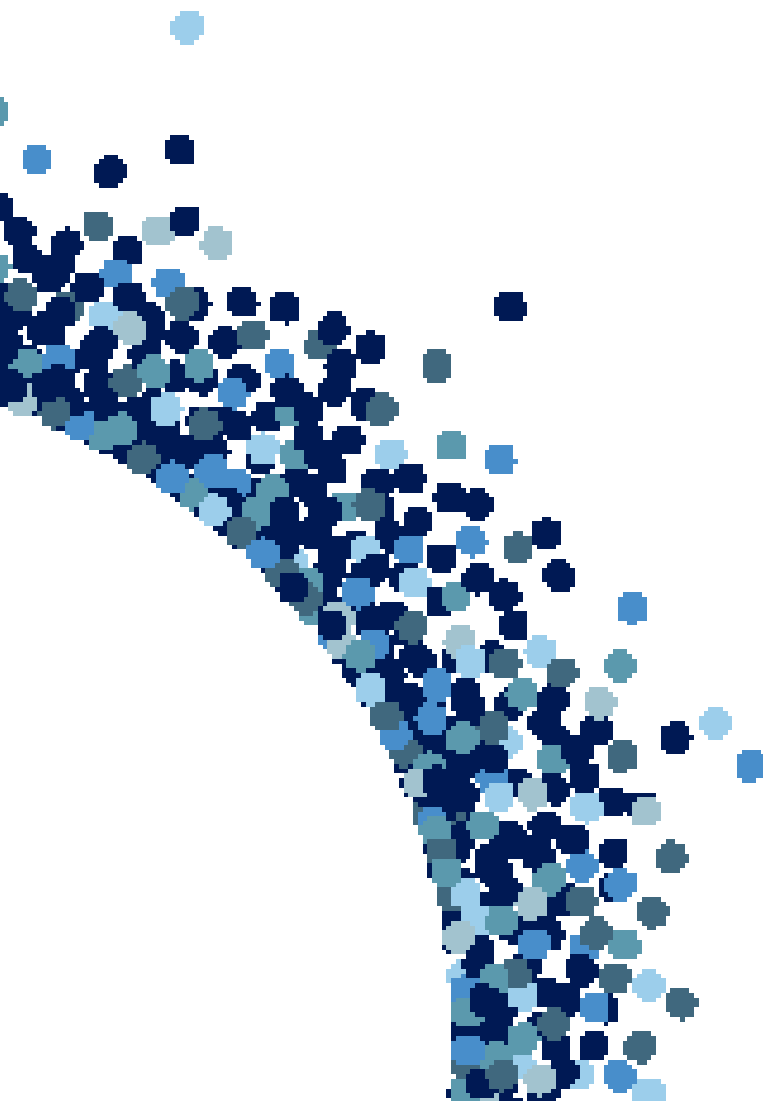




BRIEFING

English language use and proficiency of migrants in the UK



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PUBLISHED: 12/03/2024



This briefing examines data on how well different groups of migrants living in England and Wales speak English, and the relationship between English language proficiency and activity in the labour market.

Key Points

Both the UK public and migrants themselves consider good English language skills as important to migrants' integration.

A large majority (90%) of migrants living in England and Wales self-reported speaking English well or very well in the 2021 Census.

Use of English increases over time: in 2021, almost three-quarters of migrants who arrived in the UK at least 20 years earlier spoke English as their main language, compared to 35% of those who arrived within the previous two years.

Migrants who arrived in the UK as children were more likely to speak English as their main language, with nearly all speaking English well or very well in 2021.

People with limited English language abilities were less likely to be employed in 2021. Of those migrants with limited knowledge of English who were in work, a lower share were working in high-skill jobs.

Funded ESOL places fell during the 2010s, but recovered to just over 150,000 in the 2022/23 academic year, the highest in a decade.

Understanding the policy

English language requirements in immigration applications

Some visa and immigration applications require evidence that the person meets an English language requirement. For example, main applicants for Skilled Worker visas, undergraduate study applicants, and people applying for settlement or citizenship need at least intermediate English skills (level B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Some people automatically meet this requirement if they are from a country where the main language is English, while others must have received an eligible qualification.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) policy

ESOL courses aim to develop migrants' English listening, reading and writing skills, as well as their knowledge of English grammar. There are five levels of ESOL course, which can be grouped into three broad categories:

- Entry level courses, for migrants with a basic knowledge of the English language.
- Level 1 courses, which are equivalent to an English GCSE at grades 3 to 1 (or D to G). This level is for migrants who can speak and understand English when discussing familiar topics.
- Level 2 courses, aimed at migrants who can fluently express opinions and viewpoints in English. This level is equivalent to an English GCSE at grades 9 to 4 (or A* to C).

