

How long it takes to learn English while learning the curriculum

June 2025

This research summary describes an Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) research project that explored how long it takes Australian students learning English as an additional language (EAL) to develop the English language skills necessary to participate equitably in curriculum learning. It outlines the key findings, context and implications of the research, and the data and methods used. The full findings are presented in our research report, [How Long it Takes to Learn English While Learning the Curriculum: New Evidence From 110,000 English as an Additional Language Students in New South Wales Public Schools Over 9 years](#).

1. Key findings

How long it takes EAL students in New South Wales public schools to develop the English language skills to equitably participate in curriculum learning

This research found that the time it takes EAL students to learn English to a level where they can participate in curriculum learning at the same level as their non-EAL peers varies but, generally, is considerable. Specifically, students starting in NSW public schools with Beginning levels of English, can, on average, expect to equitably participate in curriculum learning after at least 6 years of schooling. This finding aligns with international research that indicates that it takes approximately 5 to 7 years to learn English from beginner levels. In New South Wales, this means that EAL students starting school at the Beginning phase of English will need English language support throughout primary school. For Beginning English phase students starting in later years, continued English language support into secondary school is also necessary. Students starting school at the Emerging and Developing phases take 4 years and 3 years, respectively, on average, to develop the English language skills for equitable participation in curriculum learning. [Figure 1](#) summarises these key findings.

Figure 1: How long it takes, on average, for students at different starting phases of ACARA's EAL/D Learning Progression to learn English while learning the curriculum



Source: NSW EAL/D Annual Survey 2014 to 2022 and NSW DoE National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy 2014 to 2022.

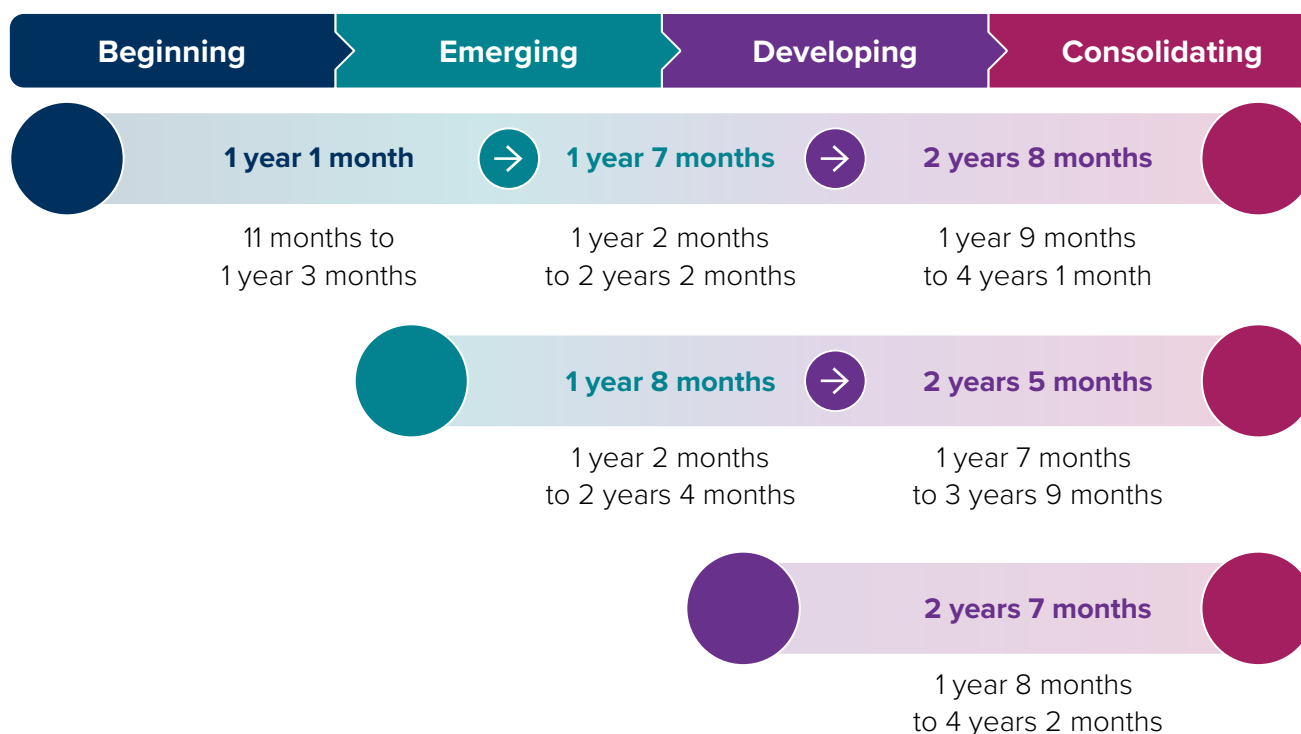
This research also confirms the importance of English proficiency to students' academic achievement. It shows that a student with a typical demographic profile at the Developing phase will take 36% less time to equitably access the curriculum than those at the Beginning phase; and those at the Emerging phase 18% less time than Beginners. Those with Consolidating levels of English likely have the skills to equitably participate in curriculum learning, but still require targeted support with the academic language and cultural demands of tasks so that they can fully access learning and demonstrate success.

