

A review of English language acquisition in the West Midlands

Executive summary

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Executive summary

Adults with English language learning needs are a diverse cohort, encompassing recent arrivals to the UK and people in longer standing settled migrant communities, with a range of language and educational backgrounds. Individuals require support with English language skills for a range of reasons, including to progress into and within employment, to access further and higher-level learning and skills, and to support everyday integration and participation in community life.

In the West Midlands, 4.2 per cent of the adult population requires support with English language learning.¹ West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) recognises the importance of supporting residents with English language skills and in 2021/22 invested 16 per cent of its Adult Education Budget (AEB) funding in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision.² Nonetheless, the region faces a challenge as the need for foundation skills, including literacy, numeracy and ESOL, cannot be met with the existing quantum of funding. In addition to insufficient funding capacity, learner outcomes have been found to vary considerably across providers.

In 2019, a provider-led review of ESOL in the West Midlands developed a shared understanding of some of the issues associated with provision which included staffing, delivery models, and access to courses.³ The review demonstrated a need to increase delivery of vocational ESOL, improve the relevance of ESOL continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers, and develop more ESOL hubs, among other actions.

Five years on, WMCA recognises that while some progress has been made against the review's recommendations, further change is needed to maximise the impact and outcomes of investment in English language acquisition (ELA) provision.

Research aims and method

WMCA commissioned Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to explore how adults can be supported to progress in English language learning, and to identify how strategic partnerships can facilitate a robust regional ELA offer. More specifically, the research aimed to:

- Assess the extent to which investment in ESOL provision is meeting need in the region
- Evaluate how approaches to language learning, curriculum design and stakeholder partnerships can contribute to achieving improved and accelerated outcomes for learners.

¹ West Midlands Combined Authority (2024) [Employment and Skills Strategy 2024 – 2027](#).

² The Adult Skills Fund (ASF) replaced the Adult Education Budget (AEB) from August 2024.

³ WMCA ESOL Review Group (2019) [Unlocking Potential – Making Sense of ESOL in the Region](#). West Midlands Combined Authority.

This research was commissioned to look at English language provision funded through the AEB, which supports learners aged 19 and over.

Taking a mixed-methods approach, the research involved a desk review; call for evidence; qualitative interviews with ESOL providers; focus groups with stakeholders, current learners and individuals not in formal provision; and analysis of Individualised Learner Record (ILR) data.

Key findings

Key findings from the review are detailed in the subsections below.

Learner characteristics

- **The ILR data reveals that for the 2022-23 academic year, a total of 24,976 individual learners engaged with ESOL provision.** In comparison, the 2021 census shows that 95,726 people in the West Midlands either cannot speak English at all or cannot speak English well. This indicates that there is an engagement rate of approximately 26 per cent in the West Midlands.⁴
- **More than two fifths of all learners in the West Midlands live in Birmingham (44 per cent), followed by Coventry (12 per cent) and Wolverhampton (10 per cent).** Similarly, more learners are enrolled in Birmingham (10,956) than any other borough. Coventry (2,765 learners) and Dudley (2,445 learners) are the second and third largest boroughs for ESOL delivery by learner numbers.
- **Older residents are less likely to be engaged in ESOL provision relative to the extent of their English language need.** The census shows that there are 49,236 residents aged 50 and over who could not speak English or could not speak English well. This equates to 52 per cent of those in the region with an English language need. Despite this, there are only 5,889 learners aged 50 and over enrolled on ESOL provision, roughly a quarter (24 per cent) of all learners.
- **In the 2022-23 academic year, there were 17,943 women (72 per cent) and 7,033 men (28 per cent) enrolled in ESOL learning in the West Midlands.** As men make up 36 per cent of adults in the region with low levels of English, they are underrepresented in ESOL learning.
- **ESOL learners in the West Midlands were most commonly recorded as Asian or Asian British (32 per cent of learners) or of white ethnicities (31 per cent of learners).**

⁴ The census data includes all individuals 16 years and older, whereas the ILR data on English language provision includes 19 years+ learners. The census data was also collected in 2021 (compared to 2022-23 for the ILR data), from which English language need has likely changed.

- **ILR data showed that 13 per cent of learners had declared a disability.** According to the census, 26 per cent of people living in the WMCA region with low levels of English also have a disability. This suggests that some learners with disabilities are not being identified and recorded as such, or that those with disabilities are facing barriers to accessing provision.
- **Prior to undertaking ESOL courses in the 2022-23 academic year, most learners were not in paid employment (79 per cent).** Only 21 per cent of learners reported that they were working or self-employed while learning.

