

English language education needs to be more accessible for migrants

POLICY BRIEF | March 2026

James Simpson, Ruth Evans, Rosa Mas Giralt, Tony Capstick, Julie Linley, Aisha Malik, John Zavos, Sandra Rice

Recommendations

1. Develop accessible, centralised information hubs on accredited and non-accredited ESOL provision in each region.
2. Provide flexible class timetables to enable migrant parents and other carers to attend.
3. Provide free crèche and childcare facilities at ESOL centres and funding for after-school clubs for migrant parents.
4. Provide free public transport to attend ESOL classes and locate classes in more community settings.

Addressing barriers will improve migrants' employability, economic growth and social cohesion

Our research with 30 migrant families with a disability or care need in England has demonstrated the multiple barriers to learning English that migrants experience¹. Not being able to access English language education has major impacts on adult carers' and other family members' wellbeing, employment opportunities and social integration. It also increases the reliance on family members, including children, for interpreting in health, social care and school settings, despite safeguarding and confidentiality concerns. Our research recommends improving the coordination and accessibility of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision at local and regional levels and supports calls for a national English language framework², aligned with a coherent ESOL strategy for England³. Improved information about available provision, addressing childcare, transport costs and other barriers would enable migrants to learn English to the required level for employment, for communication with services and for wider social integration.

Rich diversity of ESOL provision needs greater coordination

Adult English language provision in England is characterised by a diverse range of providers, including formal classes run by adult education and further education colleges, private providers, third sector community centres and migrant organisations, alongside more informal learning opportunities which are highly valued and generally provided by the third sector. Classes may be accredited or non-accredited. This provides a rich diversity of classes that may be appropriate and valued by different learners and allow different levels of engagement, depending on for example, migrants' caring responsibilities, mental health challenges related to forced migration, and varying levels of literacy in first languages.

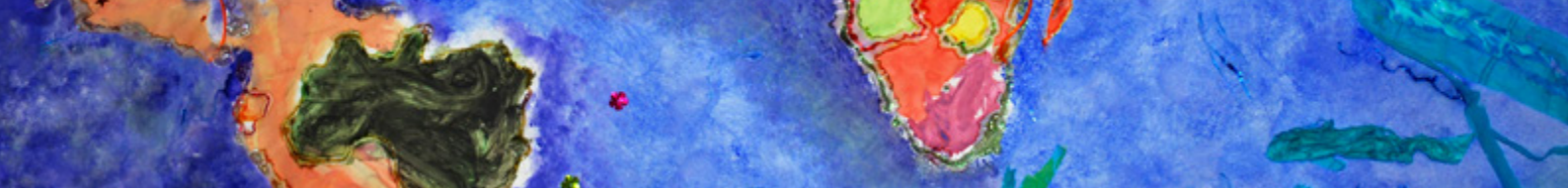
While the historic under-funding of the sector has stabilised in recent years, ESOL in England still suffers from neglect, particularly in terms of national coordination and organisation^{2,3}. Furthermore, national funding regimes and eligibility requirements based on immigration status and resettlement schemes (such as those established in response to the Syrian, Afghan and Ukrainian conflicts and the political situation in Hong Kong) create inequalities between migrants and are complex and difficult to navigate, both for students and providers. For example, people seeking asylum are not eligible to access government-funded ESOL provision until six months after they have applied for asylum, limiting their employability and social integration. Levelling out differential eligibility criteria would ease ESOL providers' access to funding for all migrant families.

In common with other recent research⁴, our study shows that adult learners have difficulty finding and accessing an ESOL class at the appropriate level. Because of the array of different ESOL providers, it can be difficult to know which type of provision, with which provider, is most appropriate: "...there's several systems that run like alongside each other, and they don't necessarily... talk to each other. It's very confusing for people [...] If they're going along the ESOL track, or you're a entry 2 or entry 3... And then, somebody says, 'Oh, no. You need B1 and B2...'" (community ESOL provider, Leeds). There is a high demand for courses, with long waiting lists.

The current devolved funding landscape for the Adult Skills Fund (comprising the majority of ESOL funding), and other funding streams that third sector providers can access, means that new opportunities are opening up. ESOL providers could harness such opportunities to improve the accessibility and coordination of ESOL provision². MESH's regional hub of information and guidance about ESOL provision and support for ESOL practitioners in Yorkshire and the Humber provides a model of best practice that could be replicated across the UK (see Box 1 overleaf).



Figure 1: ESOL Skills for Health Class for older women, teaching English related to health topics, Reading Community Learning Centre, Reading.



Box 1. Model of a regional information hub for greater coordination of ESOL provision

Migrant English Support Hub (MESH) provides a virtual ESOL information and guidance hub for Yorkshire and Humber. It also works with local stakeholders to promote coordination, develop resources, address training needs, and challenge barriers to access in different localities. MESH is part-funded by Local Authorities through the regional Strategic Migration Partnership. As an independent charity, it supports learners and providers across the whole sector, including smaller third sector ESOL providers, who often provide highly valued flexible learning opportunities in community settings, which meet learners' diverse needs.

www.learningenglish.org.uk

Box 2. Importance of childcare for migrant parents and difficulty in finding an accessible ESOL class:

"Childcare is really important, so our crèche is on site, so they literally come in and drop their child off, get them settled and go straight into the classroom [...]. So especially for new mothers, they can go and breastfeed if they need to, and do all that. [...] We're one of the very few organisations who provide a crèche".

"So knowing about what options there are, potentially. Because again, not everyone can do a college course because some people are not eligible, or they only start a certain time or end a certain time. Or a community class, you know, it might be far from where you live. So awareness of what is there, what you can do, and how to join in. Knowing what it is. But then, how do you get through the door and onto a seat? That's difficult."

(Community ESOL provider, Reading)

For more information, please contact:

Prof. Ruth Evans

University of Reading | revans@reading.ac.uk
Tel (0118) 378 7755

Dr. Rosa Mas Giral

University of Leeds | r.masgiral@leeds.ac.uk

research.reading.ac.uk/transnational-families

Recognising caring responsibilities and addressing childcare and transport costs

The timing and location of language classes represent additional barriers. Carers may be juggling language learning with caring for a child or adult with a disability or chronic illness and/or work, alongside supporting relatives in other countries, and have limited opportunities to attend. As one mother from Ecuador, who relied on her 14 year old daughter to translate for her, commented: *"We have studied a little and on top of the studies you have to work, the house, pick them up and thousands of things that you have in mind, that the only time you can study is the time [they] are at school, that time that you can dedicate, if it is 2 hours, those 2 hours, those are the ones that you will have"*. Greater recognition of parenting and other caring responsibilities of adult migrants is needed by ESOL providers through offering more flexible class timings.

Furthermore, only a few providers provide free crèche facilities (see Box 2). Our research suggests free childcare provision and meeting the costs of after-school clubs is crucial in facilitating migrant women's access to English language classes, which has long-term knock-on effects for the social inclusion of women carers and their children. Meeting the costs of public transport, with flexibility over the distance covered to attend the most appropriate course, and providing learning opportunities in community settings and family hubs close to where migrants live, would make language classes more accessible, particularly for people seeking asylum, and women carers, whose language education may not be prioritised within low income families.

Concluding recommendations

Greater coordination of ESOL provision is needed at regional, local and combined authority level. This would enable professionals and migrants to access information about accredited and non-accredited English language education for adult migrants in each locality, and would facilitate collaboration and complementarity between ESOL providers. Childcare, transport costs and timetabling barriers need to be addressed as a priority. Improved access to English language education would alleviate the reliance on children and other family members to provide language mediation due to shortfalls in interpretation services. Improved English language learning opportunities would greatly improve migrant families' wellbeing, employability and social integration in the UK, fostering long-term economic growth and social cohesion.

Resources

Website: download the Report, Policy Briefs and other resources from:

<https://research.reading.ac.uk/transnational-families>

Training materials: free short participatory films:

- **Addressing barriers to English Language for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes**
- **Language and Interpretation Needs in Accessing Healthcare**

Two free ESOL Learning resources for ESOL teachers produced by MESH, based on our research findings:

- **Transnational Families: Family Challenges**
- **Support for Transnational Families: Caring from afar and Family Reunification**

Acknowledgements

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