

2012 The **ESOL** Manifesto

A statement of our beliefs and values





The **ESOL** Manifesto

In November 2010, the Government announced cuts to ESOL¹ funding and restrictions in fee remission for many ESOL students. These proposed changes threatened the education of adults from minority ethnic communities as well as teachers' jobs. Action for ESOL campaigned against the changes and August 2011 saw a u-turn from the Government on fee remission for those on 'inactive benefits'. But although this particular battle was won, ESOL remains vulnerable to the whims of policymakers and funders and the fight for its survival as a sector continues.

¹ By 'ESOL' we are referring to the full range of provision: discrete ESOL, beginner literacy, community based classes, family learning, embedded vocational programmes, work-based provision, offender learning and access to HE.

In order to resist attempts by policymakers and funders to undermine all we have gained over the years, and to prevent more cuts from pushing us back into the margins, we need a strong collective identity, a clear sense of the purpose of ESOL and confidence in ourselves as qualified, knowledgeable, committed professionals.

This manifesto is a statement of our beliefs and values and draws together ideas from discussions held during the Action for ESOL campaign in 2010-2011 – in particular two seminars in June and September 2011, which were held to debate fundamental issues about the very nature of the ESOL profession itself. The manifesto is the result of many hours of shared thinking amongst a large group of people and is intended to raise crucial issues for practitioners, learners and policymakers alike.

We recognise that the ESOL profession is diverse, and not everyone will agree with all the ideas and statements in the manifesto. For this reason, we invite practitioners to debate the issues we raise: the aim of the manifesto is to spark further discussion and generate more ideas which will help to shape our future.



Defending our sector

1. We recognise that the challenges facing ESOL are shared across adult education, and that cuts in social provision are widespread and deep.
2. In defending and promoting ESOL, we recognise the need to build a coalition of teachers, students, professional bodies, employers, voluntary organisations, community groups, trade unions and others.

Funding

3. Language education is a public good which contributes to society as a whole. This should be recognised through the availability of an accessible, comprehensive and integrated system of ESOL provision, in which financial and other barriers to participation are removed.
4. In order to maintain high-quality ESOL, funding needs to be persistent and sustained and not vulnerable to the whims of political administrations. Rather, people who need English language education to live and work in the UK should have a statutory entitlement to ESOL.
5. Funding mechanisms should be transparent and encourage co-operation between providers, not competition. In particular, attention should be given to the lack of co-operation between different agencies, notably FE colleges and Jobcentre Plus².
6. At all times, funding should be based on the needs and aspirations of students.

The right to learn the common language of the UK

7. Action for ESOL believes that the opportunity to learn the common language of the community in which you live and work is a human right. Access to the common language is a precondition of full and equal participation in society. Denying access to learning the common language is a fundamental barrier to participation. There is a well-established correlation between poor English language skills, low pay, unemployment, poor housing, poor health and poverty.
8. Access to ESOL should be independent of immigration status. ESOL classes should be free to all, including newly-arrived spouses, asylum seekers and students who are working.

² For example, when students are making progress on ESOL courses they should not be moved onto inadequate employability training programmes.

Language, community and diversity

9. A common language enables the emergence of shared identities and collective action. However, whilst we recognise the value of speaking the dominant language, this should not be a precondition for the rights of citizenship or for social acceptance. Nor should the issue of language detract from other factors that cause division within our communities, including poverty, inequality and discrimination.
10. It is discriminatory to marginalise people on the basis of their spoken language. The majority of migrants both want and need to learn English, and the claim that they do not belongs to the racialised immigration and cultural agenda in which migrants are scapegoated and where 'language' often serves as a proxy for race. This is especially pernicious in the contexts of funding cuts and restrictions on entitlement. We should resist being co-opted into a simplistic rhetoric of 'citizenship' or 'community cohesion'.
11. Urban communities are increasingly multilingual and multicultural. Multilingualism brings many social and educational benefits, and should be valued and invested in. In a multicultural society, the right to language education is inseparable from the right to cultural and linguistic identity.
12. ESOL students comprise a highly diverse group – culturally, linguistically and in other ways. They include members of settled communities, refugees and asylum seekers and migrant workers and their spouses. Their purposes for learning English are equally diverse. These include: negotiating everyday life; finding work; socialising; continuing education, retraining or seeking re-qualification; and participating in civil society and political life.
13. Fundamentally, ESOL is concerned with enabling migrants to acquire the language and language-related skills they need in order to have a voice and live autonomous fulfilling lives, in community with others.
14. Migrant workers form a vital part of our economy. Many employers in some UK regions rely almost entirely on this workforce but few pay for the training needs of their workforce. While literacy tuition for so-called 'native speakers' remains free, the cost of ESOL can be prohibitively high for many low-paid workers. In addition, many migrant workers are unable to access community provision due to unsociable or changing shift patterns. Many migrants bring with them vital skills and experience from their own countries and should not be prevented from progressing in work purely because of their unmet ESOL needs.
15. It follows that ESOL should be responsive to the variety of needs people have for language education. Whilst many migrants need ESOL in order to find work, ESOL should not be seen as solely at the service of the economy or reduced to the so-called 'employability' agenda. We challenge the top-down imposition of a labour market agenda.

