

# ESOL Learners' Progression to Functional Skills

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**Learning and Work Institute**

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## About Learning and Work Institute

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We research what works, develop new ways of thinking and implement new approaches. Working with partners, we transform people's experiences of learning and employment. What we do benefits individuals, families, communities and the wider economy.

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## Executive summary

Stakeholder engagement carried out for the Department for Education (DfE) by Learning and Work Institute (L&W) in spring 2019 identified that effective practice in the use of Functional Skills English (FSE) qualifications in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision is an area that providers are keen to explore further. Earlier research, carried out by NIACE in 2014, found a range of curriculum models existed in the sector to support ESOL learners' progression to FSE<sup>1</sup>. Since then, there have been relevant developments in the sector, including the introduction of reformed FSE qualifications.

In this context, DfE asked L&W to undertake a small-scale, time-limited additional stakeholder consultation project to provide an up-to-date picture on ESOL learners' progression to FSE. Building on the earlier research and stakeholder engagement, L&W conducted stakeholder and provider interviews, and online practitioner focus groups, in order to answer the following questions:

- What curriculum delivery models are providers currently using in their ESOL / Functional Skills provision?
- What are the features that providers believe to be effective in supporting learner achievement and progression?
- What professional development opportunities are there to support ESOL practitioners who are delivering FS qualifications? Are there any gaps in the offer and what would help?

## Summary of findings

Working towards ESOL qualifications at lower levels before moving on to FSE, generally after achieving ESOL Entry Level 3 (sometimes Level 1) remains the most common model for adult ESOL learners to progress to FSE. However, some providers report alternative models, including using solely FSE qualifications (or only ESOL) and 'combined models' where FSE is supplemented by additional ESOL awards, commonly in Speaking and Listening. Where FSE qualifications are used within ESOL provision, teaching is usually by specialist ESOL teachers, who often hold subject-specific teaching qualifications.

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<sup>1</sup> NIACE (2014) *ESOL Learners' Progression to Functional Skills and GCSE English Qualifications*. Private report to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Delivery models identified included: 'Functional Skills only' i.e. all ESOL learners take FSE qualifications; 'split models' i.e. learners start with ESOL qualifications, then move to FSE at an appropriate point, usually after Entry Level 3; and 'combined models', involving combinations of qualifications in the same course, e.g. FSE with an ESOL Speaking and Listening qualification.

Although not considered the primary market for FSE qualifications, the Functional Skills reform programme undertook consultation with the ESOL sector. Revised qualifications include an enhanced focus on spelling and grammar, identified by ESOL specialists as likely to benefit ESOL learners in contexts where they would encounter FSE qualifications, for example as part of mainstream vocational programmes, or where used in ESOL programmes. Despite this, engagement with ESOL providers and practitioners finds widespread consensus that ESOL qualifications are still considered to have clear advantages, particularly at lower levels. For example, learners are reported to benefit from a more specific focus on grammar and an approach to assessment that more closely mirrors the ESOL curriculum in terms of speaking and listening, reading and writing skills.

There remain significant challenges in ESOL provision and learners' progression to FSE. These include: initial assessment and placement into ESOL or FSE provision (linked to different funding eligibility criteria), progression between ESOL and FSE, progression between levels in FSE and overall achievement rates for learners.

This consultation found consensus around the features of effective practice in delivering ESOL and FS qualifications, namely:

- ESOL learners benefit from being taught by ESOL specialists<sup>2</sup> whether they are aiming towards ESOL or FSE qualifications.
- A recognition of the benefits to teaching ESOL learners at lower levels separately from native speakers, to enable a focus on grammar, vocabulary, idiomatic language and fluency.

Although many providers use ESOL qualifications where possible, FSE's role in preparing learners for life and work is well recognised, particularly where FSE is seen to support learner progression e.g. into further vocational study. Providers highlight a range of factors when considering which qualifications would benefit a learner or identifying progression routes. Learners' backgrounds, aspirations, confidence, and length of time in the UK all play a role. Wrap-around support is critical, especially for refugees and new arrivals, to develop appropriate progression pathways, including language and employability skills, and identify the qualifications that would best support this.

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<sup>2</sup> Providers report that, generally, ESOL staff are well-qualified, often holding subject specialist teaching qualifications. Here, teachers are referred to as specialists (rather than qualified, for example), reflecting that in some cases ESOL teachers may have acquired relevant skills through experience of working with ESOL learners, regardless of the particular qualifications held. Similarly, FSE teachers are referred to as specialists when it is their main teaching area, though it is recognised that FSE qualifications are often taught by teachers as a part of their role, for example by vocational tutors, as well.

Professional development opportunities for ESOL practitioners are limited. There is scope to update and expand professional development for new and existing ESOL specialists, FSE teachers and vocational specialists who teach FSE as part of their role, to support non-native speakers to develop the language skills and vocabulary required by reformed FS qualifications.