Benefits and outcomes of learning

- **Employment prospects.** In focus groups with ESOL learners, many participants were motivated to engage with ESOL provision in order to improve their employment circumstances. Learners believed that the type of job opportunities they could access was dependent on their English language proficiency. In their view, having a good level of English would allow them to access more highly skilled, secure work that offered better pay. On the other hand, without a strong grasp of English, learners felt that they would be confined to short-term and insecure roles.
- **Life skills.** Providers cited the development of wider life skills as a major benefit of engaging with ESOL provision. Providers are delivering contextualised learning, in which content is tailored to learner needs and day-to-day life. Learners also acknowledged that ESOL courses have helped them to develop important life skills and lead more independent lives. This was a particular benefit for migrants who had recently arrived in the UK.
- **Wellbeing and social benefits.** As well as increasing learners' confidence to lead more independent lives, providers also mentioned how ESOL learning supports learners to build resilience, leaving them less vulnerable to exploitation or harm. Learners identified increased social capital as a further benefit of ESOL learning, with classes providing opportunities to meet people who share similar experiences and challenges.⁵

Tracking learner outcomes

- **Reporting of learner outcomes is limited and inconsistent,** with analysis of ILR data for 2022-23 finding that 'Other (no further information provided)' and 'No destination recorded' were logged for a significant proportion of learners.
- **Providers interviewed for this research were measuring development of English language skills as a key outcome.** Providers who offer accredited provision reported measuring development of English language skills through the

⁵ According to the ONS, social capital describes *"the extent and nature of our connections with others and the collective attitudes and behaviours between people that support a well-functioning, close-knit society."* Office for National Statistics (2020) [Social capital in the UK: 2020](#).

achievement of qualifications. Other providers, such as those in the voluntary and community sector (VCS), track language development more informally (through mock tests, for example).

- **Providers reflected that wider, social outcomes, including increased wellbeing and confidence, are difficult to capture.** Nonetheless, some providers were measuring wider outcomes that are not captured in achievement data. For example, one further education college was using learning management software to track learner understanding of cultural values, among other outcomes. Another reported that they conduct aptitude surveys for learners before and after courses to measure changes in confidence.

Barriers and challenges associated with learning

- **High demand for ESOL provision.** There was consensus among providers that their ESOL courses are oversubscribed and they cannot sufficiently meet demand. Several providers suggested that demand for learning had increased significantly in recent years, following the coronavirus pandemic and the arrival of refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine.
- **Balancing learning with wider commitments.** The demands of attending ESOL classes and completing homework was challenging for learners who had childcare responsibilities or were employed. Some learners with children explained that they struggled to find childcare while attending classes. Similarly, groups of employed learners indicated that it could be a struggle to attend ESOL classes while in work.
- **Travel and transport.** Learners had mixed experiences travelling to and from ESOL classes. While buses were said to be unreliable, most learners were able to routinely attend classes on time. Most learners were entitled to free bus passes so had no difficulty affording transport costs. However, some smaller providers, typically in the VCS, reported that they were unable to offer comprehensive support with travel costs, so this was a greater barrier for their learners.
- **Other challenges** included Jobcentre Plus (JCP) work coaches not always recognising the value of ESOL learning and pushing learners towards less sustainable, more immediate employment. Learners were also unclear about their options for progression to higher level ESOL provision in the West Midlands. Level 1 learners, who participated in focus groups, were uncertain whether Level 2 courses would be offered by their colleges for the next academic year.

Ideas for future support

During interviews, providers were asked how a future ELA system could better support learners. Suggestions included:

- **Widening access to provision.** Several providers suggested that support should be extended to enable learners to overcome barriers to accessing provision. While

many larger providers had access to funding to pay for learners' transport and childcare costs, VCS organisations had fewer resources to provide this support.

- **Improved communication about ESOL provision.** Learners suggested that there should be clearer messaging around the ESOL offering available to migrants, and this should be communicated through official channels, such as the local council. Learners also recommended that information about ESOL opportunities should be available in a range of languages.
- **Support for voluntary sector organisations.** It was suggested that VCS organisations should be supported to play a more significant role in a future ELA system. To achieve this, local authority stakeholders proposed that they could perform a coordination role in referring learners to VCS services. VCS providers would also require more funding to increase their capacity, enabling them to support more learners with ESOL learning.

Improving and accelerating outcomes

Providers are using stakeholder partnerships, curriculum design and different approaches to language learning to improve and accelerate outcomes for ESOL learners.

