

A woman with dark hair tied back is shown in profile, focused on her work. She is holding a black digital PC-loop tester, which has several cables connected to it. The device has a small screen and various buttons. The background is a plain wall with some electrical conduits. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter.

Supporting people with English language needs to access apprenticeships

A guide for employers and providers
of ESOL and apprenticeships

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide has been designed to raise awareness of ways in which ESOL learners can benefit from and progress to employment as an apprentice. It also illustrates how a focus on meeting ESOL learners' needs in the workplace can benefit employers and training providers. It is drawn from interviews with employers, ESOL providers and apprenticeship providers.

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

Employers

This section is for employers with staff whose first language is not English, to consider an apprenticeship as a route to improve their language and work skills.

It is also for employers who want to recruit an apprentice and provide on-the-job training that is complemented by language classes and vocational training.

This guide aims to show that in both cases improving language skills need not be a barrier to upskilling or recruitment, and how apprenticeships can help.

Learning Providers

This section is for both apprenticeship providers and ESOL providers. This may be within one organisation or separate organisations working together.

Apprenticeship providers may be working with employers whose staff have English language needs. They may support employers to recruit new apprentices. This guide considers how they can successfully support English language needs in partnership with ESOL practitioners and promote opportunities for ESOL learners.

ESOL providers may have learners either looking for work or already in work who would benefit from doing an apprenticeship. Within possible progression routes to work for ESOL learners, this guide examines the option of employment as an apprentice.

INTRODUCTION

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) is an independent policy and research organisation dedicated to promoting lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. We strive for a fair society in which learning and work help people realise their ambitions and potential throughout life. We do this by researching what works, influencing policy and implementing new ways to improve people's experiences of learning and employment. We believe a better skilled workforce, in better paid jobs, is good for business, good for the economy, and good for society.

This guide has been developed by Learning and Work Institute as part of a wider project, undertaken at the request of the Department for Education (DfE), to understand and address barriers to apprenticeships for those with English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) needs.

The project aimed to:

- establish how and to what extent providers facilitate the transition from ESOL learning to apprenticeships
- identify current barriers to progression to apprenticeships for learners with ESOL needs;
- identify ways in which policy and practice could be improved, to enable more people with ESOL needs to access apprenticeships; and
- identify any current effective practice in supporting people with ESOL needs to progress into apprenticeships.

BACKGROUND

Apprenticeships are seen by the Government as a key vehicle to support transition to the labour market, social mobility, economic growth and improved productivity. An ambitious reform programme is underway to raise the quality and quantity of apprenticeships, funded in part by the new Apprenticeship Levy which has also catapulted apprenticeships to the top of the agenda for many businesses. The Government has committed to a target of 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020. To achieve this, it is crucial that those who want to undertake an apprenticeship are supported to do so.

This agenda offers an opportunity to reverse the long-term decline in employer investment in training and open up new opportunities for employees to access and progress in skilled jobs.¹ Supporting equal access to high quality apprenticeships important, given that the benefits to apprentices, to businesses and to our

wider economy and society are considerable.

Though incomplete, some evidence² suggests that English language skills may be a barrier to accessing and/or successfully completing an apprenticeship for people whose first language is not English and who have not yet achieved a GCSE English Grade A-C or equivalent. Some learners experience a situation in which their occupational skills meet the standard required, but language learning needs present a barrier to achieving the Functional Skills English element of an apprenticeship, as this qualification is not designed to meet the needs of non-native speakers. This can act as a barrier to employment, or to being accepted onto an apprenticeship programme. Learning provision to support non-native English speakers, known as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), offers a range of courses from elementary levels (Entry Levels 1 – 3) to more advanced levels of proficiency (Levels 1 and 2). ESOL qualifications are not currently recognised as an alternative to GCSEs or Functional Skills English within apprenticeships, but can enable non-native speakers to achieve the level of proficiency to allow them to take up an apprenticeship.

L&W's analysis found that a small proportion of people whose first language is not English can, and do, subsequently take part in training as an apprentice in the four years following ESOL learning. Achieving Functional Skills qualifications also emerged as an important element of learners' progression into employment as an apprentice.

