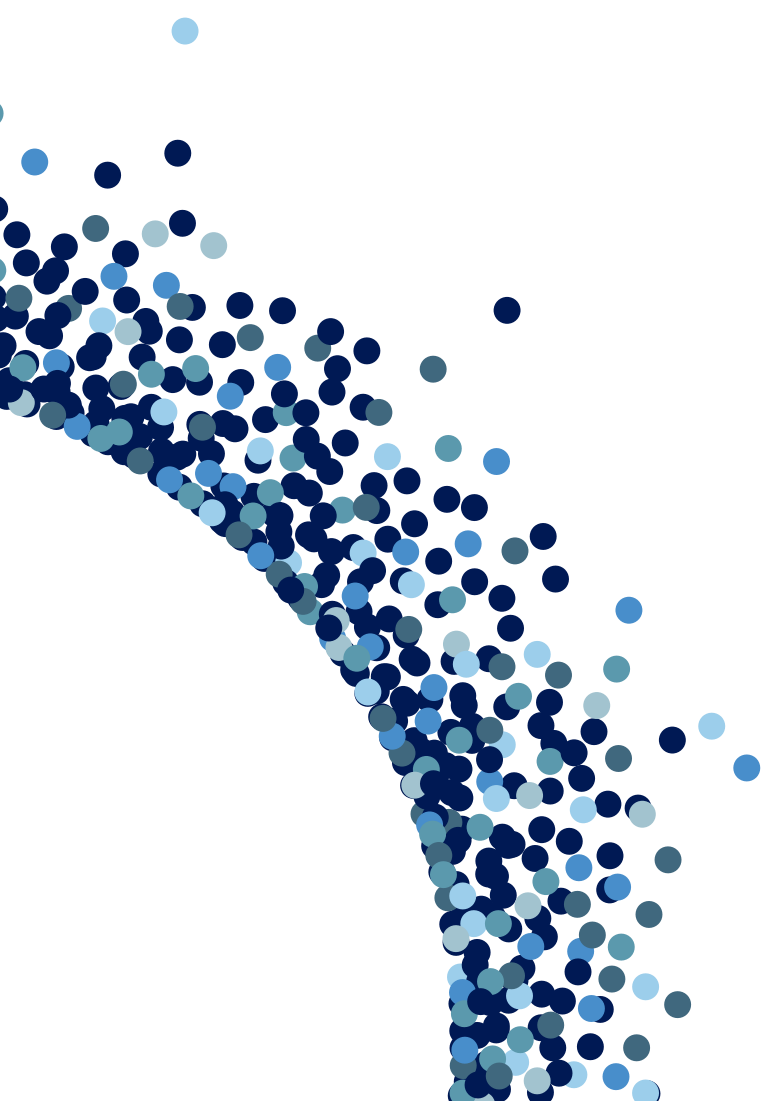




BRIEFING

English language use and proficiency of migrants in the UK



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Trust for London
Tackling poverty and inequality



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This briefing examines data on how well migrants in the UK speak English, whether English is their main language at home, and the extent to which they have faced problems in work or education as a result of language barriers.

Key Points

A large majority (89%) of the foreign born living in the UK self-reported speaking English well or very well in the 2011 Census

In 2018, about half of foreign-born adults had English as their first language at home

Use of English increases over time: in 2018, about 68% of the foreign-born population residing in the UK for at least 15 years had English as their first language at home, up from 29% of those who had been in the country for 0–2 years

Migrant children adopt English as their first language faster than adults. About 88% of people who moved to the UK before age 5 had English as their first language at home in 2018

People whose first language at home is English are more likely to be employed and have higher average earnings

ESOL participation in England fell from 179,000 in 2009–10 to 114,000 funded learners in 2017–18

Understanding the evidence

This briefing examines the outcomes of people who were born abroad and have migrated to the UK. The word ‘migrant’ is used differently in different contexts. In this briefing, we use the term ‘migrant’ to refer to the foreign born, regardless of whether they have become UK citizens. For a discussion of this terminology, see the Migration Observatory briefing [Who Counts as a Migrant: Definitions and their Consequences](#).

There are various sources of data on language use and language proficiency of UK residents, which have different strengths and limitations. This briefing relies on two different sources of data: the Labour Force Survey (LFS) June–September quarterly data from 2018; and the 2011 Census.