Adult skills policy is devolved to each regional government, as well as each of the English Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCA). This means that [funding arrangements](#) for ESOL courses differ across the UK. In England, courses are mainly funded through the Adult Education Budget (AEB), although no specific budget is set aside. Instead, the government or relevant MCA sets out criteria for who can receive free or reduced-cost provision, with actual spending shaped by these criteria and the demand for courses among learners.

In the 2023/24 academic year, courses were free in England for eligible learners aged 19 and over who had lived in the UK for three years or been granted leave to remain for humanitarian reasons. In practice, however, migrants often cannot enrol onto courses due to high demand. Eligibility is wider in some MCAs.

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 people who were born outside of the UK, 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](#).

This briefing relies primarily on data from the 2021 Census from England and Wales. These figures are significantly more accurate than survey-based estimates released between censuses, such as those from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Survey-based data are known to underestimate the migrant population, and their quality has declined over time, particularly since the pandemic. However, the Census data in this briefing do not include Scotland or Northern Ireland. The former has yet to release the results of its latest Census, and the latter asks questions that are similar but not directly comparable to those asked in the England and Wales Census.

The Census figures will not include non-EU citizens who arrived during the unusually high period of migration to the UK from mid-2021 to 2023.

Language variables in the 2021 Census

In the 2021 Census from England and Wales, respondents were asked about their main language and could either select English or write in another language. Respondents may interpret the concept of a ‘main language’ in different ways – some may have indicated the language they speak most often in daily life, whereas others may have interpreted the question as asking about their native language. Respondents who reported a main language other than English were also asked how well they can speak English, on a scale from “Very well” to “Not at all”. The England and Wales Census had a high response rate (97%), although it is likely that recently arrived migrants and people with limited English skills had lower response rates. The Office for National Statistics has adjusted the estimates to account for non-response.

English proficiency is widely regarded as important to integration in the UK

Speaking English is thought to play an important role in migrants’ well-being and integration. Language proficiency increases the range of jobs migrants can do, reducing the risk of being overqualified. It also makes it easier for people to develop social connections within the UK, understand their rights and avoid exploitation, access healthcare and other amenities, and participate in shared cultural institutions.

Qualitative research suggests that migrants themselves consider language important. For example, asylum seekers have previously [identified](#) limited language abilities as a barrier to accessing healthcare, and migrants with better language abilities have [reported](#) higher trust in neighbours and greater access to social support. In addition, the UK public views language abilities as an indicator of integration – migrants who speak English to their own children are perceived as more [integrated](#), and [support](#) for admitting asylum seekers into the UK has been found to increase when participants are told that asylum seekers will be required to partake in language courses.

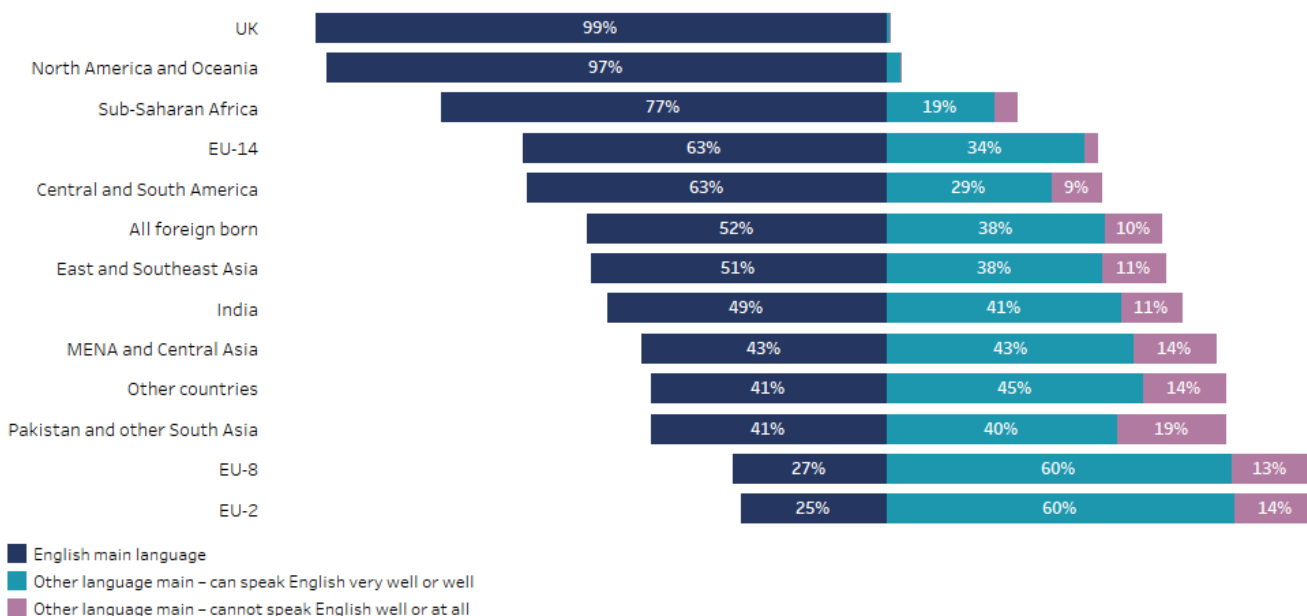
The majority of migrants living in England or Wales in 2021 reported speaking English well