However, people with English language needs may be unaware of the ways in which an apprenticeship can help them achieve their aspirations in work and further training; many employers are unable to upskill existing employees via an apprenticeship because of the employees' level of English; and many ESOL providers find difficulty in progressing ESOL learners into work through an apprenticeship route. Despite some examples of effective practice in this research, links within providers to support transition may not always well developed, even where both ESOL provision and apprenticeships training are offered.

Apprenticeships

An apprenticeship comprises the following elements:

- Vocational training in technical skills and knowledge, both on- and off-the-job
- English and maths at Level 1 or 2, depending on the type of apprenticeship and whether the apprentice already has these qualifications
- Completion of Employment Rights and Responsibilities training (ERR)
- Assessment of performance and knowledge
- Transferable skills

Training for English and maths, up to and including Level 2, must be in addition to the minimum 20% off-the-job training requirement (see below) and agreed separately between training provider and employer. For all apprenticeships there is a minimum exit requirement apprentices to reach Level 1 in English and maths, and to work towards Level 2 through GCSE or Functional Skills qualifications. This means that apprentices can work towards and achieve their Level 1 whilst on the programme. In August 2017 this was adjusted to Entry level 3 for a defined group of people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

However, many potential apprentices do not have these 'required' levels and are therefore not recruited. These potential apprentices include those whose first language is not English, who may be already attending

Off-the-job training

Off-the-job training is defined as learning which is undertaken outside of the normal day-to-day working environment and leads towards the achievement of an apprenticeship. This can include training that is delivered at the apprentice's normal place of work but must not be delivered as part of their normal working duties. Current models of delivery by providers are:

Day release: for example, one day a week at the training provider's location.

Block release: for example, 3-4 weeks at the training provider's location.

At your location: the training provider comes to your workplace.

Where an apprentice requires additional training to reach minimum standards for English and maths, this is not included in the off-the-job training time, and as such if a learner was also to require such training this may be a potential deterrent for an employer.

ESOL classes to learn English, or in employment and wish to progress in their work. The number of adults (19+) in ESOL learning was 114,100 in 2016/17.³ According to the 2011 Census, around 770,000 people in England do not speak English well or at all. Of these, 312,773 people are in employment.



FOR EMPLOYERS

Key Benefits

Our research indicates a number of ways in which employers can benefit from taking on apprentices whose first language is not English.

- In many industries, it can be an advantage to have bi- or multi-lingual employees.
- ESOL apprentices are frequently highly motivated and may have professional, technical and vocational skills from their employment or training overseas.
- There is considerable potential in recruiting people whose first language is not English in terms of existing work skills. Considering candidates whose first language is not English may help employers recruit from a wider pool of applicants. Even if they do not already have Level 1 qualifications in English and maths, these can be worked towards during the apprenticeship.
- As large employers are now expected to pay an apprenticeship levy, it is advantageous to make use of the scheme to upskill employees and this could be an opportunity for employees who don't speak English well. Many colleges and learning providers are able to offer ESOL support to apprentices.

One employer in the care sector reported that having an apprentice who could speak Urdu as well as English was invaluable to the business. The apprentice was able to converse with housebound clients and people with dementia, and contribute highly effective to care planning.

Points to Consider

- Level 1 English is the exit requirement for an intermediate apprenticeship and Level 2 for the advanced – but apprentices should work towards this level during their apprenticeship training.
- ESOL qualifications are not funded within apprenticeships, but some learners will be able to access Functional Skills English qualifications or may have already completed these.
- English and maths are additional requirements to the off-the-job training. Employers are not required to pay for these subjects as the government funds the provider directly.

- If the level of employees' English language skills is unknown, employees can access advice at a local college or learning provider to have their language skills checked and to access ESOL classes if needed.
- Part-time routes for apprenticeships are permitted. For many apprentices and employers this is a beneficial route to employment and training. The completion time and the off-the-job training are adjusted pro-rata to the full-time route. This could be very beneficial to someone whose first language is not English, if they require more time to develop their language skills.
- Union Learning Representatives can play a role in supporting colleagues whose first language is not English to access apprenticeships and other learning, as well as offering informal language support in the workplace.
- Employers with a number of apprentices whose first language is not English may benefit from some additional language training included alongside the apprenticeship package offered by the provider.
- The local authority may have a department who can advise employers on the recruitment of apprentices. Often, local colleges and learning providers have employer-facing departments as well.