The LFS is the largest household study in the UK (39,000 households) and provides the official measures of employment and unemployment. It collects information about a wide range of topics, including language, on individuals aged 16 and over every quarter. Interviewers arrange for translation for people who do not speak enough English to complete the interview, either from another member of the household or an external interpreter. The language module in the LFS is only asked on the June–September quarter every three years, the most recent data being from 2018.

The LFS has some important limitations. Some people are excluded, such as residents of communal establishments like hostels, and other groups may be undercounted due to survey non-response. Its response rate has declined over time, and is now below 50% (ONS, 2016); this means that people who are more likely not to respond to the survey may be undercounted, and ONS analysis based on the 2011 Census suggests that non-response is a greater problem among people born outside of the UK (Weeks et al, n.d.)

Language variables in the LFS and the Census

In the Labour Force Survey, respondents are asked about the first language they speak at home, which can be English, Welsh, Gaelic, Ulster Scots/Ullans, or other language. For simplicity, figures in the briefing include Welsh, Gaelic and Ulster Scots/Ullans speakers in the 'English-speaking' category. These languages represent less than 1% of the population and almost all speakers are UK born.

Respondents may interpret the concept of a 'first language at home' in different ways – some will indicate the language that is most commonly spoken in the family (i.e. the 'main language'), though others might interpret the question chronologically. By asking about the language spoken 'at home', the question does not aim to elicit the respondent's first language or native language, although it is possible that some people may interpret it in this light. There is also some uncertainty about how multilingual respondents who live alone will interpret the concept of a language spoken 'at home'. In this briefing, we use the terms 'main language at home' and 'first language at home' interchangeably, but recognise that respondents may interpret these terms in different ways.

Respondents reporting a language other than English as their first language at home provide information on whether they have experienced any difficulties in finding or keeping a job or with their education because of English language difficulties. It should be noted that the LFS does not directly ask respondents how well they speak English; experiencing language difficulties at work is a very imperfect indicator of language proficiency because English language requirements vary considerably across occupations.

The 2011 Census included questions on English language use and self-reported oral English skills for all residents age 3 and older. The Census asks for respondents' *main* language at home, not the 'first language at home' as in the LFS. Only people who report that their main language at home is not English are asked questions about level of proficiency in English. The main advantage of Census data is that it gathers detailed information from the whole population so it is possible to have accurate data even for small areas. However, census data is only collected every 10 years, which means that the 2011 Census does not reflect the current composition of the foreign-born population, particularly the most recent migration inflows (e.g. from Romania or Bulgaria, most of whom arrived after 2011).

Data breakdowns

The data for the foreign-born population are presented either as a whole or for different country of birth groupings. The country categories are the following:

- EU-14 countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden).
- EU-8 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), EU-2 (Bulgaria and Romania) and EU Other (Croatia, Malta and Cyprus) countries. Sometimes we refer to this group as new EU countries or new EU member states.
- Middle East and North African (MENA) countries and Central Asian countries; the largest groups in these categories were born in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, South Sudan and Tunisia).
- East Asian & Southeast Asian countries; the largest groups within this category were born in the Philippines, China, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan and Taiwan.
- India
- - Pakistan and other South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal). Most of the respondents in this category were born in Pakistan and Bangladesh.
- Sub-Saharan African countries; the largest groups within this category were born in Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Uganda and Tanzania.

- All foreign born; this category includes all the non-UK born population. Migrants born in non-EU European countries, America and Oceania are included here along with those born in the abovementioned country groupings.

About 40% of migrants in the UK were born in the EU and around a quarter were born South, East or Southeast Asian countries. See the the Migration Observatory briefing [Migrants in the UK: an overview](#) for more information about the geographic origins of the foreign born population.

Margins of error in the estimates

Because the LFS is a sample survey, the estimates come with margins of error. This means that small differences between numbers or percentages may not be statistically significant. However, all the differences between groups that are described in the text of the briefing are all statistically significant. A difference between two groups is considered statistically significant when the probability that this difference is caused by chance is very small. In that case, we assume that the differences we observe in the data are likely to exist in the population. Note that small differences between estimates for different groups may not be statistically significant, if they are not described in the narrative of the briefing.