In 2021, 90% (9 million) of migrants living in England or Wales self-reported speaking English without difficulty. Just over half (52%) spoke English as their main language, and a further 38% had another main language but spoke English well or very well (Figure 1). Only 1% of migrants said they could not speak English at all (142,000).

Figure 1

English language proficiency, by region of birth

2021; England and Wales



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the 2021 England and Wales Census.

Note: People who reported speaking English as their main language were not asked about their proficiency.



Although the proportion of migrants who spoke English as their main language varied considerably by region of birth, the proportion who spoke English well or very well was more consistent. For example, the share of people from North America and Oceania who reported speaking English as a main language was 72 percentage points higher than people from EU-2 countries, but the difference in the share that could speak English very well or well was 14 percentage points (Figure 1).

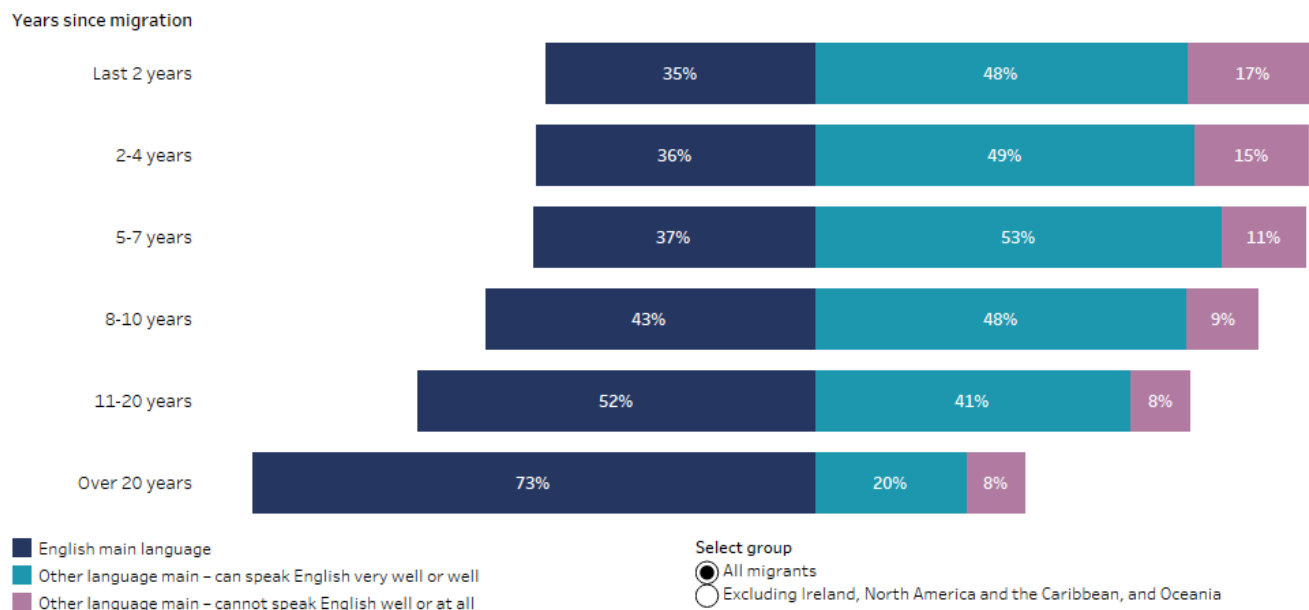
The share of migrants speaking English as a main language was higher among those who had lived in the UK for longer or had moved to the UK at a younger age