Effective Practice Examples

- There are many examples of people with ESOL needs succeeding on an apprenticeship if it is identified at initial assessment that they have the potential to achieve.

In one large manufacturer, an ESOL learner at Entry Level 2 was taken on as an apprentice and subsequently became a branch manager with the company.

- For workers who have more than one job, employers can share responsibility for an apprenticeship. There are many examples of this happening in the construction industry.
- When choosing an apprenticeship training provider to work with, employers should establish what support the provider can offer for workers whose first language is not English.
- Employers may wish to explore with providers the option for other learning provision for an existing employee, prior to an apprenticeship. Learning

providers reported creating 'bridging courses' and 'progression pathways' to prepare people for apprenticeships, based on an integrated ESOL and Functional English course at Entry 3 or Level 1.

- Offering work experience to learners on other programmes (such as traineeships or vocational courses) could form part of an agreed package in which apprenticeship providers offer extra language support to apprentices with ESOL needs.
- Local authorities are in many cases employer-providers of apprenticeships, but can also play a local strategic role supporting other employers and providers.

One local authority has developed a new coordinator role to pull together the various strands of:

- Coordinating apprenticeship recruitment across the council
- Recruiting a quota of apprentices within the council
- Developing an apprenticeship programme to upskill existing staff
- Working with schools on how they can use their apprenticeship levy effectively for staff recruitment and development
- Promoting apprenticeships with local employers
- Working with local learning providers across all strands

Some employers, often with the help of union learning representatives, work with learning providers to improve language and communication skills in the workplace. Areas of work reported to benefit included: productivity, customer service, health and safety, team working, staff retention, reduced absenteeism, integration and social cohesion.

In one firm on the south coast, the trade union has recruited an apprenticeship representative to support and act as a buddy to apprentices in the company.

Employer Reflective Questions

- **What levels of proficiency in English do your employees have? How are poor skills identified and addressed?**
- **What are the impacts of this on your business? For example, on team morale, written and spoken communications, understanding of health and safety requirements, efficiency and productivity, employee retention.**
- **Do some employees face barriers to accessing apprenticeships due to poor language skills?**
- **What training or other schemes could help? For example, working with a local training provider to refer employees to set up a course. Or working with trade unions to establish informal support, such as buddying or mentoring schemes.**

FOR PROVIDERS

Key Benefits

L&W's research identified a number of benefits to ESOL and apprenticeship providers when specific consideration of the needs of ESOL learners is made.

- Supporting access to employment and apprenticeships can be an important element of fulfilling providers' missions to prepare ESOL learners for life and for work.

"If someone with ESOL needs has walked in off the street and tried to interview for a job they will not necessarily present themselves as effectively as if they had come through the apprenticeship route." (Apprenticeship Provider)

- Providers who can support ESOL learners to become apprentices, either in pre-apprenticeships programmes or through delivery of apprenticeship training with language support, are better able to support local businesses to upskill their workforce, and therefore may be a more attractive partner as a training provider.
- There are more ESOL learner pathways available where apprenticeship and ESOL departments join up. Adult learners are generally want to upskill and improve their language skills, and employers often welcome mature apprentices and find they are well motivated.
- Providing information about apprenticeships to ESOL learners can be motivating and can help to develop a pipeline for new apprentices; as can advertising apprenticeships within local community organisations particularly those representing non-native English speakers.
- Creating bridging courses to encourage ESOL learners to progress to Functional English can help progression towards apprenticeships, and help the provider demonstrate positive progression outcomes.

An Integrated ESOL and Apprenticeship Offer

A large FE provider in an area with high levels of ESOL needs works proactively and using different funding streams to identify the most appropriate learning programmes to meet the requirements of individuals and businesses. The college has a large ESOL cohort (1500) which ranges from people working at Entry Level 1 to Level 2 and they deliver ESOL or Functional English qualifications as appropriate. In practice, this usually means moving learners on to tailored Functional English at Entry level 3 or Level 1. Where initial assessment identifies that an individual is working at Level 1, they can be taken on to an apprenticeship if that's their preferred route. Otherwise they are placed into ESOL classes to get their English skills up to Level 1 before moving into apprenticeship. The college has actively worked with unions and local employers for many years, including five NHS trusts, local councils, logistics companies and railway industries. This ensures an ongoing pipeline of work placements and jobs for people at all levels even if they are not eligible for apprenticeships. Some of the larger employers in the area also co-fund ESOL classes for staff having been persuaded by college staff and union reps of the benefits to the company.