Understanding the policy

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) policy

Non-native English speakers learn the language at different paces depending on multiple factors, such as their learning abilities, the age at which they migrated or their exposure to English before and after moving to the UK. The availability and cost of English language training (ESOL) is one of these factors.

There is no specific budget set aside for classes for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Instead, the government sets out criteria for who can receive free or reduced-cost provision, and actual spending is shaped by these criteria as well as the demand for courses among learners. Adult skills policy is devolved, so England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all have different arrangements (Foster and Bolton, 2018).

Adult ESOL courses are mainly funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) through the Adult Education Budget (AEB). There are additional sources of funding such as the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme, Local Authority Grants, the European Social Fund or the Controlling Migration Fund Criteria, among others (Higton et al. for the DfE, 2019: 30). Criteria for who can receive government-funded ESOL have become more restrictive over the past decade in England (Foster and Bolton, 2018), though certain English language learners can still receive publicly funded English language tuition. The ESFA fully funds ESOL learning delivered in the classroom up to Level 2 for eligible learners aged 19 and over who are unemployed and in receipt of certain benefits or have an annual gross salary of less than 15,736.50. All other eligible classroom-based adult ESOL learning is co-funded by ESFA, which means that ESFA pays half of the course costs. Since 2011/2012, there is no funding for ESOL provided in the workplace. Eligibility for ESOL depends on a person's immigration status and the length of time they have been in the country.

The funding constraints and the oversubscription of pre-entry and entry level ESOL have been identified as weaknesses of the current ESOL provision (The Casey Review, 2016: 97; Integrated Communities Green Paper, 2018: 38).

Control over the Adult Education Budget, which is the main source of ESOL funding, will transfer to the six Mayoral Combined Authorities (Tees Valley, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, West Midlands, West of England, and Cambridge and Peterborough) and the Greater London Authority from 2019-20. The ESFA will continue to be responsible for funding residents of non-devolved areas (Hubble et al., 2019: 3). The government is expected to publish a new national strategy for ESOL in England in autumn 2019.

A large majority (89%) of the foreign born in 2011 self-reported speaking English well

A large majority (89% or 7,086,000) of the foreign born living in the UK self-reported speaking English well or very well in the 2011 Census. Just over half of the foreign born population (51%) had English as their main language in 2011. Among the 11% with limited English language skills, 15% said they could not speak English at all (138,000 or 1.6% of the foreign-born population). Among the UK-born population, less than 0.1% reported not being able to speak English well or at all (58,000).

In 2018, about half of foreign-born adults spoke English as their first language at home

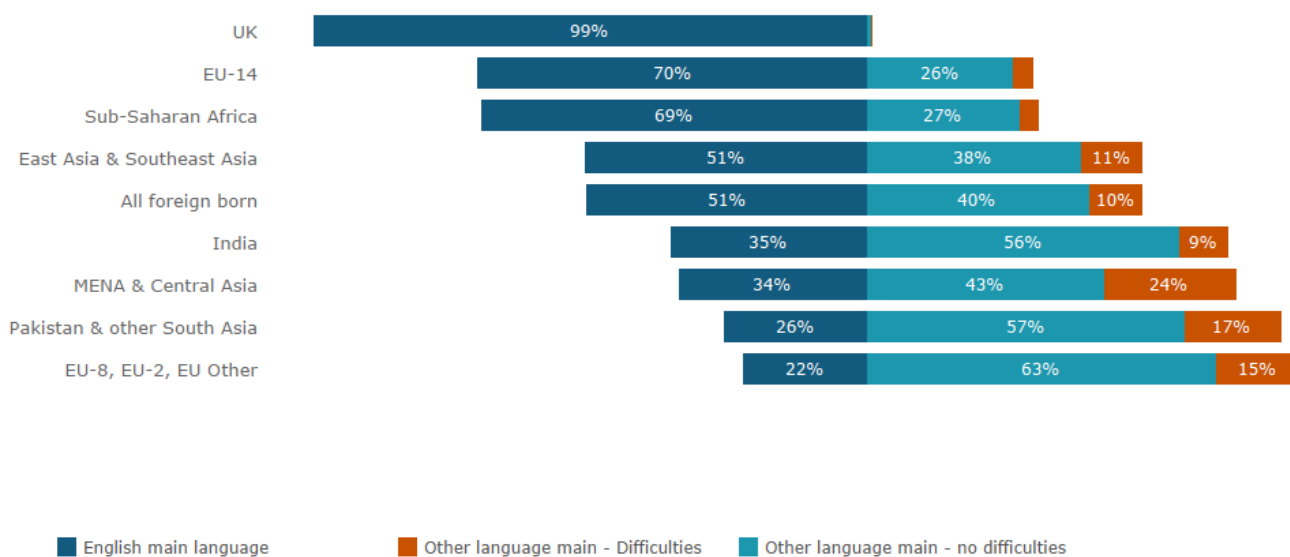
Speaking English at home does not necessarily indicate proficiency but it is sometimes seen as an indicator of cultural integration by the public. For example, recent research has shown that migrants who speak in English to their own children are perceived as culturally integrated (Soboleswska et al., 2017).

