 11, face significant challenges due to limited opportunities and support. Many of these students are unable to access GCSE exams, which are often the only accredited qualifications available in most schools. Consequently, many leave Key Stage 4 without passing qualifications, such as a grade 4 in English and maths. The narrowing of academic pathways has been to the detriment of pupils who use EAL. The vocational learning offer from Key Stage 3 onwards should be reinvigorated to better equip these learners for the future.

The system therefore needs to be more flexible, to support those learners who arrive later in their education at different learning paces. These young people need flexible programmes of learning, which match their existing skills and needs, with a better range of appropriate qualifications that support both their academic and/or vocational learning and their English-language development. For some of these learners, the possibility of taking three-year GCSEs would be a game changer. With adequate time to learn and a more flexible programme of study – enabling them to communicate effectively, successfully navigate complex classroom interactions and the demands of written assignments, and use a wide range of relevant technical and academic registers and styles – many are able to overcome educational disadvantage.

In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other protected characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity)?

The use of EAL is not a reliable indicator of ethnic minority status, since the proportion of ethnic minorities in the English school-age population is much larger than that of EAL speakers (Lindorff, Strand & Au, forthcoming). However, in the absence of a specific question regarding barriers to improving attainment, progress, access, or participation for disadvantaged EAL/ESOL learners, this question is answered here.

Analysis shows that average attainment figures for learners using EAL are misleading, as they do not provide sufficient detail about the nuances of need within this diverse group (Strand, Malmberg & Hall, 2015). The overall EAL average masks underachievement among certain groups, including those in the early stages of English-language development, those arriving late into the school system, and those from certain first-language groups. However, the most significant determinant of the educational achievement of pupils who use EAL in England is their proficiency in English, as shown clearly by Strand (2021) and Hessel & Strand (2023). Since English is the medium of instruction in schools, those entering school with limited proficiency in English are likely to struggle to access the curriculum, unless significant additional support is provided. This support may be required for up to six years or more for pupils who are new to English (Strand & Lindorff, 2021).

Research evidence (Ashlee, 2024) warns that in Years 10–13, secondary schools face substantial pressures to perform well in league tables of examination outcomes, resulting in

late-arriving children experiencing “a limited curriculum largely made up of English Language or other intervention classes designed to equip those with the necessary English competence to pass a narrow range of examination subjects.” Given the welcome focus of this review on fairer educational outcomes, a pertinent question for the panel to consider would be whether EAL students who are new to English should be exempt from high-stakes exams.

Limited curriculum access is heightened for those in the 16–18 age group, who may be required to attend a college ESOL course before accessing other subjects – rather than being able to study them concurrently, with adapted teaching and in-class language support. The long waiting lists for ESOL courses further impacts the learning and future educational opportunities for late arrivals (Gladwell, 2019; Gladwell & Chetwynd, 2018). While mastery of English is crucial, emphasis on what the learner *cannot* do fails to consider their prior learning and overlooks what they *can* contribute to their classes. In turn, such an approach often leads to these learners becoming marginalised, not only from the mainstream curriculum but from extra-curricular activities. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that all qualification pathways meet the needs of all EAL/ESOL learners – especially those of recent arrivals who are new to English or at the early stages of language learning, who need significant language support to access a study programme if they are to reach their full potential. Ashlee (2024) identified a number of features of provision for these young people that are beneficial (see the response to Question 20 for more details).

In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?

There is evidence suggesting that EAL/ESOL learners are overrepresented in the SEND cohort in England. According to the latest data from the Department for Education, EAL learners are more likely to be identified as having SEND compared to their peers for whom English is a first language. There are just under 230,000 children in schools in England who speak, or are thought to speak, a language other than English and who also have SEND (UK Government Statistics Service, June 2023). In the academic year 2023/24, the percentage of pupils using EAL who were identified as having SEND was higher than the national average, and this trend has been consistent over the past few years. This overrepresentation can be attributed to several factors, including language acquisition challenges, cultural differences, and potential misidentification of SEND. Some research suggests that EAL/ESOL learners may be more likely to be identified as having SEND, particularly in the early years, due to language barriers that can mask their true abilities. This highlights the need for careful assessment practices, to ensure that EAL students receive appropriate support. Anecdotal evidence from schools confirms this concerning trend, suggesting that pupils who use EAL – and who have no real SEND needs – are often put into nurture groups and lower ability groups.

The largest attainment gaps for pupils who speak EAL are of similar size to the largest SEND attainment gaps. Yet there is a vast discrepancy in the amount of policy attention towards SEND and EAL needs respectively. Within a tense funding landscape, EAL needs have been significantly overlooked and have lost all visibility in educational policy over the last decade. This review offers an opportunity to ensure that the needs of EAL learners are explicitly integrated into these discussions, with clear cross-references to how access arrangements for EAL learners intersect with SEND considerations.