Migrants’ language abilities are expected to improve over time because they are exposed to the language spoken. In 2021, migrants who had lived in the UK for longer were more likely to speak English as their main language, and the share saying they had limited English language skills was lower: 8% of those who moved to the UK over 20 years ago could not speak English well or at all, compared to 17% of those who had arrived within the previous two years (Figure 2). The pattern is similar when migrants from predominantly English-speaking regions are excluded, indicating that this trend is unrelated to changes over time in the mix of countries from which people come to the UK.

Figure 2

English language proficiency, by years since migration to the UK

2021; England and Wales



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the 2021 England and Wales Census.

Note: People who reported speaking English as their main language were not asked about their proficiency.

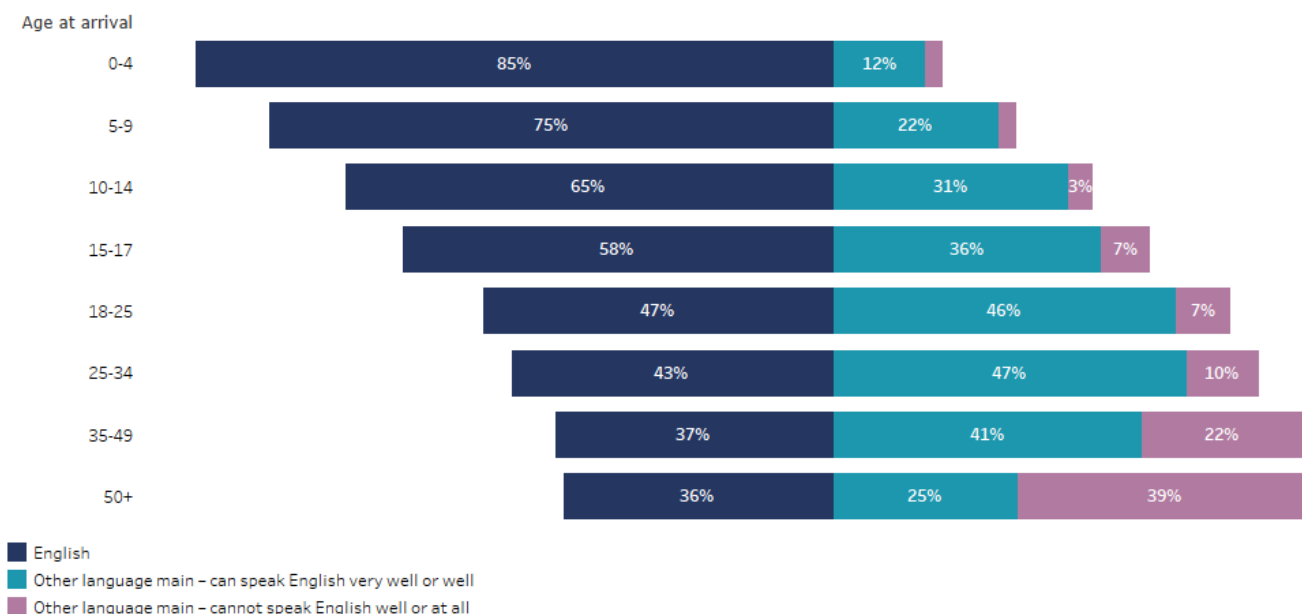


The age at migration is another critical factor in explaining how well migrants learn English because young children learn languages faster and with less effort than adults (Chiswick and Miller, 2001; Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003; Stevens, 1999). Migrants who moved to the UK before the age of 18 were more likely to report speaking English as a main language, while a higher share of those who moved later in life could not speak English well or at all (Figure 3).

Figure 3

English language proficiency, by age at migration to the UK

2021; England and Wales



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the 2021 England and Wales Census.

Note: People who reported speaking English as their main language were not asked about their proficiency.