In 2018, 51% of foreign-born adults (3,200,000) reported a language other than English as their first language at home. If we exclude those born in Ireland, North America and Oceania, the percentage is similar, at 55%.

People born in EU-14 and Sub-Saharan African countries were most likely to be speaking English as their main language (70% and 69%, respectively), while the lowest share was found among those born in EU accession countries (Figure 1). Note that having a language other than English as the first language at home does not necessarily indicate proficiency in English.

Figure 1

First language at home by country of birth, 2018
Age 16 and older



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey (quarterly data from June-September 2018)

Note: respondents with a language other than English as their first language reported whether they have had problems in finding or keeping a job or with their education due to their difficulties with English.



In 2018, 10% of the foreign born reported experiencing problems in work or education as a result of their limited English language skills (Figure 1). Among the UK born, the share of residents reporting job or education-related problems due to language difficulties is very small (0.03%).

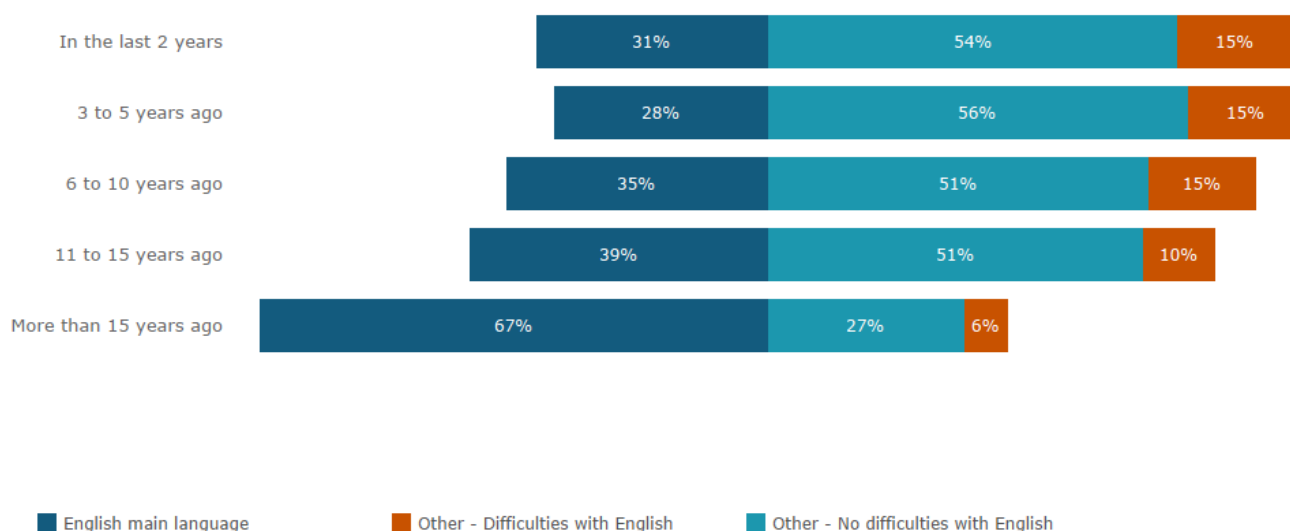
Exposure to English is a key factor explaining English language use and proficiency and is closely related to the time spent in the UK. This means that some of the differences between migrant groups' English use could arise from differences in the amount of time since their arrival. For example, 61% of people from EU accession countries who had been in the UK for more than 15 years reported speaking English at home, compared to 10% of those who had arrived within the previous 5 years (not shown in figure).

