

Speaking up

The case for universal fluency in English

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British
Future...

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British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, opportunity and identity, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

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I. The case for reform of English language teaching

Fluency in English is foundational to integration. It helps migrants find work and enables them to become part of community life. Migrants and refugees who are unable to speak English have restricted job prospects and are also more vulnerable to exploitation. Adults who lack fluent English are also more likely to experience loneliness and poor mental health. Poor English contributes to residential segregation as those who cannot speak the language are dependent on their co-national/ethnic group for work or to interpret in everyday situations. Language barriers can increase misunderstandings and tensions between new arrivals and long-settled residents.

The one-year spending round to be announced in early September 2019, together with a new English language strategy for England later this year, offers an opportunity to address the barriers preventing adults learning English. Chancellor Sajid Javid, in his previous role as Home Secretary, has said that he would ‘put rockets under’ a programme to increase English language teaching for migrants to the UK¹. But it is important that any extra investment in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision is well spent and reaches the groups that are struggling.

Data from the 2011 Census showed that 844,000 people living in England – some 1.6% of all residents – did not speak English well or at all. Those who lack fluency in English are disproportionately concentrated in certain local authorities². People who have little social contact outside their ethnic or linguistic communities are among the groups who struggle most to learn English as they have few opportunities to practice the language.

There is broad public support for providing English classes for migrants. In polling undertaken by ICM for British Future in 2018 some 65% of people agreed that “*The Government should provide English lessons to those that need them*”³.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teaching is available, through formal classes from further education providers and informal provision such as conversation clubs, often provided by charities. Yet there are long waiting lists in many parts of England for formal classes and little provision for those who work during the day. Fee regulations prevent asylum-seekers and newly-arrived spouses/partners from enrolling on subsidised provision, with full fees too costly for many. There has also been a lack of innovation by providers, with little offered to migrants who work long hours and find it difficult to attend daytime classes offered by colleges.

This paper examines current provision to help people learn English and the barriers preventing people from achieving this aim. It also sets out British Future's recommendations for reform, not only to funding, but the ways in which ESOL is delivered. As adult education is a devolved power, the report and its recommendations only apply to England. If implemented these changes would help remove barriers to learning and help this country achieve universal fluency in English by 2030.

We recommend that the Government:

- Has a clear ambition of achieving universal fluency in English by 2030, with a ten-year plan to get there.
- Front-loads the ten-year ESOL plan with an extra £150 million per year over the next four years. This should enable reform to fee regulations and help colleges to meet demand. It should also encourage innovation and improve provision for migrant workers whose employment makes it difficult to attend college-based classes during the day.
- Reforms fee regulations, scrapping the requirement for students to have been resident in the UK for three years to qualify for free or co-funded courses.
- Introduces an adult ESOL curriculum and reviews the content of teaching materials so that ESOL courses not only help language acquisition but also help migrants on their pathway to British citizenship, promoting shared values and an understanding of life in the UK.
- Sets out a clear expectation that employers should support workplace-based English, by making space available for classes and conversation clubs and encouraging their staff to attend.
- Builds on the work of MHCLG to promote social integration and support volunteer-led conversation clubs, encouraging more groups to be involved as volunteers.
- Sets up a new *Learning English* freeview channel, enabling greater exposure to English.

2. What English teaching is currently available?

Those who want to improve their English may attend formal ESOL courses offered by further education colleges, local authority adult education services and independent (private and not-for-profit) providers⁴. Teaching on such courses is typically only for 2-5 hours per week and generally only runs over 30-week term times. In most big cities, there is a range of classes on offer at different levels, although the number of courses has fallen since 2009 and many colleges report waiting lists⁵. Outside large cities there is much less provision available: in Evesham, Worcestershire, for example, the local college offers five three-hour courses during term-time, one held in the day and the remainder in the evening. All but one of these Entry Level courses is targeted at those with the least English⁶. This is despite a large number of EU migrant workers living in and around the town.

In some parts of the UK, civil society groups are offering informal community-based provision, for example using conversation clubs. There is also some online material available. But much of this informal community provision is targeted at those who are waiting to start a college course or groups such as asylum-seekers who are excluded from subsidised provision.