## Introduction

Stakeholder engagement carried out for the Department for Education (DfE) by Learning and Work Institute (L&W) in spring 2019 identified that effective practice in the use of Functional Skills English (FSE) qualifications in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision is an area that providers are keen to explore further.

Earlier research, carried out by NIACE in 2014, found a range of curriculum models existed in the sector to support ESOL learners' progression to (FSE). These models included: 'Functional Skills only' i.e. all ESOL learners take FSE qualifications; 'split models' i.e. learners start with ESOL qualifications, then move to FSE at an appropriate point, usually after Entry Level 3; and 'combined models', involving combinations of qualifications in the same course, e.g. FSE with an ESOL Speaking and Listening qualification.

Since then, there have been relevant developments in the sector, including the introduction of reformed FSE qualifications in September 2019. The reformed qualification includes updated subject content, a greater focus on phonics, and new assessment arrangements that do not allow the use of a dictionary. These reforms aimed to make Functional Skills qualifications more robust and improve their value and recognition to employers. Although ESOL was not considered to be the primary market for the reformed qualifications, use in ESOL settings was recognised in the consultation process and feedback from ESOL stakeholders sought on the development of revised subject content.

In this context, DfE asked L&W to undertake a small-scale, time-limited additional stakeholder consultation project to provide an up-to-date picture on ESOL learners' progression to FSE. This additional stakeholder consultation builds on the earlier research and stakeholder engagement, and aims to answer the following questions:

- What curriculum delivery models are providers currently using in their ESOL / Functional Skills provision?
- What are the features that providers believe to be effective in supporting learner achievement and progression?
- What professional development opportunities are there to support ESOL practitioners who are delivering FS qualifications? Are there any gaps in the offer and what would help?

## Approach

L&W conducted 14 semi-structured telephone interviews with ESOL providers and sector stakeholders, including:



- ESOL curriculum leads, including FE colleges (6) and ACL (1). These interviews were recruited from a longlist of organisations offering FSE to ESOL learners, identified through earlier sector engagement.
- ESOL curriculum experts, including ETF Regional Specialist Leads (3)
- awarding organisations, with a substantial ESOL and FSE offer (2)
- The National Association of Teachers of English and Other Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) (1)
- The Education and Training Foundation (1)

L&W facilitated two interactive online practitioner focus groups. 47 registrations were received, with a total of approximately 22 participating. Focus group participants were recruited via an open invitation circulated to ESOL sector networks.

L&W also facilitated a semi-structured discussion at a NATECLA meeting of approximately 50 ESOL curriculum managers in London. This discussion used elements of the focus group topic guide, focussing on the benefits, challenges and effective practice in supporting ESOL learners' progression to FSE.

Five case studies are included in this report to illustrate different models of provision. These are based on the telephone interviews, and follow up discussions with the providers concerned, as required. L&W selected the case studies from interview and focus group contributions, based on their potential to showcase different delivery models and providers' rationales for these, as well as examples of effective practice.

## Effective Practice

The ESOL sector has mixed views about what works best for learners, and has established different curriculum models (see following section) to support progression to FSE. L&W's stakeholder engagement identified some points of consensus on effective practice in delivering ESOL and FS qualifications, and how learners can be supported to achieve and progress.

### Discrete provision

Most providers conclude that ESOL learners taking FSE qualifications are most effectively taught in discrete provision (i.e. not in classes alongside adult basic skills learners, who are speakers of English as their first language) to enable a focus on grammar, vocabulary, idiomatic language and fluency, particularly at lower levels. Whilst there are some reported benefits to learners from mixed provision with expert speakers (e.g. opportunity to interact with first language speakers; learning different skills from each other), generally practitioners consider that the difference in learning needs is most effectively met in discrete provision for ESOL learners.

**Lewisham Adult and Community Learning** service finds that Functional Skills qualifications – although fully funded – are not always appropriate for adult ESOL learners. ESOL learners in FSE classes miss out on a focus on aspects of language such as grammar, vocabulary and idioms, pronunciation, and common conventions in English. Due to different learning needs of participants in its FSE provision, the service also notes that learners may not feel confident to practise speaking skills in this context. For these reasons, the service considers it most effective to offer ESOL and FSE as discrete provisions.

### Robust, holistic initial assessment

There is consensus that FSE plays an important role in preparing learners for life and work, and that achieving FSE can be valuable in supporting learners' wider ambitions. Whether a learner enrolls on an ESOL or FSE course, or the point at which they progress from ESOL to FSE, should be informed by a robust assessment of learning needs, and consideration of the learner's motivations for learning English, and longer term aspirations.

### 'Bridging the gap'

Some providers report that building unit-based awards into the curriculum offer to 'bridge the gap' between ESOL and FSE can be an effective solution and help support progression. There is evidence of varying practices in progression placement, for example whether learners should progress to FSE at the same or at a higher level than the ESOL

learning completed, given that the two types of qualifications are not perceived to be directly comparable.