Stakeholder partnerships

- **Collaboration between providers.** Some providers reported that they collaborate with other providers through attendance at meetings such as the ESOL Regional Leads group organised through Colleges West Midlands. In these meetings, providers share curriculum plans and best practice in ESOL provision, as well as signposting learners to one another to help manage capacity.
- **Collaboration with employers.** Though some providers are working with employers, ESOL provision for learners in work is underdeveloped. In interviews, some providers reported communicating with employers either directly or through employer boards about the language skills needed from their employees and potential applicants. Some were also hosting careers fairs where employers visit the provider site to speak with learners about available job opportunities.
- **Collaboration with stakeholders and other organisations.** Some providers work with their local JCP to coordinate financial support for learners, such as applying for a free bus pass or equipment for vocational courses. In Birmingham, most providers have signed up to the Birmingham ESOL Hub. Other providers work with charities and other third sector organisations to support learners' physical and mental wellbeing.

Curriculum design

Providers have made various changes to their curriculum design to improve and accelerate outcomes for English language learners.

- **Vocational ESOL courses.** Most providers interviewed were offering vocational ESOL courses which combine language learning with the development of vocational skills to prepare learners for different job roles and career paths.
- **Combined essential skills courses.** Some providers are offering combined essential skills courses for English language learners. For example, some providers offer ESOL with maths and see this, alongside learning other essential skills, as an integral part of their curriculum and key to learners' wider development.

Language teaching methods

Interview findings suggest ESOL providers are using a range of language teaching methods.

- Many providers are using **contextualised learning** to support learners to develop useful skills for everyday life and ensure that content is engaging and relevant to learners' lives.⁶
- Some providers also reported using a **lexical approach** where language teaching is focused on acquiring common vocabulary and phrases, rather than perfecting grammar. Instead of learning isolated words, learners learn how they are used in sentences and conversations.
- Some providers highlighted that they are increasingly using **substantive assessments through task-based learning**. Task-based learning opportunities allow for context-based language to be acquired through research, communication, negotiation, and planning. Visits to locations outside of learners' local areas can expose them to opportunities to step out of their normal routine and practice their language skills in new contexts.

Provider and stakeholder ideas for a future ELA system

Providers involved in the research were asked how a future ELA system could improve and accelerate outcomes for learners. Suggestions are outlined below.

Policy and strategy change

- **The most common suggestion from providers was for greater recognition within the ELA system of the diverse range of learner needs and outcomes.** Most providers perceived the current focus of ESOL provision in the West Midlands to be on economic outcomes, such as progression into work. Providers would like a future ELA system to focus on wider outcomes, such as increased confidence and independence, or the development of social networks, as well as economic outcomes.
- **Most providers highlighted the importance of a future ELA system recognising long-term outcomes.** Some learners are focused on ESOL for employment, but

⁶ Contextualisation is putting language items into a meaningful and real context rather than being treated as isolated items of language.

providers highlighted that those with lower-level English skills are unlikely to achieve this outcome in the short-term. Language acquisition is often a lengthy process as it takes time for learners to progress through ESOL levels.

- **Most providers would like to increase collaboration with other providers, employers and wider stakeholders.** Providers emphasised the importance of a joined up approach to ESOL across the region. For instance, several providers were supportive of the work being undertaken by the Birmingham ESOL Hub to introduce a standardised initial assessment and connect providers with one another, as well as with wider stakeholder organisations.

Curriculum design

- In interviews, providers expressed that **lower-level ESOL learning should focus on “pure” language acquisition, with the option to progress into vocational provision at higher levels**, depending on learners' personal goals. Some providers are concerned that focusing on vocational ESOL can result in learners having a narrow vocabulary without developing wider language skills.
- Most providers acknowledged the value of vocational ESOL provision. Some suggested a programme where learners could work while learning English, and English could be taught within the context of work tasks, would be beneficial. Most providers proposed that a future ELA system should include **increased input from employers to help design curriculums that support learners to develop workplace skills**. This would require providers to engage directly with employers.
- Some providers highlighted that **accessing effective teaching materials for ESOL** can be a challenge. These providers pointed out that many of the resources currently used for ESOL teaching are outdated and no longer relevant to learners' lives. Designing relevant resources, which accurately reflect the experiences of different migrant groups, was identified as imperative in supporting learners' social and cultural integration and progression into work.