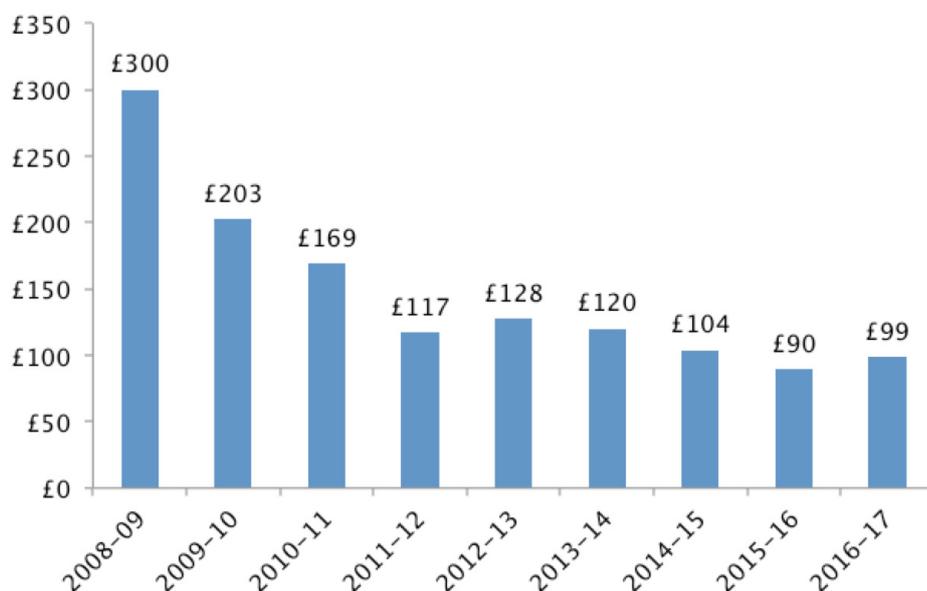
Social interaction with other English speakers is also needed to help people practice and remember what they have learned in the classroom. Policy debates have tended to focus on funding for formal provision and have paid insufficient attention to increasing people's exposure to the English language in social contexts.

3. Funding for English language teaching

In England, most formal ESOL provision is funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) through the Adult Education Budget. In the academic year 2016-17 £99 million funding was allocated to ESOL by the ESFA. There have been year-on-year reductions in ESOL spending since 2004 (Figure 1) as well as changes to the eligibility criteria determining whether students qualify for free or subsidised ESOL. Both have led to reductions in the number of classes and student enrolments. In England, the number of people attending ESFA-funded classes fell from 179,000 students in 2009-10 to 114,000 students in 2017-18⁷.

In addition to ESFA funding, the Government has from time-to-time allocated additional money for ESOL (see Appendix). Overall, recent funding policy has been characterised by instability and change. Funding streams have been introduced then later scrapped, for example, targeted funding for workplace ESOL courses in 2011 and Job Centre Plus-commissioned courses⁸ in 2015. The new English language strategy should aim for greater policy stability and give providers the certainty they need to plan their services in the long-term.

Figure 1: Estimated ESOL expenditure (£ millions), England



Sources: Skills Funding Agency and ESFA estimates.

Fee subsidies

ESFA funding enables colleges and other providers to offer free classes up to Level Two⁹ for students who are aged 19 or over and who are unemployed and actively seeking work. To be eligible for a free class a person also has to have been ‘ordinarily resident’ in the UK for at least three years prior to the start of the course (with the exception of refugees and their spouses/partners) - a regulation which potentially excludes about 150,000 family migrants and adult dependents of people with work and student visas¹⁰.

The ESFA will part-fund courses for other students, paying half the course costs with the college funding the remainder, usually by charging a fee to the student. Low-income groups who are not actively seeking work are eligible for co-funding. Asylum-seekers are also eligible for co-funding for ESOL, but only after they have waited for over six months for a decision on their asylum application^{11,12}.

These funding regulation regulations only apply to England. In Scotland and Wales, ESOL provision is free to low-income groups, including asylum-seekers. These regulations will also not apply to new courses commissioned in Greater London and the combined authorities¹³ which, after August 2019, will be able to set their own fee policy.

4. Barriers to learning English

Some people struggle to learn English. Understanding the factors that influence a person's ability to learn a new language is essential if the Government wants to reduce social exclusion caused by a lack of English. The most important factors are **motivation, encouragement** and **exposure**¹⁴. Someone who is personally motivated to learn English, is encouraged by teachers, community and family members and has lots of exposure to the language inside and outside the classroom almost always achieves fluency in English.