Many providers feel that FSE qualifications are more challenging for ESOL learners than ESOL qualifications, as they focus on different aspects of language. For example, in FSE, much of the vocabulary and grammar expected of learners will be assumed knowledge, as the qualification is aimed primarily at first language speakers. ESOL learners will therefore benefit from additional input in these areas. In ESOL, more time is devoted to teaching speaking and listening skills, including a focus on skills such as pronunciation. Although speaking and listening skills are assessed in FSE too, ESOL learners may require more input on this, compared to first language speakers. These differences in focus can lead to horizontal progression to FSE, i.e. at the same level, which can be demotivating for learners, who may feel they are not making progress.

At **Halesowen College**, ESOL learners at Entry Level 3 or higher have the option to progress to vocational provision, and attend FS classes there. However, learners' progress is carefully monitored, with and learners are offered the opportunity to continue their study within the ESOL programme if they find the transition difficult.

### **Access to specialist language teaching**

Providers reported their ESOL staff to be highly-skilled, often highly trained and qualified practitioners, with specific subject specialist teaching skills that support learners to achieve, whether the qualification aim is ESOL or FSE. ESOL learners in FS maths classes were also reported to benefit from being taught by ESOL specialists who had been trained to deliver maths. Providers commonly reported that FSE teachers, whilst also skilled practitioners, are not always trained in the specific skills and knowledge needed to teach the grammar and other language points needed by ESOL learners. Where ESOL learners access FSE as part of a vocational or technical programme, the FS component can be taught by an FS specialist, or by the vocational tutor, who may also benefit from support to meet the language needs of ESOL learners. Providers identified that access to some form of specialist language support helps learners progress in vocational provision.

The **Sheffield College** is currently trialling using ESOL specialists to teach FS maths and English, to improve learner experience and outcomes.

### **Wider support**

Alongside core teaching and learning activities, wrap-around support is seen as critical for young adult learners and adults, especially for asylum seekers, refugees and new arrivals. There are examples of social action projects and enrichment activities such as reading groups and football teams to help learners develop wider skills and confidence in everyday use of English, which support language development and help them to access Functional Skills English qualifications, which practitioners report often assumes greater familiarity with life in the UK than ESOL qualifications.

Enrichment activities and working closely with vocational departments plays a key role in developing ESOL learners' skills and confidence, helping to facilitate progression for ESOL learners to FSE and mainstream provision. Providers report that their ESOL teams work closely with vocational areas to support progression into provision such as study programmes, which will require learners to work towards FS qualifications in English and maths. Some offer 'taster days' where ESOL learners visit different departments, to explore progression pathways and experience the language used in the vocational context. Some providers offer contextualised ESOL learning to prepare for progression, and use specially developed vocational assessments for ESOL learners to determine readiness to progress.

**Sheffield College** provides support with bus passes and childcare through the learner support fund, and also offers some provision in women-only groups, which enable learners a range of national and cultural backgrounds to attend. The ESOL team is working to explore other solutions to support progression, such as study skills sessions and conversation clubs for additional speaking practice.

## ESOL and FSE Curriculum Models

This section sets out current delivery models used by ESOL providers in 19+ and 16 – 18 ESOL programmes to support learners' progression to FSE. It also summarises providers' views on the relative advantages and disadvantages of ESOL and FSE qualifications.

### Adult (19+)ESOL

Curriculum intent is a key tenet of the Ofsted Education Inspection Framework. ESOL providers must therefore consider the different skills levels, learning aims, aspirations and motivations of adult ESOL learners when planning their provision. Large providers are often able to offer several options and pathways.

Adult programmes at **The Manchester College** are typically between 9 to 12 hours per week, to fit with work and family commitments. Adults have access to an integrated learning programme designed to accelerate progression in English language, maths, employability and digital skills, preparing them for work and life. The English language element comprises the study of ESOL Skills for Life qualifications, but learners are also offered opportunities to undertake further study in Functional Skills in both English and maths, through the levels, where appropriate. The college also offers bespoke programmes for students in vocational areas, who need to improve their language skills to support their progression and employment prospects.

Despite careful planning and rigorous assessment, some providers report that at times, there can be a tension between learners' needs and aspirations, and the available progression pathways. For example, some providers report that adult learners request FSE because there is no fee contribution, although the provider has determined that ESOL qualifications would be more appropriate to support progression.

Working towards ESOL qualifications at lower levels and moving on to FSE at a certain point (generally on achieving ESOL Entry Level 3, sometimes Level 1) is the most common model for adult learners in part-time provision. This is driven by providers' widespread agreement that separate awards for ESOL qualifications, specialist language support and a focus on grammar are what is needed at lower levels. Some providers note that, for ESOL learners working below Entry Level 1, there is no equivalent Functional Skills offer, as provision is generally non-accredited, or sometimes uses the 'pre-Entry' ESOL qualifications offered by some awarding organisations. The majority of providers and practitioners L&W engaged with consider the number of guided learning hours funded

for Functional Skills qualifications insufficient to teach the wider breadth of knowledge and skills required by ESOL learners.