Time required by EAL students in New South Wales public schools to progress through the phases of English language development

The research found that, as students progressed along the English language proficiency continuum, each successive phase took longer to achieve than the phase before. For students starting school between Kindergarten and Year 9, the time for half of the EAL students to progress from the:

- Beginning to Emerging phase was 1 year and 1 month
- Emerging to Developing phase was about 1 year and 8 months
- Developing to Consolidating phase (or higher) was about 2 years and 7 months.

Additionally, as [Figure 2](#) shows, the typical time it took students to progress through the phases (Beginning, Developing, Emerging and Consolidating) varied. For example, depending on their starting phase, the fastest 25% and 75% progressed from the Developing to Consolidating phase (or higher) about a year faster and over a year slower than the median speed.

Figure 2: Findings about progress through the phases of ACARA's EAL/D Learning Progression

Source: NSW EAL/D Annual Survey 2014 to 2022.

Note: Horizontal bars show the times taken by the fastest 50% of typical students to reach the next phase. The times beneath are estimates for how long it takes the fastest 25% and 75% of typical students to reach the next phase.

Impact of demographic characteristics of students in New South Wales public schools on their language progress

Learning English is a complex process that may be impacted by a wide range of factors. The factors identified in this research as being significant predictors of the time students in New South Wales public schools take to learn English included:

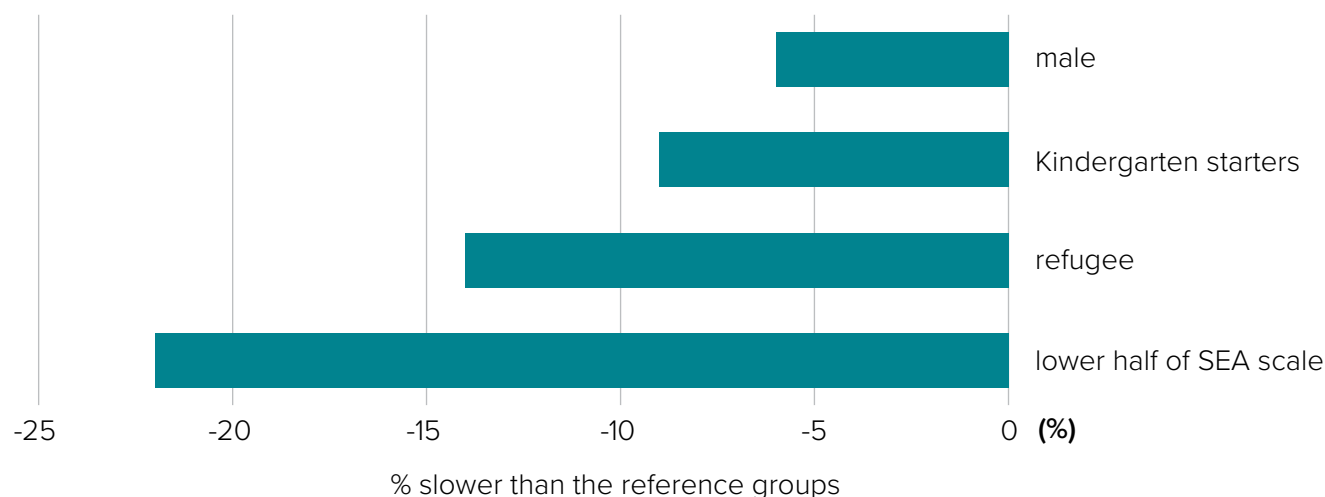
- socio-educational disadvantage
- refugee experience
- gender
- the year level they started school in New South Wales.