More than two thirds of the foreign-born population residing in the UK for at least 15 years have English as their first language at home

The English language skills of foreign-born non-English speakers are expected to improve as their time spent in the UK increases. In 2018, 67% of the foreign-born population residing in the UK for at least 15 years reported having English as their first language at home, compared to 31% of those who moved to the UK in the previous 2 years (Figure 2). The share of the foreign born experiencing problems in work or education due to language barriers is also smaller for those who have lived in the UK longer (Figure 2).

Figure 2

First language at home by years since migration to the UK, 2018
Age 16 and older



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey (quarterly data from June-September 2018)
Note: respondents with a language other than English as their first language reported whether they have had problems in finding or keeping a job or with their education due to their difficulties with English.



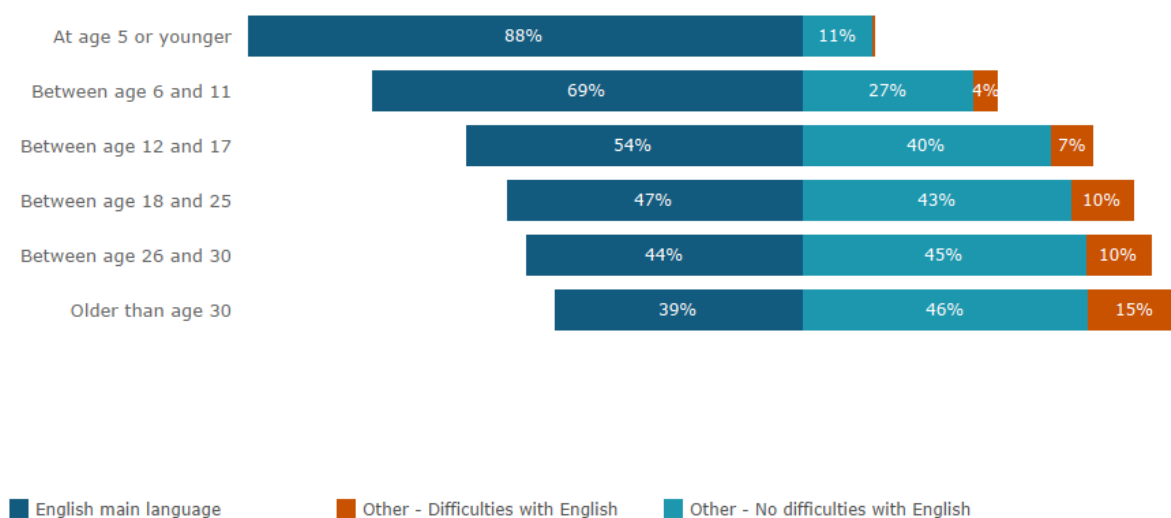
About 88% of the foreign born moving to the UK before age 5 had English as their first language at home in 2018

The age at migration is a critical factor explaining how well the foreign born learn English because young children learn languages faster and with less effort than adults (Chiswick and Miller, 2001; Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003; Stevens, 1999). An estimated 88% of the foreign born who arrived in the UK before age 5 has English as their first language at home, while for those migrating between age 6 and 11 and between age 12 and 17, the shares decrease to 69% and 54%, respectively (Figure 3). People migrating at older ages are also more likely to report experiencing problems in work or education due low proficiency than those arriving at a younger age. This is

particularly pronounced for the foreign born migrating after age 30, among whom 15% report job- and/or education-related problems due to their low English skills.

Figure 3

First language at home by age at migration to the UK, 2018
Age 16 and older



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey (quarterly data from June-September 2018)
Note: respondents with a language other than English as their first language reported whether they have had problems in finding or keeping a job or with their education due to their difficulties with English