**New City College** recognises that new arrivals can be highly motivated but often struggle to stay on the programme if wider needs are not addressed. These might include support with housing, benefits, banking and money, accessing support online, and physical and mental health, all of which can affect their ability to focus on learning. Within the standard 55 guided learning hours for FSE, there is not always the scope to provide contextualised language learning which can help address the wider needs of ESOL learners.

Some providers use alternative models. These include using solely ESOL or FSE qualifications at all levels, and 'combined models' where FSE is supplemented by additional ESOL awards (commonly Speaking and Listening) or grammar workshops. In most cases, FSE in ESOL provision is taught by specialist ESOL practitioners. This reflects broad consensus that, to support language learning effectively, FSE courses for ESOL learners should be taught as ESOL, by appropriately qualified ESOL practitioners.

**The Sheffield College** runs a 14-week mandated ESOL programme for around 200 adult learners referred by Jobcentre Plus. This provision currently offers 15 hours per week. Learners work towards separate ESOL awards in reading, writing, speaking and listening, at the appropriate level, in a specialist, supportive environment with access to further employability courses. The college finds that the focus on separate awards, taught by ESOL specialists, provides the language skills learners need to become 'work-ready'.

The 2014 research highlighted the benefits to ESOL learners from obtaining an FSE qualification, for example smoother progression into further vocational learning, on the same terms as non-ESOL learners. This is recognised by some ESOL providers in current curriculum models, which use solely FSE qualifications, or progress learners to FSE beyond a certain point. However, funding eligibility remains a key driver for choosing fully-funded FSE qualifications rather than ESOL qualifications, which are only fully-funded for some learners. In these cases, providers must then manage the challenges of FSE delivery for ESOL learners, with many practitioners questioning the suitability of FSE for ESOL learners, particularly at the lower proficiency levels.

The current Adult Education Budget low wage fee remission trial has been used by providers to benefit learners studying across a number of curriculum areas. The trial enables providers to fully fund eligible learners who would otherwise be eligible for co-funding. Some providers report benefits from the trial in terms of impact on ESOL learners' progression options, with a few using it to fund more ESOL learners than previously<sup>3</sup>. Arrangements for the trial beyond 2019/20 will be confirmed in due course.

### Young adults (16 – 18)

Provision for young adults is mainly through full-time ESOL study programmes, up to Level 1. These programmes include the main elements that make up this type of provision, with ESOL delivered alongside vocational tasters, employability skills, Functional Skills Maths, tutorials and enrichment. As with all study programmes, learners can work at different levels in maths and in English. Providers report careful consideration of language level when determining how to meet the maths element of study programme requirements, with some asserting that GCSE maths can be better suited to learners with lower language skills, as there is more reading required by the contextualised assessment in Functional Skills maths qualifications.

ESOL study programmes are usually organised within the ESOL curriculum area, with progression to vocational and technical learning, generally from Entry 3 or Level 1.

Providers report using ESOL and FSE qualifications in study programmes, sometimes combining FSE with an ESOL award in Speaking and Listening. As study programmes are fully funded, providers' choice of qualification is not influenced by eligibility for funding, as the AEB co-funding arrangements do not apply. Use of FSE in these contexts appears intended to support progression to vocational and technical study programmes, which also include further Functional Skills learning at a higher level, or GCSEs in maths and English.

In 16 – 18 study programmes at **The Sheffield College**, learners are streamed by language level from pre-entry to L1. In general, learners move from Entry 3 ESOL qualifications to Level 1 FSE. For this cohort, the college views the reformed FSE qualifications as working well, particularly the new emphasis on spelling and grammar. Furthermore, the learners find the qualifications have more currency when progressing into vocational study programmes, with those completing a Level 1 ESOL programme progressing to a vocational study programme at Level 2.

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<sup>3</sup> Tyers, C. and Aldridge, F (2020) *Evaluation of the AEB Low Wage Fee Remission Flexibility Trial. Stakeholder, Provider and Learner Views*. Private report to DfE.

Once learners complete an ESOL study programme and move to vocational provision, some continue to access ESOL provision for language skills development. Others progress to Functional Skills within their vocational areas, where they may be taught by FS specialists (i.e. teachers who mainly or solely teach FS) or vocational tutors who also deliver Functional Skills.

### **Benefits and challenges**

The perceived relative advantages and disadvantages of both ESOL and FSE qualifications, identified in the 2014 research, are largely unchanged (see Table 1). Despite reformed FSE qualifications focusing more directly on spelling and grammar, there is consensus that ESOL qualifications still have clear advantages at lower levels. Learners are reported to benefit from a more specific focus on grammar and an approach to assessment that more closely mirrors the ESOL curriculum in terms of speaking and listening, reading and writing skills.

Practitioners suggest the emphasis on grammar, language features and meta-language in reformed FSE suits ESOL learners and teachers, but identify a risk that learners are disadvantaged by some specific features of FSE. For example, learners are no longer permitted to use dictionaries in FSE assessments.

Despite increased FSE guided learning hours, practitioners still consider these insufficient for the needs of ESOL learners who typically need longer to build the required language skills and range of vocabulary. The advantages and disadvantages highlighted by ESOL practitioners are set out in Table 1 below.