The similarity between the language spoken where migrants were born and where they live is also an indicator of language skills (Isphording, 2015). For example, native German speakers would be expected to learn English more easily than native Chinese speakers, as the German language is closer to English in terms of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

People who could not speak English well or at all were less likely to be employed in 2021

The economic activity of migrants who reported speaking English as their main language was the same as that for those who had another main language but could speak English very well or well (Figure 4). In 2021, just under 70% of migrants who were proficient in English were either employed or self-employed, compared to 50% of those who could not speak English well or at all. A higher share of this last group were neither in nor looking for work, with looking after the home or family the most common reason.

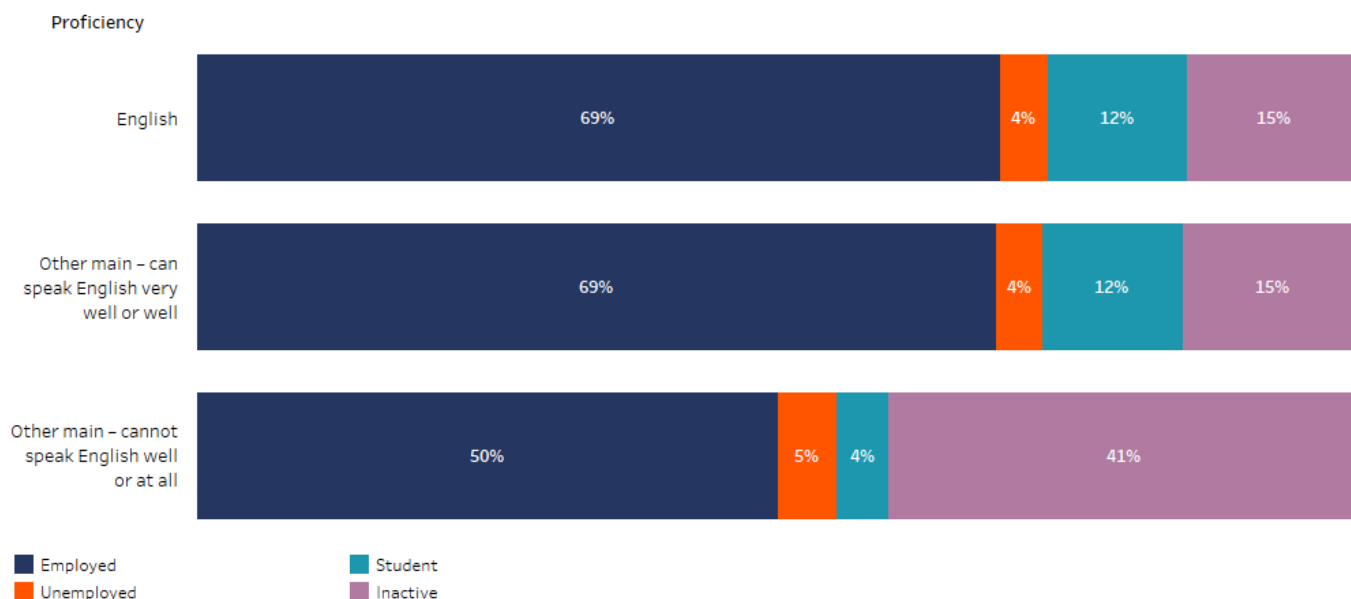
That migrants with good English language abilities are more likely to be employed is in line with [previous research](#), which found that, after accounting for other factors, such as education and age, fluency in English increased the employment probabilities of non-white migrants in the UK by about 22 percentage points.

Figure 4

Economic activity by English language proficiency, 2021

England and Wales; aged 16 to 64

Select view
 Broad
 Detailed



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the 2021 England and Wales Census.

Note: People who reported speaking English as their main language were not asked about their proficiency. Figures include both employees and self-employed. Some full-time students are in or are seeking employment.