Points to Consider

- It's important not to make assumptions about ESOL learners. This is a very diverse group and as with all other learners, everyone is an individual with their own aims and ambitions.
- Level 1 English is the exit requirement for an intermediate apprenticeship and Level 2 English for the advanced. Learners who do not already hold a qualification at this level will need to complete this requirement during their apprenticeship. It is recognised as a significant step up from Entry level 3, and this may be a challenge for some ESOL learners.
- Language proficiency amongst ESOL learners ranges from people highly qualified from their own country to people who have had little or no schooling, or use a different alphabet and script. For some ESOL learners the journey to employment and an apprenticeship will be long, but where it is part of their long-term plan it is achievable.

“One student on an Access to Nursing course has taken five years to get there from where she started, but she’s absolutely where she wants to be now. She was at Entry 1 when she came to us, now five years later she’s on an Access to Nursing, she will go on to her full nursing next year. Other people do ESOL and go straight onto the apprenticeship, it’s very individual.” (Provider)

- English and maths are additional requirements to the off-the-job training and some providers report difficulties getting apprentices released for these subjects. Hence there may be a reluctance to take on apprentices with basic skills needs. However, employers are not required to pay for these subjects as the government funds the provider directly. Providers need to emphasise the benefits as a means of providing quality apprenticeships.
- Some ESOL providers currently have no links with apprenticeship providers even within the same organisation: this is more noticeable within Adult Community Learning providers, whose learners tend to be at the very lowest levels of ESOL. However, across all provider types there is less promotion of apprenticeships to ESOL classes than to other learner groups.
- Gender bias can be an issue, with people having certain expectations about what is an appropriate job for them. Providers have a role to play in challenging stereotypes and assumptions – whether from learners or employers.
- Part-time routes for apprenticeships are permitted. For many apprentices and employers this is a beneficial route to training and employment. The completion time and the off-the-job training are adjusted pro-rata to the full-time route. This could be very beneficial to an ESOL learner needing more time to assimilate language skills, and/or for those with childcare responsibilities.
- Sometimes an apprenticeship may not be the best career progression route. Whilst someone may be doing a job already or have an aptitude for a vocational area, that does not override the requirement within an apprenticeship for proficiency in English to the required standard. Where the learner is some distance away from the required English level, an apprenticeship may not be the best available option. Hospitality departments within learning providers reported that the biggest challenge that they face is that so many potential ESOL apprentices are unlikely to achieve the English element of the apprenticeship despite being competent in the job role.

Effective Practice Examples

Supporting Transition

Where ESOL departments link up with apprenticeship departments, employability language is introduced throughout ESOL classes and presentations on apprenticeships are routine.

Some providers target their ESOL groups with clear marketing materials for apprenticeships displayed throughout the organisation.

Providers with a good relationship with Jobcentre Plus use that to promote the apprenticeship offer to ESOL candidates.

Providers who interview many ESOL students with overseas qualifications can sign up as an organisation to the UK NARIC agency for checking equivalency.

One explained how the ESOL teachers make effective use of Individual Learning Plans to thoroughly identify learning goals and next steps on a regular basis (weekly) and this includes both short and long-term goals. All their learners at the end of their course are given a handout which explains all the options open to them for their next-steps learning, which now includes apprenticeships.

I think that’s one of the strengths of the college as a provider, we’ve got so many different routes that people can get to the same end point. It’s like a street map, you know, there’s different ways to actually get there and no one way is right or wrong, it’s about what’s right for that individual.” (Provider)

One NHS Trust is piloting a scheme for lower-paid staff with ESOL needs, working with a local provider to deliver Functional English, as part of a ‘pathway’ to apprenticeships. The programme uses ESOL teaching and learning approaches and is contextualised to the health service.

Before Apprenticeship Training

- Some providers invite employers to speak to ESOL groups about apprenticeships, offer visits to workplaces and work experience opportunities.
- Some providers effectively market ESOL courses to local employers – it’s important to sell the workplace benefits of improved language skills rather than ‘ESOL’.