**Table 1. Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of ESOL and FSE, identified by ESOL practitioners**

**ESOL qualifications**

<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on grammar</li> <li>• Taught by specialist teachers</li> <li>• Build a solid language foundation</li> <li>• Exam reflects course content</li> <li>• Separate awards allow for spiky profiles. This supports progression through enabling a focus on one skill area, and allows learners to be placed into provision based on their strengths, rather than a default placement based on their weakest skill.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack currency with employers, and with some learners themselves, compared to well-established ‘brands’ such as Functional Skills and GCSE.</li> <li>• Less portability – providers often reassess (potentially at a different level) when a learner moves between providers.</li> <li>• Progression to FSE not always straightforward, sometimes requiring ‘sideways’ progression to FSE at the same, or even a lower level than the ESOL qualification achieved.</li> <li>• Not always fully-funded for adults</li> <li>• Increasingly dated (compared to reformed FSE); content may not effectively prepare learners for life and work.</li> </ul>

## FSE qualifications

<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fully-funded for all adults, within AEB overall eligibility criteria</li><li>• Currency with employers e.g. included in apprenticeships</li><li>• Recognised by learners – e.g. as ‘native speaker’ qualification</li><li>• Fit with study programme requirements</li><li>• Offer smoother progression into further vocational learning</li><li>• Prepare learners for work and life</li><li>• Enhanced focus on spelling and grammar in reformed qualifications</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Not suitable for learners at pre-Entry level</li><li>• Don’t support the structured teaching and learning of grammar</li><li>• Scenario-based assessments can be a barrier for some ESOL learners</li><li>• FS teachers may not be able to provide the specialist language support needed by ESOL learners</li><li>• Insufficient guided learning hours for ESOL learners</li></ul>

The following additional challenges were cited by ESOL practitioners, in relation to learners’ progression to Functional Skills English.

### *Reliance on online initial assessments*

Practitioners recognise the diversity of past educational experience of ESOL learners including: literacy levels in their native language, knowledge of the alphabet, basic digital skills and overall amount of prior schooling and education. Learners’ personal backgrounds, which may include different cultural practices and expectations, length of time settled in the UK and experience of trauma, also need to be considered. In this context, careful and robust initial assessment is essential. Practitioners suggest that online assessment tools often show learners to be at a level lower than their actual proficiency level, and the tools are therefore less useful in the ESOL context.

Furthermore, where learners have previously undertaken multiple attempts at FSE qualifications, they are not always secure in the knowledge and skills at the level of accreditation.

### *Comparability of ESOL and FSE*

Practitioners note a perceived lack of parity between levels when learners transfer from ESOL qualifications to FSE – there appears to be little consensus on whether or not the levels are comparable. Despite reformed subject content for FSE aiming to achieve incremental progression in skills, practitioners report that for ESOL learners the ‘gap’ between levels is too great, particularly from Entry 3 to Level 1 and from Level 1 to Level 2. There can be a tendency to focus on speaking and listening in ESOL provision rather than building a strong foundation with reading and writing, which can disadvantage learners progressing to FSE.

### *Factors limiting ESOL learners’ achievement in FS, identified by ESOL practitioners*

- Guided learning hours are less than for all-modes ESOL, and may be insufficient
- Use of dictionaries is no longer permitted in reformed FSE
- ESOL learners often find writing skills more challenging than other areas (e.g. speaking, or reading) and may need longer to develop this skill to the same level as other skills. The lack of unitisation in FSE qualifications means that learners are likely to be placed in provision based on their weakest skill area
- Some FSE content may expect learners to understand the nuances of English e.g. how vocabulary is chosen for different purposes. ESOL learners have to do this whilst at the same time establishing basic comprehension of a text, adding an extra layer of challenge.
- In FS Maths, the language of assessment scenarios is often a challenge for ESOL learners, who may lack the range of vocabulary and cultural knowledge assumed, even though awarding organisations work to ensure that language is graded one level below the maths level being assessed
- Where ESOL learners are accessing FSE as part of mainstream vocational provision, there may be a need for additional learning support with ESOL. Some providers reported that they do not offer this facility.

## Professional development

ESOL practitioners and providers report using a range of sources of professional development to support FSE delivery in ESOL contexts. Many cite the ESOL teachers' professional association NATECLA, whose events, resources and training are highly valued. Practitioner-led sessions exploring aspects of ESOL and FSE delivery are frequently delivered at NATECLA's national and regional conferences. Through *Shaping Success*<sup>4</sup> the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) is increasing its provision to meet specific needs of ESOL practitioners and has a number of new developments in the pipeline.

### ESOL Specialists

Providers report that ESOL practitioners are generally well-qualified, for example with Level 5 professional qualifications, subject specialist diplomas and Master's degrees. Teachers of ESOL undertake a variety of internally-organised CPD – often informed by observation outcomes - such as using English language teaching strategies, supporting learners who have experienced trauma, embedding maths, digital and/or employability into ESOL lessons. Despite this, beyond practitioner-led workshops at NATECLA events, there appear to be few specific professional development opportunities to help practitioners support ESOL learners' progression to Functional Skills English.