As [Figure 3](#) shows, students:

- in the lower half of the socio-educational advantage scale progressed 22% slower than those in the higher half
- with refugee experiences progressed 14% slower than those without.

Males took 6% longer than females (the 2 gender categories in the dataset). Kindergarten starters were 5% to 15% slower to develop the language skills to equitably participate in curriculum learning than those starting school in New South Wales public schools at higher primary year levels (on average 9% slower).

Figure 3: Impact of demographic factors on progression speed



Source: NSW EAL/D Annual Survey 2014 to 2022.

Reference groups: male ref: female, Kindergarten ref: other primary years, refugee ref: non-refugee, lower half of SEA scale ref: upper half of SEA scale.

It's important to note that some students may have more than one of these characteristics, which interact with each other to impact how long it takes to learn English as an additional language at school. Further research into this phenomenon and how other factors, such as teaching practice and individual differences, impact language learning is required.

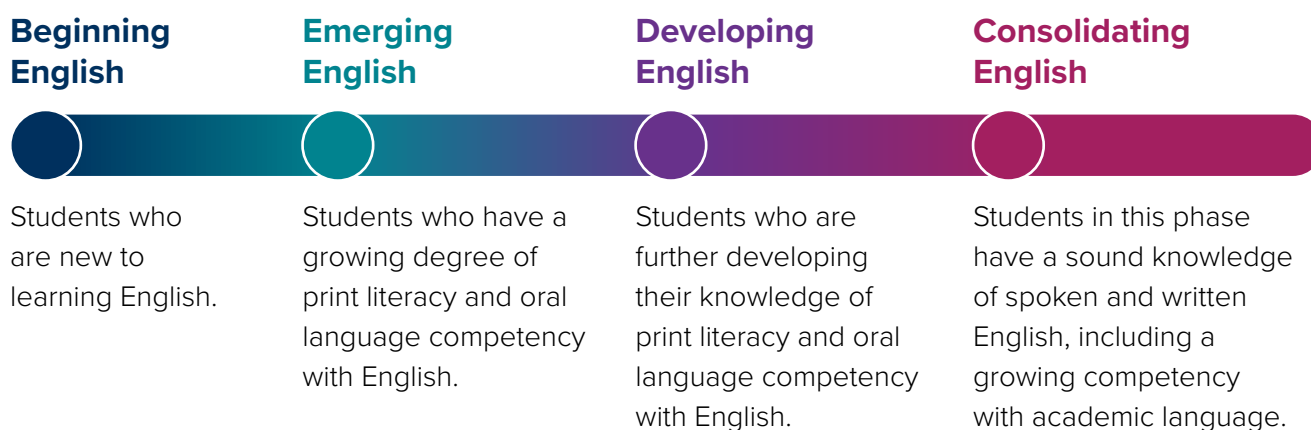
2. Context and implications

Approximately 30% of students in Australian schools are from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE). Some LBOTE students speak English as their first language and don't need English language support, while others (about 25% of the student population [Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), n.d.]) are learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). These students face the challenging task of learning English while, at the same time, learning the curriculum through English. As such, EAL/D students need 'targeted, systematic and explicit instruction based on their language needs and prior learning' (ACARA, n.d.). English language proficiency is important for participating in all parts of curriculum learning. Without appropriate instruction and support, EAL/D students are at risk of academic underachievement and plateaus in their English language and literacy skills (Australian Council of TESOL Associations, 2022).