How can we better support learners who do not achieve level 2 in English and maths by 16 to learn what they need to thrive as citizens in work and life? In particular, do we have the right qualifications at level 2 for these 16-19 learners (including the maths and English study requirement)?

Many learners who join the UK school system part way through Key Stage 4, with little or interrupted previous education, struggle through a GCSE curriculum with limited EAL support; fail their exams or obtain low grades; then enrol in a FE college after leaving school and start back in entry-level ESOL, quickly becoming frustrated at their lack of progress. The years spent in school for those who arrive part way through Key Stage 4 can become, in too many cases, a missed opportunity for relevant and quality learning (Ashlee & Gladwell, 2018).

To ensure that those EAL/ESOL learners who are not yet competent or fluent in English, and have not achieved level 2 in English and maths by 16, to continue to engage in education, fast levelling-up programmes should be available to meet their distinctive learning needs as speakers of other languages. This could also mean the addition of an extra year to the course of study.

In Further Education and Skills this is more likely to be ESOL Level 1 or 2 than GCSE or Functional Skills English (FSE) designed for first-language English learners, and will vary from course to course, depending on their language demands. English courses should be combined with vocational courses, providing both adaptive teaching strategies that appropriately scaffold these students' learning, and the additional learning support or ESOL tutoring that they may require to succeed in classwork and assignments.

A recent study (Ashlee, 2024) found that the following provisions are reported to have significant benefits for learners arriving late to the English education system:

- Bespoke pathways for these learners in schools and colleges.

- Enhanced and bespoke ESOL provision in college settings (referred to as "ESOL Plus"), with a strong ESOL focus alongside other courses/elements (subject-specific or vocational). This can include ESOL from Entry Level 1 through to Level 2, alongside qualifications or courses in different subjects – including maths, digital skills, and science. This provides young people with the opportunity to develop their English-language skills alongside furthering their academic development and progression. Also, ESOL Plus courses focus on progression, whether into other college courses or into employment. For example, once students have made meaningful progress with their ESOL in the early part of the year, FE providers work with vocational course teachers to provide taster sessions in courses that students are interested in (such as engineering, ICT, plumbing, or business). This helps students develop the skills and knowledge they need to be accepted onto those vocational courses once they have graduated from the ESOL programme. Another successful initiative is the offer of employability skills workshops to explore the career aspirations and interests of young people, and to tailor language learning to include specific vocabulary that can help facilitate and support their progression into wider courses. Such ESOL courses are described as being far more motivational and able to improve engagement, attendance, and integration with other students, when compared to stand-alone ESOL courses.
- Accelerated learning pathways for students who are new arrivals in the UK. For example, a successful, London-based sixth form college, building on and responding to international evidence on the benefits of accelerated and bridging learning programmes, established a "Newly Arrived Academy" for 16–18-year-olds. This

provision enables students to make swift progress with their English literacy and oracy, achieve high grades, and progress to ambitious post-18 destinations that advance their career aspirations. For more details, see https://www.reuk.org/_files/ugd/d5aa55_e938e4cedf8c4218b579205be82299ee.pdf.

Are there any particular challenges with regard to the English and maths a) curricula and b) assessment for learners in need of additional support (e.g. learners with SEND, socioeconomic disadvantage, English as an additional language (EAL))? Are there any changes you would suggest to overcome these challenges?

Key Stage 2

Unlike GCSE English, when students know what books they will be tested on, SATs books are random and are not necessarily those that will be included in the SATs papers. It would be helpful to list a selection of books – for example, three books that might come up in the SATs paper. Also, evidence from the Foundation's partner schools from different parts of England highlights that some of the texts included in the SATs papers can be alien to pupils who use EAL. Such texts should be more enjoyable and relatable to the age and circumstances of these children.

Key Stage 4

Research by REUK (Ashlee, 2024) has found that standardised tests and high-stakes examinations in the upper-secondary years have serious implications in terms of how late arrivals are assessed and the type of education they receive, because within a highly regulated system it is extremely challenging to accommodate learners arriving from disparate countries, who have varied educational backgrounds and needs. A reform that prioritises exam-based assessment risks compounding this challenge for 16–19-year-old EAL/ESOL learners, as, for this group, assessment performance inevitably rests on both subject knowledge and proficiency in English, the language of instruction. As English-language proficiency among these learners is a key predictor of attainment (Strand, op. cit.), formal assessment undertaken before they reach a competent level of proficiency in English may understate actual academic ability.

The Foundation does not agree with the belief that summative exams are always the best and fairest form of assessment for this diverse group of learners, who have different individual learning needs and "spiky" language-skill profiles (see *Striking the balance: A review of 11–16 curriculum and assessment in England* [OCR, 2024] for a detailed discussion of issues associated with an overdependence on terminal examinations for disadvantaged learners). We recommend developing assessments and qualifications pathways that are flexible and involve inclusive processes (Prentice, 2022), as these positively impact on the education of learners arriving late in the education system, with different prior experiences, as well as on those who are functionally competent in social interactions but need to further develop their academic communications skills to thrive (Ashlee, ibid.). A more flexible, holistic, and assets-based approach to assessment and qualifications pathways is needed. This should take into account the linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds of EAL learners; focus on young people's potential; and make use of a wider range of assessment models and methods – including non-exam-based assessments, taken at different times of the year.