Recently, ETF has produced the *New to ESOL*<sup>5</sup> materials for teachers of ESOL at 'pre-Entry' level. Additional teaching materials are currently under development, including a phonics pack, along with a programme of face-to-face and online training events. A further strand of this project aims to develop an outcomes framework, to support providers to plan for learners' progression to Entry Level 1. In the longer term, it is hoped that improving practitioners' skills to focus on basic literacy needs will help equip learners with a firm foundation in reading and writing skills, that supports progression through the ESOL levels and into Functional Skills.

The ETF offer also includes two online modules on grammar and literacy, and introduction to phonics pack. These resources were developed in response to the additional focus on phonics in the reformed Functional Skills qualifications.

Overall, there appears to be an opportunity for strategic workforce development planning to deliver high-quality, in-depth professional learning and development to help ESOL learners progress to FSE. From findings above, potential areas for development could include:

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/supporting/support-practitioners/maths-and-english/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://esol.excellencegateway.org.uk/learners-new-esol>

- Effective practice in initial assessment, and curriculum design to develop tailored progression routes to FSE for ESOL learners, in different delivery settings
- Curriculum development, to embed key elements of the reformed FSE subject content within ESOL delivery
- Continuing to build on the range of resources and training to support appropriate and effective use of phonics in ESOL

### **Functional Skills English specialists**

Where learners with ESOL needs are taught by specialist FSE tutors, providers identify a need to upskill FSE tutors to support learners who speak English as a second or additional language. Areas of focus could include more in-depth support with teaching language skills such as speaking and listening, and approaches to teaching grammar and vocabulary, to help meet typical ESOL learning needs. ETF currently offers short 'top tips' resources to help practitioners support ESOL learners with basic literacy needs, and ESOL learners in FS, GCSE and vocational classes. Typically, a small number of providers reported upskilling their FSE tutors using professional qualifications such as the Cambridge Certificate in TESOL, to help FSE teachers support learners with ESOL needs and embed effective teaching of grammar across FSE provision.

### **Vocational tutors**

ESOL learners who progress to FSE often do so in the context of progression into vocational or technical learning, or an apprenticeship. In these contexts, FSE may be delivered by specialist FSE tutors, or by vocational practitioners. Providers identified that further professional development for vocational practitioners delivering FSE would help support them to work effectively with learners with ESOL needs, in turn supporting learners' achievement and progression. This may be particularly valuable in settings where smaller learner cohorts mean that it is not feasible to run programmes which fully embed ESOL within a vocational subject.

The existing range of ETF resources is relevant here, and ETF have also produced a resource which focuses on embedding English (in vocational learning), for ESOL learners. Some providers report that their ESOL specialists do work with English and vocational tutors to look at aspects of pedagogy, share practice or undertake action research. Programmes such as ETF's Professional Exchanges and Outstanding Teaching Learning and Assessment (OTLA) initiatives have the potential to provide further opportunities for ESOL specialists to collaborate with vocational staff, to share practice and test out new ways of working to support learner progression.

## Summary of Findings

Working towards ESOL qualifications at lower levels before moving on to FSE, generally after achieving ESOL Entry Level 3 (sometimes Level 1) remains the most common model for adult ESOL learners to progress to FSE. However, some providers report alternative models, including using solely FSE qualifications (or only ESOL) and ‘combined models’ where FSE is supplemented by additional ESOL awards, commonly in Speaking and Listening. Where FSE qualifications are used within ESOL provision, teaching is usually by specialist ESOL teachers, who often hold subject-specific teaching qualifications.

Although not considered the primary market for FSE qualifications, the Functional Skills reform programme undertook consultation with the ESOL sector. Revised qualifications include an enhanced focus on spelling and grammar, identified by ESOL specialists as likely to benefit ESOL learners in contexts where they would encounter FSE qualifications, for example as part of mainstream vocational programmes, or where used in ESOL programmes. Despite this, engagement with ESOL providers and practitioners finds widespread consensus that ESOL qualifications are still considered to have clear advantages, particularly at lower levels. For example, learners are reported to benefit from a more specific focus on grammar and an approach to assessment that more closely mirrors the ESOL curriculum in terms of speaking and listening, reading and writing skills.

There remain significant challenges in ESOL provision and learners’ progression to FSE. These include: initial assessment and placement into ESOL or FSE provision (linked to different funding eligibility criteria), progression between ESOL and FSE, progression between levels in FSE and overall achievement rates for learners.

This consultation found consensus around the features of effective practice in delivering ESOL and FS qualifications, namely:

- ESOL learners benefit from being taught by ESOL specialists<sup>6</sup> whether they are aiming towards ESOL or FSE qualifications.

