

Media release

How long it takes to learn English

Embargoed until 17 June 2025

New large-scale Australian study shows school students learning English need long-term support

A groundbreaking new study has laid bare the challenge students from non-English speaking backgrounds face in Australian classrooms, revealing it can take multiple years to learn the language to the level required to do well at school.

Analysis of longitudinal data collected from more than 110,000 students learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) revealed that those starting school with beginning levels of English took at least six years to become proficient to the level where they could participate fully in the school curriculum.

Students starting school with more developed English language skills still required three years to catch up to their English-speaking classmates.

Dr Jenny Donovan, CEO of the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), said this study highlighted the diverse needs within Australian classrooms, where a quarter of students, on average, could be learning English as an additional language.

“We know from NAPLAN data that students from diverse language backgrounds can thrive in Australia’s education system and, in many cases, outperform students from English-speaking backgrounds,” Dr Donovan said.

“However, for those learning English, further support is needed.

“This research provides valuable insights that support teachers and school leaders to understand the needs of EAL/D students, develop realistic expectations of their progress, and plan for providing targeted, explicit instruction for them to learn English so they can successfully participate in the school curriculum.”

AERO’s research also identified how various background factors and life experiences influence language development. It found that students facing socio-educational disadvantage, on average, took 22 per cent longer than advantaged students to learn English, and students from refugee backgrounds took 14 per cent longer than non-refugee students.

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.

The study drew on nine years of data from 110,000 NSW public school students.

AERO's Senior Manager of Analytics and Strategic Projects and the report's lead author, Dr Lucy Lu, said the findings indicated that once EAL/D students reached parity with their monolingual peers, they generally continued on a faster learning trajectory.

"This suggests that a bi- or multi-lingual experience can be of benefit in developing an explicit understanding of language structures," Dr Lu said.

"This linguistic flexibility represents a strength that, when properly supported, contributes to academic achievement and enriches the educational environment for all students."

Approximately 30 per cent of Australian students come from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE), and about 25 per cent are actively learning English as an additional language.

Dr Donovan said the distinction was important as "not all LBOTE students require intensive language support – many are already proficient English users."

"However, even students at the more advanced consolidating level may still require ongoing English language support," she said.

"Those with consolidating levels of English likely have the skills to equitably participate in curriculum learning but may still need targeted assistance with academic language and the cultural demands of tasks to fully access learning and demonstrate success."

Dr Donovan said AERO would continue to explore language acquisition in schools in a second phase of analysis, including for First Nations students, many of whom were learning English as an additional language.

The report, '*How long it takes to learn English while learning the curriculum*' is available on AERO's website:

- [Report summary](#)

For AERO media inquiries, please contact Rebecca Urban:

M: 0411 790 304

E: media@edresearch.edu.au

About Us

AERO is Australia's independent education evidence body, established in 2021 and funded by the Commonwealth, state, and territory governments.

Our vision is to achieve excellence and equity in education outcomes for all children and young people through the effective use of evidence. AERO's role is to generate high-quality evidence, make it accessible, and encourage the adoption and effective implementation of evidence into practice and policy.