Regarding maths GCSEs, respondents to our own consultation from our partner schools consistently reported that these are particularly difficult because they include many word

problems, which pose unnecessary linguistic challenges for learners who are developing their competence in English. The wording of such problems could easily be changed to ensure that learners are able to demonstrate their knowledge of maths without the barriers posed by the complex wording of exercises.

In English GCSE, the preponderance of 19th-century texts in English literature is also challenging for these learners.

Are there particular curriculum or qualifications subjects where: a. there is too much content; not enough content, or content is missing; b. the content is out-of-date; c. the content is unhelpfully sequenced. there is a need for greater flexibility (for example to provide the space for teachers to develop and adapt content)?

a) **Content quantity and quality**

Key Stage 3

Consistent feedback from our partner schools indicates that while the curriculum provides a solid foundation, there may be instances where the pace of content delivery can be overwhelming for those EAL learners who are new to English or at the early stages of English acquisition. Greater flexibility is needed to allow teachers to tailor the curriculum to the specific needs of EAL learners, providing additional support and scaffolding as required.

Key Stage 4 and 16-19

The content at these key stages can be challenging for EAL learners due to the increased academic demands and the complexity of subject-specific language. There is a need for more explicit and integrated teaching of language skills, such as reading comprehension, writing, and critical thinking, across all subject areas.

b) **Content that is out of date**

Key Stage 5

The ESOL curriculum is 20 years old, and its linguistic framework is outdated and no longer in line with research evidence on how individuals learn additional languages. There are many instances of inaccurate sequencing of language development, and important aspects of language learning, such as vocabulary and listening skills development, are missing.

Also, the ESOL curriculum, which is based on the National Standards for Adult Literacy, applies learning objectives designed for first-language English speakers who are fluent in English but need help with reading and writing. These objectives are then imposed on ESOL learners, who lack the underpinning language competence to communicate in English. ESOL learners need to learn how the English language works, e.g. in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as well as how English is expressed in the four domains of language use: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Imposing the literacy standards on the ESOL Core Curriculum has had a detrimental effect, as too much time is spent on meeting first-language English speakers' goals, which are not relevant to the learning of a new language. For example, the Functional Skills English (FSE) reading curriculum has a strong focus on recognising text genre, when ESOL learners are likely to need help with foundational skills, such as understanding vocabulary, and the meaning of tenses.

In addition, the ESOL Core Curriculum focuses almost exclusively on language for survival, e.g. home and family, shopping, the use of public services, and health care. While this coverage is useful, especially in the early stages of settlement, it is not enough. Schellekens (2001) showed that, overwhelmingly, learners' priority is to improve language for work and study, and to be financially independent.

An added concern is that lack of rigour in standards setting has allowed too much variability between awarding bodies' exams. As a 2022 Ofqual study on ESOL exams indicates, this has resulted in an insufficiently robust framework to ensure parity of ESOL qualifications and levels between awarding bodies. It also provides evidence that the level of language demand across the ESOL levels is not evenly calibrated. This confirms concerns among ESOL practitioners that the learning load of the levels and qualifications is inconsistent.

Following extensive consultation with practitioners and experts from across the sector, The Bell Foundation recently published the ESOL Qualifications and Curriculum Review (May 2024), which includes resulting recommendations. Respondents to the consultation expressed widespread agreement that reform is essential to promote effective language learning, exams, and regulation. The most important recommendation from this review is to develop ESOL standards that align with second-language acquisition research, providing a structured roadmap for English learners aged 16-19. The standards should serve as the blueprint for the development of a revised ESOL curriculum. It should also provide a sound base from which to design reliable and valid qualifications, both as a main learning aim and to support the development of language skills on vocational and education courses, e.g. GCSE and A levels, Level 3 IT, Health and Social Care, Plumbing, etc. The standards should be informed by the findings from the 2022 Ofqual study on ESOL exams, ensuring that curriculum content across levels is balanced and manageable. Key considerations for the design of new ESOL standards include:

1. **Learning trajectory and proficiency mapping**: The new standards should reflect the distinct levels in English language learning across the four domains of language use (listening, speaking reading and writing), helping to design valid, reliable qualifications that align with vocational courses and A-level standards.
2. **Separate speaking and listening skills development**: Separate standards are needed for speaking and listening skills, as learners' progress occurs at different rates. An enhanced focus on listening is essential, addressing the distinct challenges that ESOL learners typically have in understanding spoken English, such as intonation, stress, lexical segmentation, etc. (Field, 2003; Field, 2008).
3. **Vocabulary**: Vocabulary development and word-building skills should be emphasised, as these are critical components for language mastery that support both comprehension and communication (Nation, 2001; Quigley, 2018).
4. **Explicit instruction on language systems**: The new standards should include explicit instruction on the underlying structures and rules that govern the English language, such as grammar, pronunciation nuances, and the contrast between spoken and written forms.
5. **Gradual introduction of literacy skills**: The new standards should take into account research findings on the point at which the teaching of reading and then writing should be introduced. For most learners who are new to English, teaching literacy skills comes too early in the ESOL core curriculum-at Entry 1. Research indicates that learners need sufficient vocabulary, listening and speaking skills before reading and writing can be meaningfully introduced (Grabe, 2009). Also, the skills of reading for gist, skimming and inference feature heavily in the NLS and the ESOL core curriculum from Entry 1 onwards (Schellekens, 2011). Yet there is evidence that these types of reading are beyond the capacity of learners at Entry 1-3 and Level 1 (Swann & Walter, 2017).

6. **Explicit focus on written texts**: The standards should equip ESOL learners to produce written content suited to academic and vocational requirements, ensuring readiness for relevant assessments.
7. **English for work and study**: Language for study should be incorporated into the ESOL standards and core curriculum, as many 16–19-year-old learners on study programmes aspire to progress to vocational and educational courses. Language for work should also be included, especially from Entry 3 onwards to equip learners for present and future employment.

The inclusion of the recommendations outlined above into the current ESOL curriculum review is expected to bring improved standards and exams, as well as a positive washback effect in the classroom. This means a much more positive impact of standards and curriculum on the quality of learning and achievement than is currently the case. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see The Bell Foundation ESOL Qualifications and Curriculum Review.

c) Sequencing of content

Key Stage 3 and 4

- The sequencing of content can sometimes be challenging for EAL learners, as it may not always align with their language-proficiency levels or prior educational backgrounds. For example, in History, a learner coming from Ukraine may have studied completely different topics related to Ukrainian and Eastern European history, and may have to start the study of a particular topic from scratch.
- A more gradual approach to introducing new vocabulary and complex language structures can help to support EAL learners' understanding and retention of information.

Key Stage 4

Most of the curriculum is currently inaccessible to students who are new to English or are at the early stages of English acquisition when they enter secondary school in later years. These learners struggle with the amount of content that needs to be covered across different subjects. In particular, the “big five” GCSEs (English Language, Mathematics, Science, History and Geography) continue to be difficult for late-arriving EAL learners. Text-dense and abstract papers (especially English Baccalaureate papers) pose significant and unnecessary barriers for those who are new to English or at the early stages of English acquisition, which risk disadvantaging learners in this cohort. These foundation papers need to be structured differently to ensure more logical progression and improved accessibility, including language modification and layout. For example, improvements could include grading the language in questions, simplifying the instructions, providing clear examples and models, and so on.

d) Need for greater flexibility

Key Stages 1-4

The Bell Foundation welcomes the Government’s commitment to developing early communication skills and to embedding oracy as part of the planned curriculum and assessment review to improve young people’s communication skills.

Oracy skills are vital to multilingual EAL children. Their social inclusion and their ability to understand what is being taught, to actively engage in learning activities, and to demonstrate

learning successfully, largely depends on their ability to both comprehend input and to express themselves in English. However, oracy skills development for children whose first-language is English is not the same as oracy skills development for children for whom English is an Additional Language. Important factors will need to be considered when developing oracy programmes to ensure that all children using EAL, and particularly those who are at risk of underachievement, can benefit equitably and are not disproportionately disadvantaged by schemes developed for first-language English children that overlook the diverse and distinctive language practices and language learning needs of multilingual children.

Key considerations for developing oracy programmes for EAL learners, which should be reflected in oracy guidance include:

- **Language exposure:** Prolonged exposure to English is crucial, especially for those learners who have started learning English later in life. Oracy programmes should provide ample opportunities for these learners to listen to and use English in various contexts, both in and out of the classroom.
- **Language proficiency:** Oracy programmes should cater to a range of English language proficiency levels, from new-to-English to fluent.
- **Age of arrival:** Early arrival provides more time for language acquisition, while late arrival requires intensive support. Oracy programmes should be tailored to the specific needs of EAL learners based on their age of arrival and the English language proficiency that learners have upon arrival.
- **Home language:** Valuing and incorporating home languages can enhance English oracy development. Translanguaging practices, which allow learners to use their full linguistic repertoire, can be beneficial for EAL learners.
- **Assessment***:* Holistic and culturally sensitive assessments are essential to accurately measure EAL learners' oracy skills. Traditional standardised assessments may not be suitable for EAL learners, as they may not capture the full range of their linguistic abilities. Alternative assessment methods, such as performance-based assessments and portfolios, can provide a more accurate picture of EAL learners' progress.

For more detailed information about Oracy for EAL learners, see The Bell Foundation briefing Oracy and Children who use English as an Additional Language: https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/09/Oracy-and-Children-who-use-English-as-an-Additional-Language-briefing_FINAL.pdf .

Are there particular changes that could be made to ensure the curriculum (including qualification content) is more diverse and representative of society?

There are several areas that require consideration to ensure that the curriculum is more diverse and representative of the multilingual and multicultural makeup of English society, schools and classrooms. These are presented below.

Standard English and non-standard English: The current national curriculum has favoured a focus on Standard English, which can lead to negative views of so-called non-standard varieties of English. Foley (2018) has found that this narrowing of the curriculum has led to schools to “police” the forms of English spoken in the classroom, potentially marginalising pupils (and teachers’) home languages, and thereby impacting their cultural identity (García, 2009). A curriculum that reflects the diversities of our society, ensuring every child is represented, must recognise that all pupils face the task of learning not just a single body of knowledge about English (i.e. standard English employed in the classroom), but also local dialects, which involves different academic literacies (Foley, 2018). To ensure

the curriculum is more diverse and representative of English society, attention should be drawn to features of dialect, assisting learners in appreciating the variety of “Englishes” that they are likely to encounter. It should also focus on register, so that learners are able to use language that is appropriate for different social situations, and involve pupils in considering differences between the grammar of spoken and written language.

Topics, texts and cultural references: Evidence from the Foundation’s partner schools working in diverse areas suggests that more diversity is needed in the English curriculum in terms of texts. For example, apart from Poetry, most books and plays studied are written by British authors. Prescription in the national curriculum means that currently teachers do not have the ability to tailor their own school curricula to the pupils they have in their classrooms. As a result, there is a huge amount of untapped cultural capital that multilingual pupils who use EAL bring with them that cannot always be recognised because of prescription and pressure to ‘cover’ a curriculum that reflects a narrow cultural capital and associated canon that represents only a limited sector of society. Also, feedback from school practitioners consistently highlights that many EAL learners cannot easily relate to some of the topics and texts that feature in the national curriculum. Many topics in subjects like History, English and Geography rely on reference points that are mostly familiar to students who were born in England and use English as a first language. EAL learners feel isolated during class discussions about topics that are alien to them, especially where assumptions are made about all the learners having shared cultural knowledge and overlook the fact that newly arrived learners may have different cultural and educational backgrounds. This means there is more for them to learn and more work for them to do to make this intelligible for their own frames of reference. Changes that could be made include:

- The inclusion of more diverse texts, materials and resources that reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the pupil population, and that integrate cultural references and contexts from pupils' home languages into the curriculum. This will make learning more engaging and relatable, and validate children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds, identity, and experiences. Literature could be made more diverse by including, for example, more Black authors and authors from displaced backgrounds, as well as embracing a greater range of genres (e.g. rap poetry). The new curriculum could include a list of diverse authors.
- Making recommendations in curriculum statements about how links could be effectively made to aspects of the learners’ cultural backgrounds, e.g.:
    - Explicit links could be made to the countries and regions where the children and young people come from, so that they can see themselves in what is being taught, e.g. the contribution of Polish people to World War Two for leaners who come from Poland.
    - In the unit on migration (GCSE History), choices can be made in terms of values and intent, e.g. moving away from the greatness of the British Empire.
    - In geography GCSE, there is scope to explore topics beyond England, and case studies that focus on other countries beyond crisis narratives that unwittingly reinforce negative views of other countries or regions, and which could well be those where these learners come from. For example, “disasters” such as flooding or earthquakes, are typically presented as occurring in the Global South. This would give learners a stronger and more applicable grounding in world geography to enable them to become well-rounded citizens who appreciate the diversity and pluralism of our society.

Heritage and modern foreign languages: There are currently only 18 GCSEs in different modern languages produced and offered by awarding organisations in England (Gibb,

2022), even though more than 300 different languages are spoken in English schools. There is a clear mismatch between 'the big three' – the most popular modern foreign languages taught at Key Stages 3, 4 and 5, French, Spanish and German (Collen, 2023) – and the most widely spoken languages other than English in England according to the last census (Polish, Romanian, Punjabi, Urdu and Portuguese). This points to the need for more heritage and community language papers as part of the GCSE MFL offer, in order to reflect the linguistic backgrounds of these learners. For example, other than Polish and Russian, Eastern European languages are not represented in GCSE MFL papers, and these offers do not reflect the range of Eastern European languages used by pupils and their families in the current EAL cohort. Increasing the number of GCSE community languages in the MFL papers would enable multilingual pupils to attain a qualification in their own languages, which would help maintain bonds with their extended family back home, and it would ensure the curriculum is more diverse and more representative of England's multilingual and multicultural society.

To what extent does the current curriculum (including qualification content) support students to positively engage with, be knowledgeable about and respect others? Are there elements that could be improved?

Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence from our work with schools and the consultations undertaken in preparation for this response indicate that EAL learners are often 'othered' (i.e. defined and labelled as not fitting in within the norms of the dominant social group) and can be easy targets for racial bullying and discrimination. The reviewed curriculum should raise awareness of cultural differences, such as notions of proximity, formality versus closeness. and unconscious biases so as to help minimise othering and to promote positively engagement with and respect for others.

In which ways do the current qualification pathways and content at 16-19 support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work and what could we change to better support this?

In addition to the recommendations made in our response to questions 20, 21 and 22, parity of academic and occupational learning, a greater choice of subjects, increases in guided learning hours and learning English in relevant contexts is likely to prepare 16-to-19 learners appropriately for further study, life and work. For this cohort, especially for many refugee and asylum-seeking young people who have had a disrupted education, continued access to holistic and specialist support from teachers and support staff and from peers is crucial for them to develop the ability to study independently. Research highlights that a key component in many examples of good practice is strong mentors (usually teachers) to help these learners succeed (McIntyre & Abrams, 2021). Therefore, more time with teachers can be highly beneficial.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that FES learners who have passed ESOL Entry 3 are deemed to have sufficient language skills to transition to mainstream provision. However, many learners drop out early because they experience language overload when trying to understand teaching input and course content and meet the challenging demands of assignment writing. Also, schools and colleges have noted that, increasingly, many learners in the 16-19 EAL/ESOL cohort at Entry Level and Level 1 are traumatised, displaced young people with severely disrupted education and looked-after children who need to learn how to be students in education settings. These learners would most benefit from additional

teaching hours for the continued study of English to meet their needs and accelerate their progression to further study with the following features:

- Non-accredited funded learning hours, which then enable progression to accredited learning.

- A focus on basic literacy for ESOL learners for those who need it.

- Level 1 taster options (e.g. in science, catering, or digital media) combined initially with one-year ESOL Entry Level courses leading to speaking/listening awards, and as learners become confident and increasingly competent in understanding and participating in more complex interactions, move onto reading and writing awards.

Research highlights that a holistic, enriching, and culturally inclusive learning environment that offers opportunities for participation in projects, that nurture good working relationships, and that help build a shared sense of community, volunteering and arts-based activities, is particularly successful (McIntyre & Neuhaus, 2021). This may require greater flexibility in how teaching hours are used. Also, the emotional and social needs arising from physical or psychological trauma experienced by refugee and asylum-seeking young people require pastoral time and strategies, so that these learners can thrive in their new surroundings, are included, and integrate into the host country (Gladwell, 2019; Morgan, 2018; McIntyre & Neuhaus, 2021; O'Toole, Thommessen & Todd, 2018). These include the promotion of social and emotional well-being alongside academic achievement, availability of strong pastoral support, and rapid interventions to improve attendance.

What can we do to ensure the assessment system at key stages 1 and 2 works well for all learners, including learners in need of additional support in their education (for example SEND, disadvantage, EAL)?

Key Stages 1 and 2

More holistic EAL assessment should be introduced in order to ascertain pupils' proficiency in English, set targets, and track progress. This would require the reintroduction of a measure of pupils' proficiency in English (which was briefly introduced in England between 2016 to 2018, based on Welsh proficiency bands) so that schools can assess it within a common framework to identify and address pupils' needs. Since 2009, schools in Wales have used a five-point scale from A (new to English) to E (fluent) to rate the proficiency in English of EAL pupils, and as a result, they have been able to track their progress through the different levels over time. The collection and access to these data has also enabled researchers to ascertain fundamental questions for curriculum developers and government officials regarding how long it takes for pupils who are new to English to acquire proficiency in English, and how long pupils need special language support (Strand and Lindorff, 2020).

At Key Stages 1 and 2 schools do not always know enough about the reasonable adjustments that can be made between EYs and KS2, or about a child's codified rights, especially about accessing, processing, and learning in their home languages, and access arrangements in general are not clear. Reasonable adjustments and access arrangements should be reviewed, disambiguated, improved and communicated clearly to ensure all schools are aware of them and understand their statutory duty to enact them and can do so.

Key Stage 2

Anecdotal evidence from the Foundation's partner schools indicates that:

- Many EAL learners are currently applied into the SATs in Years 3 and 4. This puts many children who are new to English and their families under undue pressure, as it is unreasonable to expect that they will attain “secure” in both academic language and vocabulary requirements in two years. As well as setting these pupils up to fail, their outcomes may not be representative of what they know and are able to do. Schools should be given discretion to make decisions about withdrawing individual pupils from SATs should the tests be deemed inaccessible to them as a result of their current levels of proficiency in English.
- A significant amount of time is spent drilling the pupils in preparation for SATs. This time could be better spent supporting disadvantaged EAL pupils to access the curriculum and develop language in the context of the curriculum.
- Standardised assessments taken under exam conditions may not be the best way of assessing disadvantaged EAL pupils aged 10-11.
- The level of technical knowledge of English is at a very high level; and so is the language of assessment, which poses unnecessary barriers for late arrivals who are new to English.
- In Year 6, SAT papers adversely impact those EAL learners from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, as the contexts, texts, concepts and vocabulary included in the papers are often not relatable to their own experiences. In order to address this barrier:

    - The choice of texts in papers should be improved through the inclusion of more diverse and relatable contexts and texts.
    - It should be made explicit in the curriculum statements that time should be spent explicitly teaching vocabulary; that the vocabulary to be taught should go beyond the high frequency lists in the three-tier lists; that there should be a focus on ensuring that pupils who use EAL understand the meaning of the target vocabulary, so that they can then comprehend texts; and that oracy work to contextualise the vocabulary should be undertaken.