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<sup>6</sup> Providers report that, generally, ESOL staff are well-qualified, often holding subject specialist teaching qualifications. Here, teachers are referred to as specialists (rather than qualified, for example), reflecting that in some cases ESOL teachers may have acquired relevant skills through experience of working with ESOL learners, regardless of the particular qualifications held. Similarly, FSE teachers are referred to as specialists when it is their main teaching area, though it is recognised that FSE qualifications are often taught by teachers as a part of their role, for example by vocational tutors, as well.

- A recognition of the benefits to teaching ESOL learners at lower levels separately from native speakers, to enable a focus on grammar, vocabulary, idiomatic language and fluency.

Although many providers use ESOL qualifications where possible, FSE's role in preparing learners for life and work is well recognised, particularly where FSE is seen to support learner progression e.g. into further vocational study. Providers highlight a range of factors when considering which qualifications would benefit a learner or identifying progression routes. Learners' backgrounds, aspirations, confidence, and length of time in the UK all play a role. Wrap-around support is critical, especially for refugees and new arrivals, to develop appropriate progression pathways, including language and employability skills, and identify the qualifications that would best support this.

Professional development opportunities for ESOL practitioners are limited. There is scope to update and expand professional development for new and existing ESOL specialists, FSE teachers and vocational specialists who teach FSE as part of their role, to support non-native speakers to develop the language skills and vocabulary required by reformed FS qualifications.

## Case studies

### The Sheffield College

The Sheffield College currently has around 200 ESOL learners on 16-18 study programmes, and around 3,000 part-time adult learners. Learners are typically from settled communities, with some new arrivals. To support access to ESOL, the college provides support with bus passes and childcare through the learner support fund, and also offers some provision in women-only groups, which enable learners a range of national and cultural backgrounds to attend. The college reports high overall retention rates, at 98%.

The college's mainstream offer for adults consists of part-time courses. These are usually 6 hours per week (2 x 3 hour sessions). Learners work towards ESOL qualifications at the Entry Levels, then move on to Level 1 FSE. The college finds that the ESOL offer at Entry Level provides a foundation to move on to FSE at Level 1.

Alongside these programmes, the college runs a 14-week mandated ESOL programme for around 200 adult learners referred by Jobcentre Plus. This provision currently offers 15 hours per week. Learners work towards separate ESOL awards in reading, writing, speaking and listening, at the appropriate level, in a specialist, supportive environment with access to further employability courses. The college finds that the focus on separate awards provides the language skills learners need to become 'work-ready'.

In 16 – 18 study programmes, learners are streamed by language level from pre-entry to L1. Only a small number study at Level 2. In general, learners move from Entry 3 ESOL qualifications to Level 1 FSE. For this cohort, the college views the reformed FSE qualifications as working well, particularly the new emphasis on spelling and grammar. Furthermore, the learners find the qualifications have more currency when progressing into vocational study programmes, with those completing a Level 1 ESOL programme progressing to a vocational study programme at Level 2.

A key challenge identified by the college is that ESOL learners need more support than native speakers. ESOL learners often want to study FS, but aren't ready as they need more time to develop their skills. Some tutors have also identified that ESOL students find progression from Level 1 to Level 2, either FSE or GCSE, a particular challenge.

The college is currently trialling using ESOL specialists to teach FS maths and English, to improve learner experience and outcomes. The ESOL team is working with Heads of English and Maths, and learners, to explore other solutions to support progression, such as study skills sessions and conversation clubs for additional speaking practice. There are also plans to pilot ESOL qualifications at Level 2, as part of addressing the challenge learners face when progressing from Level 1.



## Halesowen College

Halesowen College has around 60 learners on a full-time ESOL study programme, and a growing adult provision.

Part-time adult learners study for 8 hours per week. During the first term, learners spend 6 hours per week working towards Trinity College London ESOL qualifications, and 2 hours working towards Functional Skills maths, with some maths embedded in the ESOL sessions too. Maths is taught by ESOL specialists. If learners complete a maths qualification in the first term, they have the option to take OCN qualifications in vocational learning and independent living in the second term, or can continue to progress in maths.

The college finds that there is lack of parity between ESOL and FS levels which means learners who progress often do so at the same level. For the maths provision, initial assessment ensures that learners are enrolled at a level which is appropriate to their language skills. Learners are encouraged to go on trips and become involved with enrichment activities such as the ESOL Reading Club. This develops their wider language skills and helps progress to FSE.

Full-time study programme learners study FS within the ESOL programme, which also includes digital skills, and OCN vocational units such as health and safety, employability and healthy living. When learners on ESOL study programmes reach Entry Level 2 in ESOL, they go on to study Functional Skills English at E3, but continue to be taught by ESOL specialists up to Level 1. College staff feel this approach provides a good foundation of grammar and study skills. At Entry Level 3 or higher, learners have the option to progress to vocational provision, and attend FS classes there. However, learners' progress is carefully monitored, with and learners are offered the opportunity to continue their study within the ESOL programme if they find the transition difficult.