Historically, there has been limited evidence regarding the length of time required for EAL/D students in Australian schools to develop the level of English necessary to participate in curriculum learning.

While considerable research into how long it takes students to learn English has been done overseas over the past 40 years, little has been done in Australia. The aim of this project was to contribute evidence of how long it takes Australian students to develop the level of English needed to participate in curriculum learning. This aim included describing students' progress through the phases of English language development outlined in ACARA's EAL/D Learning Progression: Foundation to Year 10 (ACARA, 2015). Figure 4 illustrates the order and nature of these phases.

Figure 4: Phases of English language learning – EAL/D Learning Progression: Foundation to Year 10



Source: EAL/D Learning Progression: Foundation to Year 10 (ACARA, 2015).

This research has important implications for understanding the support needed for EAL students in schools. These implications include:

- the length and continuity of language and literacy support
- teacher and school expectations for EAL student learning
- allocation of EAL resources in response to students' needs.

In the study, students who had English beyond the Beginner stage – who could be considered bilingual – did well in terms of academic progress. This points to a need to support and value first language for all students. The research also has implications for the:

- identification of EAL students as a national priority equity group
- assessment and reporting of EAL students' learning
- professional support available for teachers working with EAL students.

Addressing these implications will ensure Australian EAL/D students receive targeted, systematic and explicit instruction based on their language needs and prior learning (ACARA, n.d.) so that they can fully access learning and demonstrate success.

3. Data sources and methods

Research into how long it takes to learn English is methodologically complex. We achieved the aim of this project by using longitudinal and comprehensive data provided by the NSW Department of Education (DoE) – Australia’s largest education system (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023) and one with a high proportion of LBOTE students (NSW DoE, 2024). The data provided by NSW DoE included National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results from students in New South Wales public schools from 2014 to 2022 and NSW DoE’s EAL/D Annual Survey over the same period.

Over 110,000 EAL students in New South Wales public schools across primary and secondary years who met the inclusion criteria were included in this research. First Nations students who are learning English as an additional dialect weren’t included in the research due to uncertainty about the completeness of data for First Nations EAL/D students, the differences in experiences compared to EAL students who migrate to Australia, and principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty, which indicate that research on First Nations students should be led by First Nations researchers in consultation with First Nations communities.

Table 1 provides an overview of the data sources and methods of analysis. In short, Part 1 compared NAPLAN results from matched English as an additional language (EAL) and non-EAL student groups to determine when EAL students achieved the same results as non-EAL students. Part 2 estimated the time EAL students took to progress to the Consolidating phase (or higher), the time they took to progress through the phases of the Learning Progression, and how long it took EAL students with certain characteristics to progress to Consolidating phase (or higher) compared to students without the characteristics.

Table 1: Overview of data sources and methods

Data collection and analysis	Part 1 analysis	Part 2 analysis
Data sources	NAPLAN data from 2014 to 2022, for both EAL and non-EAL students	EAL/D Annual Survey data from 2014 to 2022, for EAL students only
Measures	Student-level scale score on 2 NAPLAN domains – reading and writing	Teacher judgement of an overall phase for each student, based on student proficiency across 4 language modes in the national EAL/D Learning Progression: listening, speaking, reading/viewing and writing
Method	Propensity score matching and repeated measures analysis of variance with tests for simple effects	Survival analysis using accelerated failure time model
Analysis outcome	Time taken to achieve parity in NAPLAN reading and writing scores	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Time to progress to Consolidating phase (or higher)• Time to progress from one phase to the next• Time ratios for subgroups

4. References

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2023). *Schools: Data on government and non-government students, staff and schools*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>

Australian Council of TESOL Associations. (2022). *National roadmap for English as an additional language or dialect education in schools. Directions for COVID-19 recovery and program reform*. <https://tesol.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Roadmap-for-English-as-an-additional-language-or-dialect-in-schools-ACTA-May-2022.pdf>

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (n.d.). *Meeting the needs of students for whom English is an additional language or dialect*. Retrieved 15 June 2023, from <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources/student-diversity/meeting-the-needs-of-students-for-whom-english-is-an-additional-language-or-dialect/>

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