Other factors which impact on progress can include prior educational experience; ability; age; confidence and the quality of teaching.

Motivation, encouragement and exposure

Recognising that motivation is essential for learning, the Government requires that most migrants applying for Indefinite Leave to Remain and British citizenship have an English language qualification at a B1 level¹⁵. Since 2004, language requirements have been extended and made more stringent. Adults applying for work visas and many student and family visas now also need to meet language requirements which vary according to the visa route that people use to enter the UK.

Access to formal teaching

Formal teaching is also important, yet there are long waiting lists in many parts of England for formal classes and little provision for those who work during the day. In smaller towns provision can be limited and in big cities the bewildering array of courses, at different levels, can make finding and enrolling on an appropriate course difficult for those with limited English.

Fees

In England, fee regulations are a major barrier to learning as they prevent asylum-seekers and family migrants from studying on subsidised courses when they first arrive. The typical course that lasts between two and five hours per week would cost £175-£300 per 10-week term. While some of those not eligible for free or co-funded courses can afford to pay a full course fee, many people cannot afford such a financial outlay. Regulations also prevent students on most ESOL courses from applying for a FE advanced learning loan.

Delays

It is also important for migrants to start learning English when they first arrive. Delays to starting classes - due to waiting lists or ineligibility for funding - can mean that people develop survival mechanisms: relying on relatives and friends to interpret. Once in place, these survival strategies are hard to shift and can act as a barrier to learning.

Most spouses/partners applying for a family visa need to pass an approved English language test at an A1 Level, showing they have a very basic understanding of spoken English, but the skills they have acquired to pass this test are soon forgotten if they cannot afford classes after they arrive in the UK due to fee regulations.

Specific groups

Those less likely to speak and write fluent English tend to be one of two groups: EU migrants in lower-skilled jobs who work long hours and/or adults who have little social contact outside their own minority linguistic community.

Data from the 2011 Census showed that 37% of people who did not speak English well or at all were in employment, amounting to 313,000 working people. Many were EU nationals, with the Census showing that there were 270,000 EU citizens who could not speak English well or all.

Census data also showed that in 2011 some 59% of those who do not speak English well or at all are female. In recent years two-thirds of students on subsidised college courses have been women¹⁶. While many of them go on to acquire fluent English, a significant minority fail to make much progress because they have little opportunity to practice their English outside formal classes. This is why conversation clubs are important, as well as exposure to English in everyday social situations.

5. What needs to change

There should be a clear expectation that migrants who settle in the UK should learn English. But shortcomings in the current ESOL system are a barrier to progression and too many migrants are unable to speak English well or at all. The forthcoming English language strategy is an opportunity to address inadequacies in current provision and to set in place a system where migrants are given the support that they need. Changes are needed, from the Government, the ESFA, combined and local authorities, by providers and by civil society and communities. British Future makes the following recommendations:

Show leadership and ambition

The Government should set out a clear ambition of achieving universal fluency in English by 2030 and put in place a ten-year plan to achieve this. The strategy should aim for greater policy stability and give providers the certainty they need to plan their services in the long term. Success also requires that local and combined authorities provide leadership and put in place local strategies.

Increase funding and spend wisely

The Government should make an additional £150 million per year available for ESOL over the next four years, allocating this extra funding in the one-year spending round and over the 2021-2024 spending period. This would bring expenditure per head back to 2008-2009 levels. The additional funding should be phased in and spent differently. The additional money that is allocated should be used to:

- Meet unmet demand for formal teaching, with an extra £20 million to provide more classes.
- Increase weekly teaching hours for vulnerable beginners (at an approximate annual cost of £15 million).
- Encourage innovation, including setting up the *Learning English* freeview channel and supporting conversation clubs, allocating £10 million annually for innovation.
- Improve provision for migrant workers whose employment makes it difficult to attend college-based classes during the day. There is a need for regular but short (one-hour) classes, before and after work, provided in or near workplaces or in schools. The annual cost of such provision is estimated to be an additional £40 million.
- Enable reform of fee regulations as set out below at an approximate annual cost of £10 million for asylum-seekers and £55 million for other groups who are excluded by current funding regulations.

Reform fee regulations to enable people to start learning English when they first arrive

The Government should scrap the requirement for students to have been resident in the UK for three years to qualify for free or co-funded courses. ESOL should be free for asylum-seekers and all adults living in households in receipt of means-tested benefits. Basic rate taxpayers should be entitled to fee subsidies, so that ESOL classes are affordable to adults in low-income working families. FE advanced learning loans should also be made available to students on ESOL courses.

Involve employers

There should be a clear expectation that employers should support workplace-based English, by making space available for classes and conversation clubs and encouraging their staff to attend. Practices such as organising shifts by linguistic group should be actively discouraged.

Make sure that the ESOL curriculum promotes integration

The Government should work in partnership with experts to bring in an adult ESOL curriculum that aids integration. It should review the content of teaching materials so that ESOL courses not only help language acquisition but also help migrants on their pathway to British citizenship, promoting shared values and an understanding of life in the UK.

Encourage social integration to increase students' exposure to English

Social contact with others who speak English enables students to practice their English, thus consolidating what they learn in formal classes. Everyone can play a part in this by talking to those learning the language. There are also a number of initiatives that work to increase social contact between migrants and long settled residents, for example the Red Cross Open Arms project and Near Neighbours¹⁷. There is a need for similar projects in almost all parts the UK. The Government should also build on the work being undertaken by MHCLG to promote social integration and support volunteer-led conversation clubs, encouraging National Citizenship Service participants, universities, faith communities and others to be involved as volunteers.

Set up a new *Learning English* freeview channel

Online material is difficult to find and not all migrants have access to a computer with an internet connection. A number of countries have used freeview channels to help migrants and refugees with language learning. Annual running costs of such channels have been less than £2 million with some of this outlay paid for by advertising. A *Learning English* freeview channel would be beneficial in the UK and would benefit migrants who find it difficult to attend classes. It could also broadcast material that helps promote integration.

6. Conclusion: Time to take English language seriously

The debate about English has been bogged-down in needless disagreement for too long. On one side are voices of loud complaint about migrants not speaking English, matched with silence on practical proposals to actually help people to learn. On the other side are those complaining that aspirations towards everyone being able to speak English are ‘colonialist’, imposing an unwanted language on an unwilling migrant population; while at the same time criticising cuts under successive governments to ESOL funding.

It is time for common sense to prevail. Nobody is going to be marched by police to the local Further Education college. But an expectation that that everyone living in the UK is able to communicate in English, or is learning to do so, should be foundational to our approach to integration. Being able to speak English is good for everyone in the UK: without English it will always be harder to access decent work, to build relationships with neighbours and colleagues and to play a full part in our society, from voting in local elections to booking a doctor’s appointment.

But it cannot be all stick and no carrot. If migrants are expected to learn English, they need access to English classes. Cuts to ESOL funding over the last decade have left many college classes with long waiting lists. In smaller towns there are too few classes where people can learn. And fee regulations often mean that people can’t access affordable classes when they first arrive in the UK.

There is now a ‘perfect storm’ of opportunity to unlock access for all to the English language. A one-year spending round will be announced in the next few weeks and a new English language strategy is planned for England later this year. We have a Prime Minister who has said he wants everybody living in the UK to learn English, and a Chancellor who has said he would prioritise it too. Sajid Javid was Home Secretary when he told a British Future event: “If there was one thing I could do to have better integration it would be to focus on English language. I would put rockets under that programme.” His move to the Treasury means he can now pay for the rockets.

Money alone, however, will not get us to universal fluency in English. It needs to be spent well, with an understanding of the barriers to learning and the factors that help people succeed.

Employers need to step up, providing space for short, regular classes, for as little as one hour before or after work each day, as part of their commitment to helping migrant workers integrate in the local community. We need more ‘Conversation clubs,’ offering a chance to practice speaking English and to interact with local people. They are good for learning and good for integration.

We could also show more innovation in our approach to English teaching. Other countries have successfully used freeview TV channels as a way to offer flexible and cost-effective language learning: a *Learning English* channel would only cost around £2million a year, much of which could be paid for by advertising. It could offer teaching at all levels from beginner to advanced, and draw on the vast archives of classic TV comedy and drama that Britain has produced. It could also broadcast material that helps integration: Sweden, for example, offers ‘News in easy Swedish’, to help migrants learn both the language and what is going on in their new home country.

If we are serious about getting integration right, we should be serious about English language teaching. Speaking English enables people who come here to settle and to thrive, to feel secure, to interact and to be part of our shared society. We should ensure that new arrivals are given the opportunity to learn English – and expect them to take up that offer.

7. Appendix: Additional government funding for ESOL

In addition to ESFA funding, the Government has from time-to-time allocated additional money for ESOL in England. This includes:

- £10 million from the Home Office and the Department for Education over five financial years (2015-2020) for Syrian refugees who have come through the two Government resettlement programmes. This funding allows local authorities to commission eight hours per week teaching.
- £600,000 to cover childcare for parents who would be otherwise unable to study because of their caring responsibilities. This money is welcome, but it is also important to make sure that the hours for which parents of young children receive free early education enables them to attend ESOL courses¹⁸.
- £1.2 million for winners of an MHCLG competition to better coordinate English language provision at a local level. This funding aims to better coordinate provision at a local level and channel migrants to the right courses.
- £4.5 million for the MHCLG Integrated Communities English Language programme targeted at those who live in the most segregated communities and who lack the confidence to attend formal classes in college.
- Funding through Controlling Migration Fund, administered by MHCLG
- Funding through the Integration Action Areas programme, also administered by MHCLG and targeted at five local authorities: Blackburn and Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall and Waltham Forest¹⁹.

8. Notes and references

1. Sajid Javid, speaking at a British Future event in July 2019: “If there was one thing I could do to have better integration it would be to focus on English language. I would put rockets under that programme.” See <http://www.britishfuture.org/articles/sajid-javid-in-conversation-on-identity/>
2. Local authorities where more than 1 in 20 people do not speak English well or at all included Boston, Brent, Ealing, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey, Harrow, Leicester, Luton, Newham, Slough, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest.
3. ICM polling of 3,667 UK adults, undertaken for the National Conversation on Immigration, June 2018
4. See, for example, Stevenson, A. Kings, P. And Sterland, L. (2017) Mapping ESOL provision in London, Leicester: learning and Work Institute.
5. House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement (2018) *The Ties that Bind: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*, London: House of Lords.
6. Ofqual (2011) Functional Skills Criteria for English Entry 1, Entry 2, Entry 3, Level 1 and Level 2, London: Ofqual.
7. Skills Funding Agency figures cited by the House of Commons Library. Foster, D. And Bolton P. (2019) *Adult ESOL in England*, London: House of Commons Library.
8. ESOL Plus Mandation Courses for Job Centre Plus clients whose English was a barrier to employment.
9. A confusing range of levels are used in the UK. Courses are usually advertised at Entry levels 1, 2 and 3, Level 1 and Level 2. An Entry Level 3 (B1 CEFR) Qualification is needed to qualify for Indefinite Leave to Remain or British Citizenship. The Home Office uses the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) system for its language requirements.
10. Figure based on Home Office immigration statistics, May 2019.
11. House of Commons Library (2017) *English language teaching for refugees*, London: House of Commons Library.
12. Education and Skills funding Agency (ESFA) (2019) ESFA funded adult education budget (AEB): funding and performance management rules 2019 to 2020, London: ESFA.
13. As well as the Greater London Authority, six Combined Authorities have had their Adult Education Budget devolved from central government: Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City region, Tees Valley, West Midlands and the West of England.

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14. Lightbown, P. And Spada, N. (2013) *How languages are learned*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 15. Those with refugee status and their families are exempt from a language requirement when applying for ILR but not citizenship. People from designated English-speaking countries are exempt from all language requirements.
 16. In 2016-17 68% of students on ESFA courses were women.
 17. <https://www.near-neighbours.org.uk/>
 18. Parents of the most deprived two-years-olds and all three- and four-year-olds receive between 15 and 30 hours of free early education in England, but sometimes the hours offered to parents stop them from attending classes.
 19. House of Commons Library (2019) *Investment in the provision of English for speakers of other languages*, London: House of Commons Library.

9. About British Future

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank seeking to involve people in an open conversation which addresses people's hopes and fears about identity and integration, migration and opportunity, so that we feel confident about Britain's Future.

We want to ensure that we engage those who are anxious about cultural identity and economic opportunity in Britain today, as well as those who already feel confident about our society, so that we can together identify workable solutions to make Britain the country we want to live in.

British Future convenes or co-convenes a number of networks: on communications, on integration and on anti-prejudice strategy. These bring together those who are working in these important areas to share best practice and new research insights. They will also, we hope, build greater connectedness between local actors who are doing good work that does not get the attention it deserves, and with national organisations working on these themes. To find out more about these networks contact: info@britishfuture.org

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