- Assessment of reading should adopt a similar approach to that of writing – that is, it should be teacher-assessed and change from being conducted as a one-off assessment under test conditions to a portfolio approach. This would enable EAL pupils to show not only how their reading skills have progressed over time, but also changes in their attitude towards reading.

Are there ways in which we could support improvement in pupil progress and outcomes at key stage 3?

Recognizing that EAL learners who are still developing their proficiency in English need more time to develop both academic and language skills, extending assessment windows or allowing students to demonstrate progress over multiple years would reduce pressure and allow a more accurate reflection of EAL learners' learning journey.

Are there ways in which we could support pupils who do not meet the expected standard at key stage 2?

In addition to the provision of language support in language-rich classroom environments as required, key strategies to support EAL pupils who do not meet the expected standard at Key Stage 2 include:

- Curriculum adaptation.

- The use of more accessible, simplified textbooks and resources.
- Culturally responsive teaching that incorporates cultural elements into the curriculum to make learning more relevant and engaging for these learners.
- The use of formative assessment to monitor progress and provide timely feedback.
- Employing alternative assessment methods, such as oral presentations, projects, and portfolios, to assess EAL learners' language proficiency.
- Providing clear and concise feedback in a language that EAL learners can understand.

To what extent, and in what ways, does the accountability system influence curriculum and assessment decisions in schools and colleges?

The removal of the specific EAL focus from the Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (see question 45 below) has meant that over the last few years many schools have prioritised other areas, such as curriculum “coverage” and behaviour, at the expense of supporting EAL learners effectively. For example, anecdotally we hear about an increase in the use of withdrawal practices in schools (where pupils are taken out of mainstream lessons in order to attend English language “interventions”), with EAL pupils having reduced access to mainstream lessons where they would have access to the full curriculum. Such approaches were outlawed in the 1980s, after it was recognised that they did not contribute to an inclusive classroom, reinforcing an awareness of “difference”, and restricting access to important educational opportunities (Commission for Racial Equality, 1986).

The suspension of statutory reporting of proficiency in English for EAL learners in 2018 (see question 45 below) has led to less accountability for schools to ensure that EAL learners are making adequate progress in English language acquisition. The lack of standardised data has made it harder to track the progress of EAL learners over time and to identify areas where additional support may be needed. As a result, some EAL learners, particularly those with complex needs, may have been overlooked or not received the appropriate level of support without the regular assessment and monitoring provided by statutory reporting.

How well does the current accountability system support and recognise progress for all pupils and learners? What works well and what could be improved?

There is a need for better transition data to track EAL learners as they move through different educational stages. As the increase in the number and proportion of school-age EAL learners in England has been more pronounced amongst primary school pupils than those in secondary schools, there may be issues regarding the recording of EAL in the transition to secondary school (Lindorff, Strand and Au, forthcoming). Anecdotal evidence suggests that information about EAL learners’ proficiency in English is currently not gathered at the end of Primary nor Secondary education.

Key Stages 1-4

The current accountability system does not have the right mechanisms to adequately measure the progress of EAL pupils. While EAL pupils are more than 20 per cent (and rising) of the school population, these learners have been deprioritised as a group, and there has been a steady erosion (and even dismantling in some parts of the country) of the infrastructure needed to deliver the support that many of these learners need to thrive in their education.

As a result of the 2019 changes to the Ofsted Inspection Framework, the focus on EAL learners was notably reduced. The term "EAL" and the specific focus on inspecting how schools integrated EAL learners and ensured their access to the curriculum was removed

from the framework. Ofsted inspectors previously had access to data on EAL learners' attainment and progress, which helped them assess schools' support for this group. However, these data were discontinued, limiting inspectors' ability to monitor the progress of EAL learners. The removal of specific EAL focus has led to inconsistencies, and in some cases, neglect of EAL learners during inspections. Reforms to Ofsted must ensure that inspecting EAL provision is included and prioritised.