Learners on the 16-18 ESOL study programme can play for the ESOL Football club who play in a league against other ESOL teams. Some became college ambassadors along with students from other courses. Becoming an ambassador requires an interview where learners practise their speaking and listening skills. College staff feel this approach prepares learners for higher level learning and to participate in mainstream vocational courses.

## **New City College**

New City College currently has around 300 young adult learners and 3,000 adult learners across the group. All ESOL courses are currently free to learners. Provision for adults aims to help them settle, live and work in the UK. Adult (19+) courses start at pre-entry levels. Learners generally work towards one ESOL award per term for around 9 hours per week.

The college also offers FSE to ESOL learners wishing to take vocational qualifications alongside this, and for learners who are in work. This provision offers 4.5/5 hours of English per week. For working students, the college offers one day or two evenings a week of FSE to fit around work patterns. For those wishing to take vocational qualifications the college offers a timetable that fits around these, as well as IT and maths. Maths is FSM or GCSE dependent upon starting points, available time commitment and longer-term goals.

All FSE components are taught by ESOL specialists. The academic year is divided into two semesters of 18 weeks each and the college uses Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) to record progression and achievement for the first semester, and learners work towards FSE in the second semester –this can be E3, L1 or in some cases, L2. The decision to offer FSE is partly driven by funding and partly due to the currency of this qualification for employment.

One challenge identified by the college is that new arrivals can be highly motivated but often struggle to stay on the programme if wider needs are not addressed. These might include support with housing, benefits, banking and money, accessing support online, and physical and mental health, all of which can affect their ability to focus on learning. Within the standard 55 guided learning hours for FSE, there is not always the scope to provide contextualised language learning which can help address the wider needs of ESOL learners.

16-18 learners are in ESOL study programmes up to Level 1 that include digital, vocational tasters and Functional Skills maths. They improve their language skills in ESOL provision and work towards separate ESOL awards in reading, writing, speaking and listening. This enables learners to work on their grammar and vocabulary, providing the underpinning skills they need to progress. Upon completion, learners can progress to L2 study programmes in mainstream provision.

## The Manchester College

The Manchester College currently has approximately 500 ESOL learners aged 16-18 and 1,700 adult learners. Learners are from settled communities and some are new arrivals.

Currently, adults are mainly referred through the Manchester ESOL Advice Service funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, as part of the Integrated Communities English Language Programme. MEAS is a project delivered by Manchester City Council in partnership with the Manchester College, along with a number of voluntary and community organisations across Manchester. MEAS offers a joined up approach to referrals to ESOL provision, helping to reduce waiting times for classes. The initiative was highlighted in the college's recent Ofsted inspection report.

*“Managers have worked to good effect with the local authority to increase provision to meet the rising demand for courses for non-English speakers in the city. They offer these students a full programme of study that develops their English, mathematics, digital and employability skills. Many students use the skills acquired on these programmes to continue on to a vocational qualification.” (Ofsted, Feb 2019)*

Adult programmes are typically between 9 to 12 hours per week, to fit with work and family commitments. Adults have access to an integrated learning programme designed to accelerate progression in English language, maths, employability and digital skills, preparing them for work and life. The English language element comprises the study of ESOL Skills for Life qualifications, but learners are also offered opportunities to undertake further study in Functional Skills in both English and maths, through the levels, where this is appropriate and relevant to their needs. The college also offers bespoke programmes for students in vocational areas, who need to improve their language skills to support their progression and employment prospects.

16 -18 ESOL study programme has learners from Pre-entry to Level 1. The intent of the curriculum offer is to develop and maximise progression outcomes onto other vocational programmes, and/or academic study. Learners advance their language skills through ESOL Skills for Life qualifications. Tutors are often dual professionals in language and numeracy, and they teach the FS maths element of the study programme too. Learners completing a Level 1 ESOL study programme can progress to a vocational study programme at Level 2.

## **Lewisham Adult Community Learning**

Lewisham Adult Community Learning service (Adult Learning Lewisham) works with around 430 adult ESOL learners a year. Under devolved Adult Education Budget funding arrangements, ESOL provision is fully funded for London residents who earn less than the London Living Wage, and for unemployed adults in receipt of benefits. The service also provides non-accredited courses, and conversation clubs for learners who cannot afford the co-funding element, or may not be eligible, for Adult Education Budget ESOL provision. The ESOL department's current achievement rate is 89%, with a pass rate of 94%.

ESOL learners from pre-entry to Entry Level 3 study for 5 hours per week. Learners are taught the four skills over the year: term one focuses on reading, term two on speaking and listening and term three on writing. They have access to an optional, additional two hours per week IT course, in which they can develop their digital skills and their language skills using technology. At Levels 1 and 2, adults are offered 10 hours per week. This supports learners to progress through the levels, and in some cases on to GCSE once they have completed Level 2.

The service finds that some learners independently choose to study FS in the service's English department. The departments work closely together, with some individual learners signposted to FS if it is more appropriate, for example if their spoken English is very strong. Similarly, some non-native speakers in FSE classes are signposted to ESOL provision if they need specialist language support that prevents them from progressing in FSE classes.