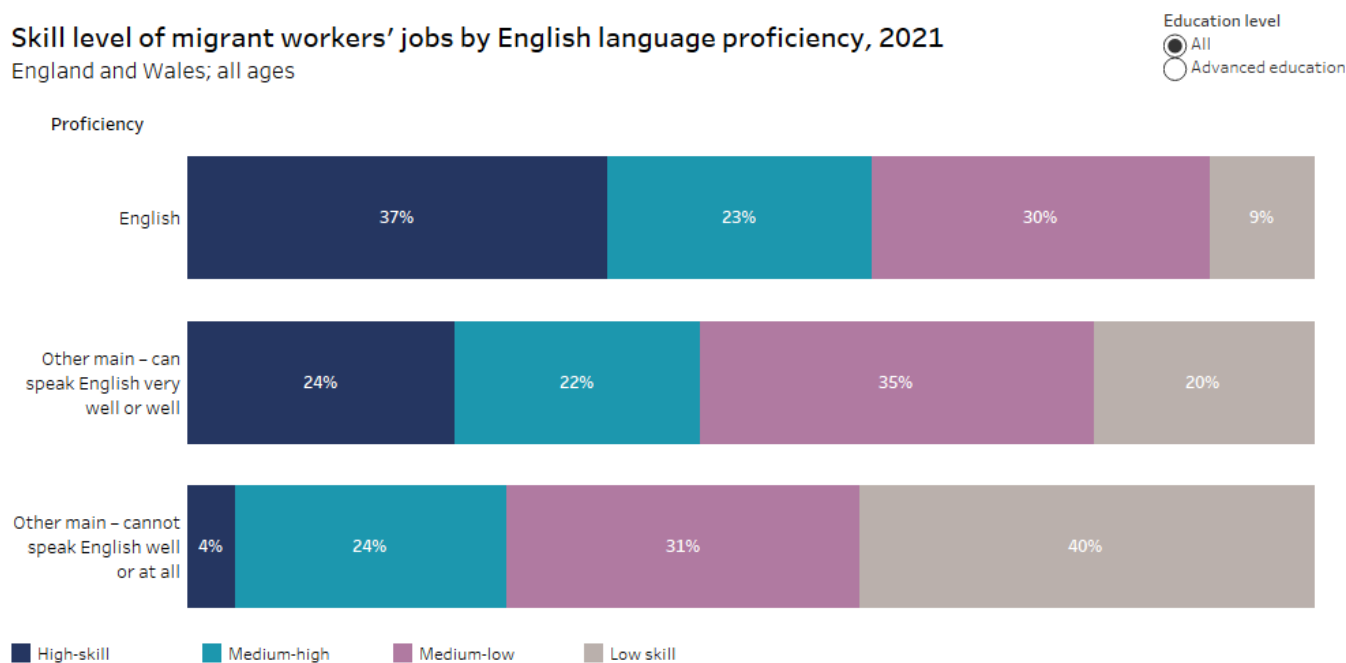
In addition to having higher employment rates, migrants with good English language skills tend to work in jobs requiring a higher level of skills (Figure 5). For example, 9% of migrants who spoke English as a main language worked in low-skill roles in 2021, compared to 40% of migrants who could not speak English well or at all. This difference cannot be explained solely by differences in education levels between groups. When looking at migrants with an advanced level of education, defined as holding a qualification equivalent to the first year of an undergraduate degree, a third of migrants who could not speak English well or at all worked in low-skill roles.

Migrants with high levels of education are more likely to “downgrade” and work in low-skill roles when they have limited language abilities (Becker and Fetzer, 2018; Peri and Sparber, 2009). This is because their skills profile does not match jobs that involve communication skills, such as marketing professionals and solicitors. Instead, they tend to fill roles that involve more manual and physical skills, such as cleaners and construction operatives.

Figure 5

Skill level of migrant workers' jobs by English language proficiency, 2021

England and Wales; all ages



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the 2021 England and Wales Census.

Note: People who reported speaking English as their main language were not asked about their proficiency. Job skill levels are based on the four-category classification developed by the ONS. In this context, job skills mainly indicate the educational credentials that are required to perform a job and do not consider other types of personal skills that are valued in the labour market. Figures include both employees and self-employed.



Around 150,000 ESOL places were funded in England in 2022/23, the highest number in a decade