Overreliance on aggregated data for EAL learners masks significant variation within this group, as it means including some of the ethnic groups who achieve the highest attainment and some who achieve the lowest. Research shows not only the significant differences between different ethnic groups but also that it is proficiency in English that is the strongest determinant of attainment for the EAL cohort (Strand, Malmberg and Hall, 2015; Lindorff, Strand and Au, forthcoming). Proficiency in English for EAL pupils explains four to six times as much variation in achievement as gender, free school meals, and ethnicity combined. Proficiency scales used to assess the English language proficiency of EAL learners in schools were only briefly introduced in England between 2016 and 2018. These helped teachers identify the support and resources needed for EAL learners to succeed, and are being used in all the devolved nations as well as in other English-speaking countries. Statutory reporting of proficiency in English should be reintroduced.

Key Stage 5

Few barriers to opportunity are more apparent than the language barrier faced by almost one million people aged 16 and over in the UK who cannot speak English well or at all, with over one-third of this group being UK citizens.

Data on ESOL are limited to the Department for Education’s annual returns on discrete adult post-19 provision. This means that government departments, providers, teachers, their managers and Ofsted do not know, nor systematically collect data on, how many second language speakers are on FES mainstream vocational and educational programmes. This includes study programmes, FS and GCSE English and maths, vocational training, apprenticeships, A- and T-levels, and high-needs provision for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. As a result, the sector does not know how many enrol, how they fare once on a programme, how many drop out and at what stage, and how well they achieve. It also means that it is impossible to demonstrate the impact of public investment in educating learners whose first language is not English. This is a major issue, as the number of second-language speakers on FES provision is considerable. For example, some FE colleges in metropolitan areas have stated that the number of second-language speakers on programme is over 50 per cent. Accurate data on the numbers of people who need to learn English and their levels of proficiency is the vital first step to understanding the local and national need for ESOL provision. An absence of data leaves learners waiting a long time for a space in a local ESOL class, or going to classes which are not suitable for their level of proficiency. Data could be improved by adding a new field marker to the individualised learning record (ILR) which identifies learners with other language backgrounds. This information will be central to inform courses in the different types of provision and progression across them, as well as monitoring of impact at sector, provision-type and local-provider level. A solution like Project Titan (an Education Record app which students would have on their phones) might have great potential if it included details of EAL needs.

All Ofsted inspectors are likely to encounter second language speakers on a regular basis. Yet not all inspectors have specialist training in ESOL provision. Ofsted has a key role to play in driving system change by raising standards across all educational settings to improve the lives of learners. To do so effectively, Ofsted needs to increase its focus on provision for ESOL learners in further education and skills, alongside better use of data.

Are there particular changes that could be made to the following programmes and qualifications and/or their assessment that would be beneficial to learners: a. AS/A level qualifications b. T Level and T Level Foundation Year programmes c. Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 3 d. Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 2 and below

The Bell Foundation is aware of examples of provision designed for EAL/ESOL learners aged 16-19 for whom joining a very academic A-level programme would not be beneficial at that stage. This model effectively supports progression to Level 3 and enables learners to flourish in education by offering opportunities that encourage individualised learning, enriched curricula that, in addition to academic and vocational content, foster relational, social, and cultural learning, and engagement with the wider community. Depending on their academic and vocational training needs, learners follow either Level 1 or Level 2 and can successfully join the provision at any point in the year, which is particularly helpful for the late arriving refugees and asylum-seeking young people. The Foundation is happy to provide further details upon request. One key point to consider is that more than just one year might be needed for those EAL/ESOL learners planning to pursue academic routes into Higher Education, as it may take longer than a year for some learners to develop the proficiency in English needed to progress to Level 3, depending on their initial level of English proficiency on entry into the English education system.

How can we improve learners' understanding of how the different programmes and qualifications on offer will prepare them for university, employment (including apprenticeships) and/or further technical study?

According to a recent report, the most frequently encountered barriers to accessing FE for 16-19 EAL/EAL learners are (Ashlee, 2024):

- Unclear, inaccurate, confusing, and conflicting information about accessing FE, with no information about rights and entitlements for ESOL speakers.
- Complex admissions and enrolment processes, and complex documentation requests.
- A lack of trained staff who are aware of language barriers and the rights and entitlements of refugee and asylum-seeking young people.

These systemic barriers typically impact these learners' ability to make informed choices about their study programmes. They will need to be seriously considered when developing the reforms, as the impact of a great new curriculum document, a reviewed and improved assessment system and great new qualification pathways may be severely limited if the structural and contextual barriers that may adversely affect the outcome of the reforms are not taken into account. This review is an opportunity to address these barriers by requiring all providers to ensure that:

- Coordinated support between agencies, colleges, and schools to provide on-site advice, guidance, and support for all EAL/ESOL learners (Gladwell & Chetwynd, 2018).

- Information, advice and guidance establishes learners' existing skills, experience, and aspirations, and provides in-depth advice to EAL/ESOL learners and their parents/carers, including clear and realistic guidance on the best course options available, and the likely level of language skills needed. This should be translated into their home languages, as parents/carers may also be new to English or at the

early acquisition stages themselves, may not be literate in English, and/or may be unfamiliar with the English education system.

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)

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