Perceived barriers to change

- **Perceived inflexibility in ESOL funding** was seen by providers as the main barrier to establishing a better ELA system. While ESOL funding is primarily driven by qualification achievements rather than employment outcomes, there was a misconception among some providers that they must prove employment outcomes to secure funding.
- Some providers identified **recruiting qualified ESOL tutors** as a key challenge, although this was variable across local areas. They reported that applicants often have experience teaching English in a voluntary context but do not have formal qualifications for teaching ESOL. This has led to appropriately qualified staff being thinly spread and has limited the amount of provision providers can deliver.

- Providers highlighted a number of barriers to partnership working. First, they reflected that **the funding landscape is highly fragmented**. Funding is drawn from multiple bodies with different rules and providers often receive mixed messages from each body. Second, it was noted that **providers can sometimes be reluctant to share data** with one another. One provider suggested this is due to competition between providers for different funding sources for learners with specific eligibility criteria. Third, most providers reported **challenges with engaging employers** due to misconceptions that ESOL learners are low-skilled.

Recommendations for WMCA and ELA providers

- WMCA should work with providers to develop and specify ELA pathways to form the basis for future delivery and commissioning of provision.** Pathways would define the specific learner cohort to be recruited, the outcomes which the pathway supports, any specific teaching or learning methods to be used, and progression routes into further English language learning pathways and other learning provision. Possible pathways could include Everyday English, Vocational English and English for Work, among others. ELA Pathways could also be a vehicle to address underrepresentation in English language learning. For example, an Engagement pathway could be delivered by VCS organisations and focus on underrepresented communities.
- WMCA should work with central government, including Department for Education (DfE), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), and the Home Office, to route all government funding for ESOL in the WMCA region through the Integrated Settlement.** This would help secure a more joined up ESOL offer, reduce the duplication of effort across local authorities to deploy these funds, and maximise the impact of available funding.
- WMCA should establish the feasibility of appointing a single or reduced number of awarding organisations for ESOL qualifications in the region.** Evidence from the Ofqual review of ESOL Skills for Life qualifications⁷ offered by various awarding organisations highlights a number of issues in terms of the quality of assessment and recognition of the qualifications for a range of purposes. To implement the single awarding organisation, WMCA could run a competitive procurement exercise to appoint a supplier(s) for an existing ESOL qualification, with a role for provider input to advise on the specification and the selection.
- WMCA should develop its approach to outcomes measurement to reflect the range of social and economic outcomes supported by ELA.** Currently, data on learner outcomes and destinations is limited, with data missing for many learners. Alongside the need for providers to develop more effective systems of destinations capture, WMCA should consider if additional investment in data capture at the

⁷ Ofqual (2022) [Understanding ESOL Skills for Life Qualifications](#).

regional level (for example, enhanced resourcing to follow up with learners) should be provided to support this.

5. **WMCA should work with local authorities and ELA providers to identify and initiate an appropriate ESOL hub model in each local authority where there is high learner demand for provision.** This would likely require support and resources from WMCA, but also requires commitment from providers. The expected introduction of multi-year funding settlements could support this, by providing greater certainty of funding. Providers recognise the benefits of collaboration and could also contribute to the resourcing of ESOL hubs (for example, staff time to conduct learner initial assessments).
6. **Building on existing work in the region carried out by the Birmingham ESOL Hub, providers should develop and roll out a common initial assessment of English language proficiency.** A common approach to assessment of language proficiency would further underpin collaboration and partnership working, and support the development of ELA pathways, with initial assessment including not just an assessment of language skills, but also advice and guidance on progression routes to help learners enrol into the right pathway for them.
7. **WMCA should work with providers to develop and deliver a programme of employer engagement with English language learning, to ensure that future provision is better linked and more effectively tailored to regional skills needs.** Many English language courses which aim to support employment outcomes are often generic, and lack the features of specific employment support programmes, such as links to labour market intelligence, tailored careers guidance, and connections with employers to support work placements and guaranteed job interviews. WMCA should consider the alignment between English language provision and other kinds of employment-related skills programmes, including Skills Bootcamps and Sector-Based Work Academy programmes (SWAPs), as part of developing English for Work pathways.
8. **WMCA should establish a regional programme to support the development of the ELA workforce and capacity in the VCS.** As a starting point, WMCA should conduct an audit of ELA workforce capacity and skills needs in the region. While many ESOL teachers are highly qualified, not all have a subject specific English language teaching qualification. The audit should inform the development of a regional programme of professional learning and development for ELA practitioners. Furthermore, some VCS organisations could be supported to become Adult Skills Fund (ASF) funded providers, particularly through ASF subcontracting (mainly by local authority providers), where the lead provider can support the subcontractor with quality assurance.