- Some providers create bridging courses to prepare people for apprenticeships based on an integrated ESOL and Functional English course at Entry 3 or Level 1.
- Unit-based Awards and Functional Skills English from Entry Level are used by some providers as English qualifications for those with lower levels of language skills.
- The use of ESOL teachers to ensure Functional English courses take account of ESOL teaching and learning approaches is seen to make the transition more effective.
- Apprentices settle better where they have good provider support: one provider related that tutors or ESOL staff contact all their apprentices frequently during first two weeks of apprenticeship. All apprentices can report back on how they are doing online.

Alongside Apprenticeship Training

- Many colleges and learning providers deliver apprenticeships with some ESOL support to employees, such as additional language training.

Accurate initial assessment and identification of learning needs, including ESOL, can ensure that apprenticeship providers recruit with integrity. This helps ensure that the right support is put in place, to ensure retention and timely achievement on programme.

"In interviews we encourage staff to use more technical language related to the vocational area to check students' understanding and ability to cope. If the interview is too colloquial then tutors get a good impression of student skills, which may not be borne out." (Provider)

- Some providers find that using bi- or multi-lingual assessors can be a helpful approach in supporting apprentices.

One apprenticeship provider employs a pool of bi- or multi-lingual assessors for their hospitality apprenticeships. This helps to support the large numbers of apprentices with ESOL needs. Across the assessor group 29 additional languages are spoken fluently.

- Some providers use their ESOL teachers to provide materials and staff training to vocational teachers and assessors in how to support ESOL needs.

One provider had introduced actions to improve the quality of training for learners with ESOL needs, following feedback from ESOL learners experience difficulties in progressing to further training. The provider identified that some teachers didn't know how to ensure learners with ESOL needs were included in lessons. A weekly one-hour support session for learners was introduced, staffed by an ESOL teacher. Online, work-related learning materials e.g. construction in Polish were also made available. This helped the provider to meet the demand support as the funded hours available were limited. On staff development days, the provider runs workshops on how to support students with ESOL needs. For the vocational teachers and assessors, the provider developed resources on English language teaching techniques, such as 'scaffolding' and approaches to teaching vocabulary. Observations of teaching and learning include feedback on approaches for working with ESOL learners. The provider has developed common guidance for all teachers and works with individual tutors to support change, where needed.

- Apprenticeship providers can consider options for language learning alongside apprenticeship, even if it is not formally part of the programme. For example, identification of self-study resources (perhaps with help from an ESOL department or practitioner) or training assessors in using coaching approaches with ESOL learners.⁴

Provider Reflective Questions

- When working with ESOL learners on progression to employment, to what extent are activities and information about apprenticeships included in the curriculum?
- Within your organisation, how can you create better links between ESOL provision and employer-facing teams?
- When recruiting apprentices, in what ways could you provide additional support to those with English language needs?
- When working with employers with larger numbers of employees who have an ESOL need, what training and other support with language could be offered as part of the package?

References

1. Green F, Felstead A, Gallie D, Inanc H and Jewson N (2013). What has been happening to the training of workers in Britain? LLAKES Research Paper 42, London: Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies, Institute of Education.
2. NIACE (2014) ESOL Learners' Progression to Functional Skills English and GCSE English Language Qualifications (unpublished report to BIS); NIACE (2012) The Impact of Changes to the Funding of ESOL (unpublished report to SFA).
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-skills-for-life>
4. <http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/resource/citizens-curriculum-coaching-report/>

USEFUL LINKS

English Language in the Workplace

The Unionlearn guide *Are we all speaking the same language?* is available at:

www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/are-we-all-speaking-same-language

National Resources on Apprenticeships

Find an Apprenticeship

<https://www.gov.uk/apply-apprenticeship>

Get In, Go Far

<https://www.getingofar.gov.uk/>

National Careers Service

<https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/>

Learning and Work Institute Resources

Part-time and flexible Apprenticeships Report

<http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/resource/exploring-models-for-part-time-and-flexible-apprenticeships/>

Guide on Using Non-Directive Coaching Approaches in Language Learning

<http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/resource/citizens-curriculum-coaching-report/>

Online toolkit designed for employers that want to develop a more inclusive and accessible apprenticeship offer

<http://www.employer-toolkit.org.uk/>