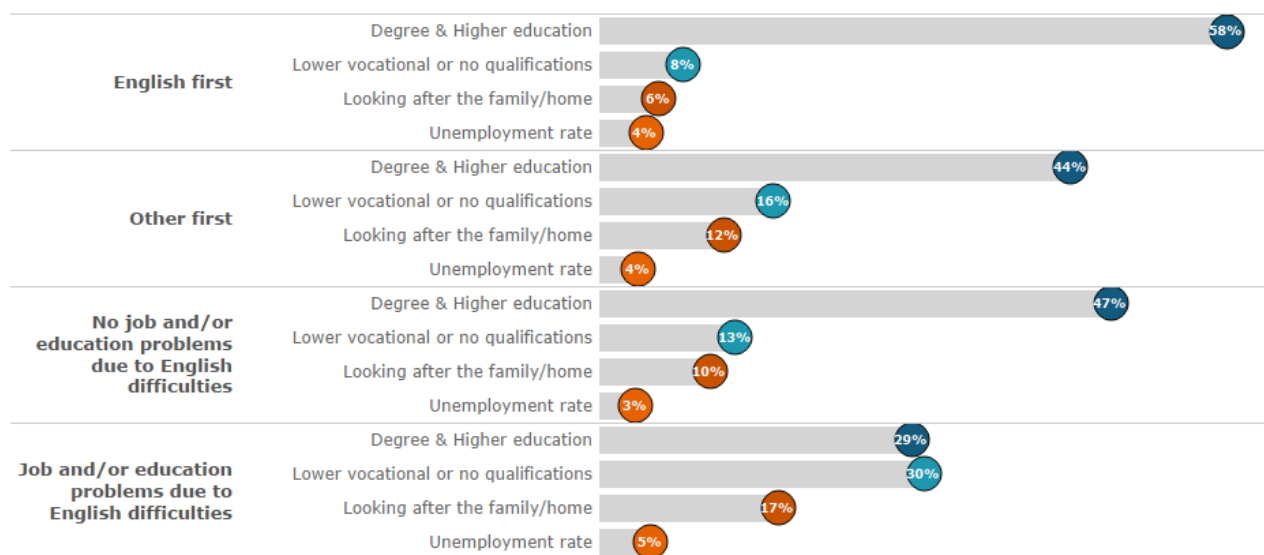
People whose main language at home is English are more likely to be employed and have higher average earnings

In 2018, the unemployment rate for the foreign born who reported having English as their language at home (5%) was the same as that for those reporting other first language (Figure 4). The higher gross annualised earnings of the foreign born speaking English at home (£32,700 compared to £24,800 for those with other main language) could be explained by factors such as their higher levels of education.

The foreign-born population reporting work or education problems due to low English language skills tend to have lower qualifications and are more likely to be looking after the home (16%) than the foreign born reporting no language difficulties or who have English as their main home language (Figure 4). For example, 31% of the foreign born reporting language difficulties have no qualifications, while this percentage is 13% for those who report no difficulties and 8% for the foreign born whose home language is English. The foreign born with low or no qualifications may not have been exposed to English in the educational system and/or may also experience more difficulties in learning a new language than those with higher levels of education. Previous research found that fluency in English increased the employment probabilities of non-white migrants in the UK by about 22 percentage points and was associated with 18% to 20% higher earnings, when holding constant other factors such as education or age that affect employment and earnings (Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003).

Figure 4

Educational and economic profile of the foreign-born population by first language at home, 2018
Age 16 to 64



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey (quarterly data from June-September 2018)
 Note: educational level excludes the student population and the inactive population over age 69. Share of population looking after the family/ home only for population aged 16 to 64. Respondents with a language other than English as their first language reported whether they have had problems in finding or keeping a job or with their education due to their difficulties with English