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Defending the ESOL identity

16. ESOL is a distinct area of provision within language and post-16 education. It is crucial that its distinct identity is preserved. There is much that ESOL shares with English as a Foreign Language (EFL), adult literacy and other kinds of language learning. However, there are features unique to English language education for multilingual migrants, and recognising the distinct contribution of ESOL is crucial for protecting, promoting and developing language provision for migrant and language minority communities.
17. At different times, people learning English need to access a wide range of provision, including discrete ESOL, beginner literacy, community-based classes, family learning, embedded vocational programmes, work-based classes and access to HE.
18. ESOL provision should be accessible, comprehensive and integrated. It should reach out into the community and provide well-constructed but flexible routes onto academic and vocational courses. It should reflect the diversity of needs, backgrounds, current circumstances and aspirations of ESOL students. Provision should be based on the needs of individuals and communities rather than on the demands of government, businesses or providers.
19. Provision should be supported by high-quality advice and guidance and tutorial support administered by teachers and others who understand the language needs and aspirations of students, and the challenges they face.



20. Serious attention should be given to identifying and removing barriers to participation, including financial ones. Every effort should be made to accommodate the complex life circumstances of students, including, notably, those relating to childcare.
21. Stereotypes should be avoided. In particular, it should not be assumed that women with childcare responsibilities only want or need community-based, family learning opportunities. Provision should acknowledge the autonomy of individual language students and their right to access the provision best suited to their needs and aspirations.

Professionalism

22. ESOL teacher professionalism is not only a matter of individuals developing their classroom skills. The classroom cannot be isolated from the institutional and social world, and to focus solely on classroom methodology leads to a narrow and restrictive idea of professionalism. Language education, like all education, encompasses issues of power and culture. It is inherently political. For ESOL teachers to be truly professional, they need the opportunities to learn about and discuss the political context of ESOL, i.e. the social, cultural and political realities that shape migrant lives and which often cause exclusion and marginalisation.
23. ESOL teachers have both a right and a responsibility to engage with the political and policy issues that affect language students, and in particular to challenge discriminatory practices and policies at the local and the national level.

24. Pay, contracts and working conditions should reflect ESOL teachers' work as professional educators. In particular, we oppose the marginalisation and casualisation of teachers through the use of hourly paid contracts which disproportionately affect women and BME teachers. College managements should recognise that students benefit from the stability of a properly contracted workforce.
25. ESOL teacher professionalism should be recognised through mechanisms which enable teachers to participate meaningfully in policy development at a local and a national level. This should include participation in curriculum planning, assessment and quality evaluation, as well as in defining realistic targets that enhance learning rather than distracting attention towards finding ways of meeting nationally imposed data targets.
26. ESOL professionals should be entitled to ongoing opportunities to develop their practice and to extend their knowledge and skills, through high-quality professional development. Training and development should be informed by a participatory ethos, which aims to nurture mutually supportive 'communities of practice' and a culture of reflective, critical enquiry.
27. Particular attention should be given to ensuring that all ESOL teachers enjoy good access to paid training and development regardless of their contractual status.
28. The teaching profession should better reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the communities who use ESOL provision. Positive action should be taken to address the limited number of teachers from BME communities.
29. ESOL needs a well-funded research community, in which researchers and practitioners collaborate in developing shared knowledge. Pedagogy should be informed by up-to-date knowledge and debates on the nature of language learning and the use of language in society.

Pedagogy

30. Teachers should have access to current research and a dialogue between practice and research should be facilitated by colleges and universities.
31. Whilst we recognise that the national core curriculum provides an over-arching framework for ESOL teaching and learning, prescribed, centralised curricula and accreditation frameworks encourage a narrow 'skills' based approach amongst ESOL practitioners, students and providers. This reinforces a 'production line' view of language learning in which discrete items of pre-decided 'target language' and specific skills are emphasised over meaning and real-world uses of language.

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32. A one-size-fits-all curriculum does not reflect the diversity of needs, aims and circumstances faced by ESOL students.
33. Although we recognise the value of qualifications, for many people an over-emphasis on exam outcomes is restrictive and limits the freedom and flexibility of ESOL students and teachers. ESOL exams should have currency in wider society, have parity with other qualifications, and be rigorous in their assessment. Too often exams are used only for funding and monitoring purposes, and have little value in wider society.
34. The language classroom should be built on a participatory ethos. Students and teachers should collaborate in developing appropriate curricula. They should be encouraged to question and speak meaningfully, and to understand the issues that affect their lives and society in order to shape or change them.
35. Language education is about the whole person. It is about the capacity of everyone – teachers and students alike – to take charge of our lives individually and collectively, and to participate actively and critically in all aspects of our world, in the classroom as well as beyond.

Thanks to all those who have supported the Action for ESOL campaign, including ESOL practitioners, voluntary organisations, trade unions, refugee and migrant rights groups, MPs and others. But mostly, thanks to the students who have written letters, signed petitions, organised events, come to rallies, and explained patiently and powerfully why ESOL matters. You are inspirational.

For more information on Action for ESOL, including a list of supporters, go to our website:
actionforesol.org