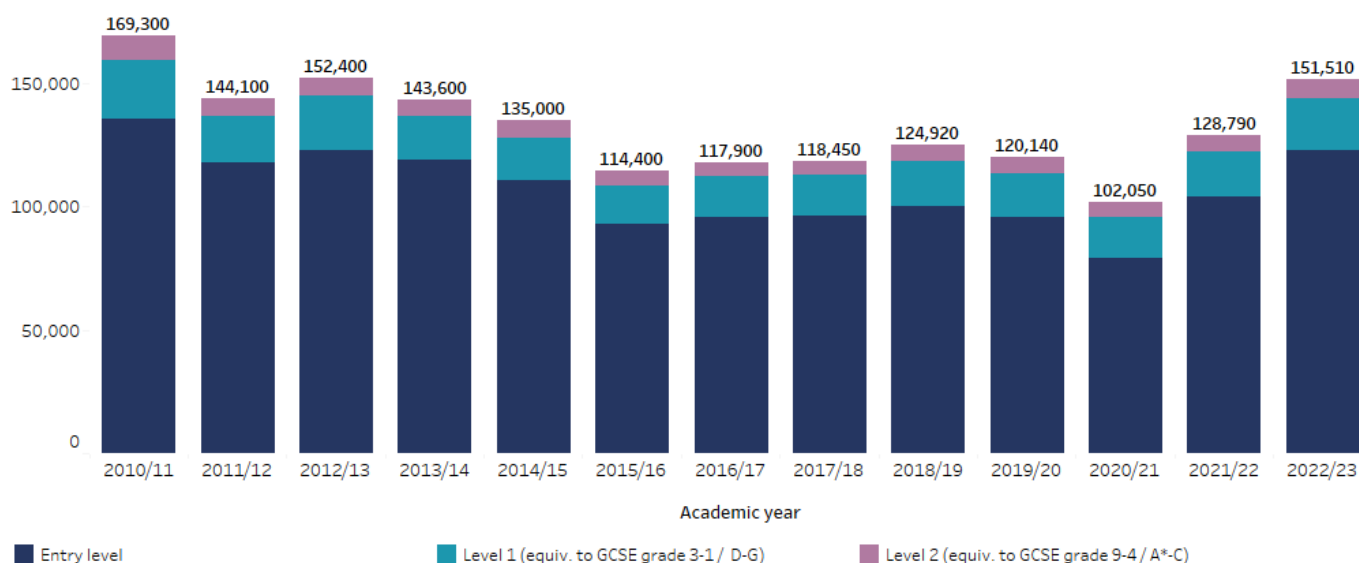
Certain migrants with limited English language skills can enrol onto *English for Speakers of Other Languages* (ESOL) courses, which aim to improve English speaking, reading and writing abilities. In the 2022/23 academic year, a little over 150,000 places were funded in England, the highest level since 2012/13 (Figure 6).

A 2023 [survey](#) of ESOL course providers suggested the increase in funded places was due to higher demand, including from Afghan and Ukrainian citizens. Usually, migrants must have lived in the UK for three years to be eligible for ESOL funding, but people on these humanitarian routes are eligible from arrival. Another possible explanation is the transfer of control over the Adult Education Budget to Mayoral Combined Authorities in 2019. In London, for example, the government [increased](#) ESOL funding and [widened](#) the eligibility criteria following the transfer.

Figure 6

Number of funded English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) places by course level, 2010/11 to 2022/23

England only; Participants aged 19 and over



Source: Department of Education Further Education and Skills data. For 2010/11 to 2016/17: March 2019 release, Table 6.1; and for 2017/18 to 2022/23: November 2023 release, Table Basic Skills Series 2022-23 Q4.

Note: A small number of people participate on more than one ESOL course in a given year.



Just over 80% of funded ESOL places in 2022/23 were for entry-level courses that teach basic English skills. Across all levels, the top locations were London (52,410), Birmingham (6,180), and Leeds (3,250).

Evidence gaps and limitations

Data on language use and proficiency in the UK have important limitations. In the 2021 Census, respondents were only asked for a single ‘main’ language. This may have posed 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. Respondents are not asked about their main language in specific contexts, including at work or in their social life, which are important dimensions to consider when examining language use.

In addition, only those respondents who reported having a main language other than English were asked about their proficiency in English. This is a limitation because it assumes people whose main language is English – most of whom are not migrants – have no problems with language. However, the most recent [statistics](#) available from 2012 indicate that five million working-age adults in England had literacy skills at or below the government’s Level 1 measure.

English language skills in the Census are self-reported, rather than being based on any kind of objective test. As a result, respondents with equivalent English language abilities may differ in their perception of how well they speak English. For example, a respondent who works in a place where most co-workers speak a language other than English may view their language skills more favourably than a respondent where the primary language at their workplace is English.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to **Jacqueline Broadhead** and **Carlos Vargas-Silva** for comments on an earlier version of this briefing.

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Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



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Recommended citation

Fernández-Reino, M. & Brindle, B. (2024) *English language use and proficiency of migrants in the UK*. Migration Observatory briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford