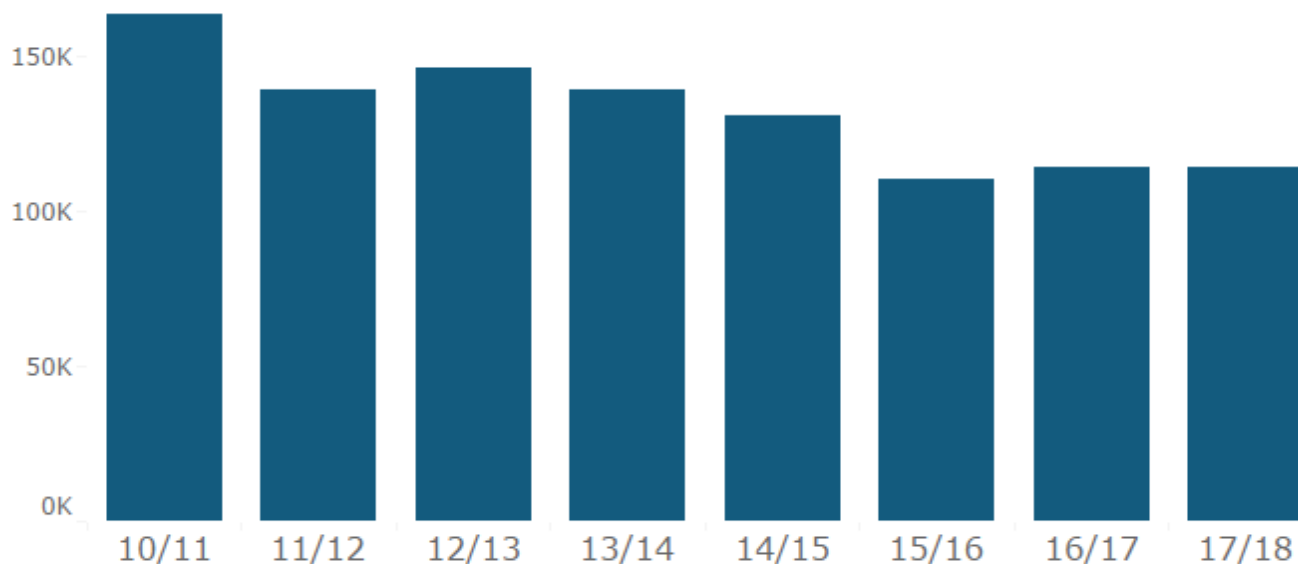
The number of funded participants in ESOL courses in England fell from 163,600 in the year 2010/11 to 114,300 in 2017/18

During 2016/17 and 2017/18, the number of funded participants in ESOL courses was about 114,000 each year (Figure 5). There are some possible explanations for the decrease since 2010/11, such as the lack of suitable ESOL provision (HM Government, 2018), the significant waiting lists and/or the lack of funding. According to a recent survey of ESOL providers commissioned by the Department of Education, more than half (53%) of English language learning providers said their organisations found it ‘fairly difficult’ to meet the demand for ESOL courses and 13% found it ‘very difficult’ (Higton et al. for the DfE, 2019: 10).

Figure 5

Number of funded participants in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses, 2010-2018

Age 19 and older



Source: Department of Education, Further education and skills data, March 2019, Table 6.1.

Note: adult ESOL learners can be funded through multiple funding streams, though ESFA funding is currently the main source.



Evidence gaps and limitations

Data on language use and proficiency in the UK have important limitations. In the LFS, respondents are only asked for a single, 'main' language spoken at home. This may pose difficulties for respondents in households where multiple languages are spoken. This could include migrant families where parents use their country of origin language but children communicate with them in English despite understanding their parents' native language. In addition, respondents are not asked about their main language used at work or in their social life, which are important dimensions to be considered when examining language use. An additional limitation of LFS data is that 20% of the sample above age 16 does not answer the language questions. The reasons are that these individuals belong to partially cooperating households, they refuse to answer these questions or they could not be contacted for interview.

In contrast to the Census, the LFS does not collect data on English language proficiency. Respondents' English language skills are not measured directly with tests nor they are based in any kind of self-reported indicator of fluency as in the Census, where respondents reported how well they could speak English.

The closest indicators of English language proficiency in the LFS are the questions on barriers to employment and education due to limited language skills. These questions are, however, only asked to respondents reporting other language than English/Welsh/Gaelic/Ulster Scots/Ullans as their first language at home. This is a limitation because it assumes that people whose main language at home is English – most of whom are not migrants – do not have any problems with language. However, five million working age adults in England had literacy skills at or below the Government's Level 1 measure (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012: 34).

In addition, reporting no work and/or education related problems due to language difficulties does not necessarily entail a high proficiency in English among the foreign-born who are not native-English speakers. Other language speakers may not report problems for multiple reasons that are unrelated to their English language skills, such as, for example, working in a place where most co-workers speak other language or being economically inactive.

This briefing has not examined the satisfaction with ESOL courses among the foreign born population. ESOL funding in England provided from the Adult Education Budget (AEB), which is the main source of ESOL funding, fell by 56% in real terms from 2009-10 to 2016-17 (Foster and Bolton, 2018: 8). It is unclear whether these budget cuts have had a negative impact on the English language skills of the foreign born population.

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