How long it takes to learn English while learning the curriculum

New evidence from 110,000 EAL students in NSW public schools over 9 years

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Acknowledgement of Country

AERO acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands, waterways, skies, islands and sea Country across Australia. We pay our deepest respects to First Nations cultures and Elders past and present. We endeavour to continually value and learn from First Nations knowledges and educational practices.

Artwork: Shaun Edwards, Wildbarra Co.
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Background and aim of the research

Students who speak English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D)

EAL/D students make up about 25% of the student population

EAL/D students:

- must learn English at the same time as learning curriculum through English
- need targeted, systematic and explicit language instruction (ACARA n.d.)
- are at-risk of academic underachievement and plateauing of English language and literacy skills without adequate support (ACTA 2022).

Project Aim

To investigate the length of time it takes EAL/D students to develop the English language skills to equitably participate in curriculum learning.

Phases of English language learning

EAL/D Learning Progression: Foundation to Year 10

Beginning English

Students who are new to learning English.

Emerging English

Students who have a growing degree of print literacy and oral language competency with English.

Developing English

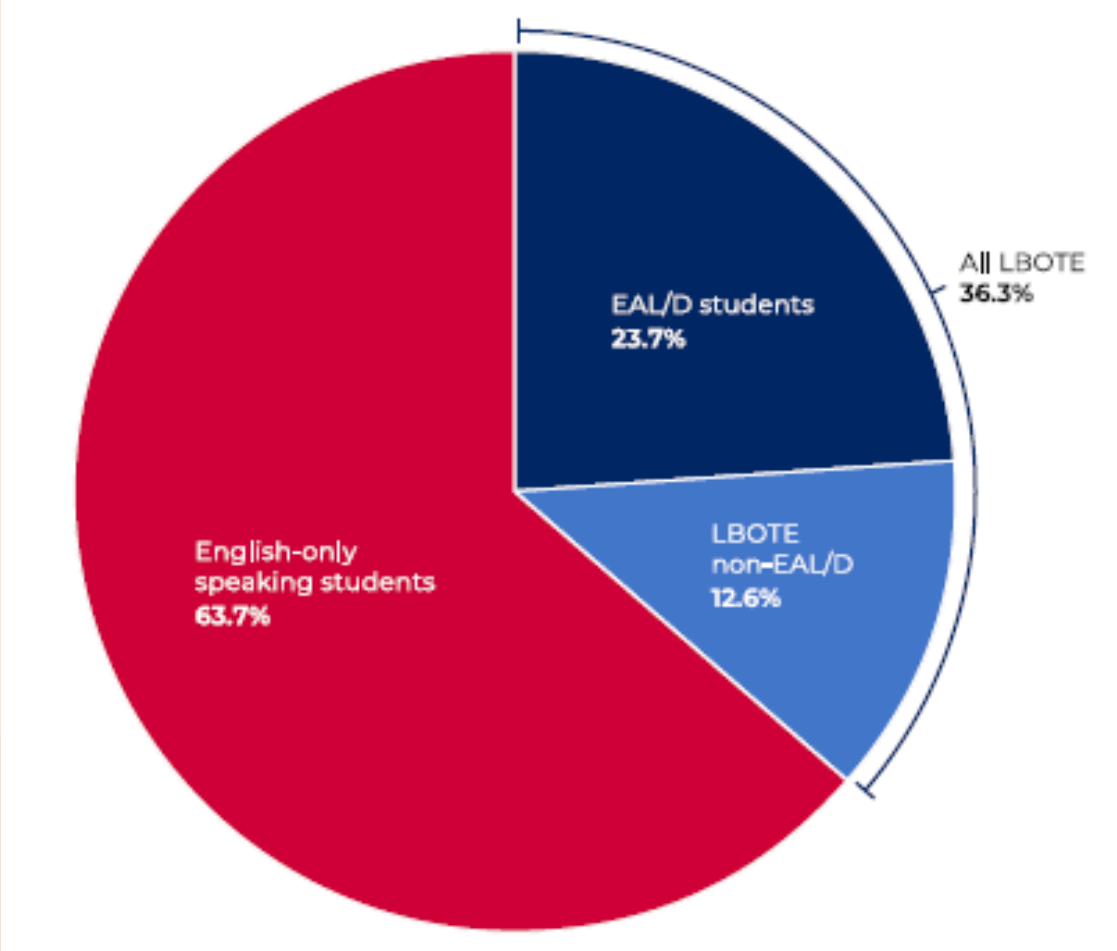
Students who are further developing their knowledge of print literacy and oral language competency with English.

Consolidating English

Students in this phase have a sound knowledge of spoken and written English, including a growing competency with academic language but require targeted support with academic language and cultural knowledge.

Context: New South Wales public schools

Source: istockphoto.com



Source: Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2021, p.7

Research approach

Research into ‘how long’ is methodologically complex but made possible by longitudinal and comprehensive data from NSW government schools.

Primary data sources:

1. Linked NAPLAN results for Reading and Writing in NSW government schools
2. Teachers’ judgements of EAL students’ English language proficiency phase from NSW Department’s EAL/D Annual Survey

Analysis techniques

- Part 1: Propensity Scoring matching and Repeated measures ANOVA
- Part 2: Survival analysis

NSW public school students

primary and secondary years

2014 – 2022

Not included:

First Nations EAL/D students

Findings

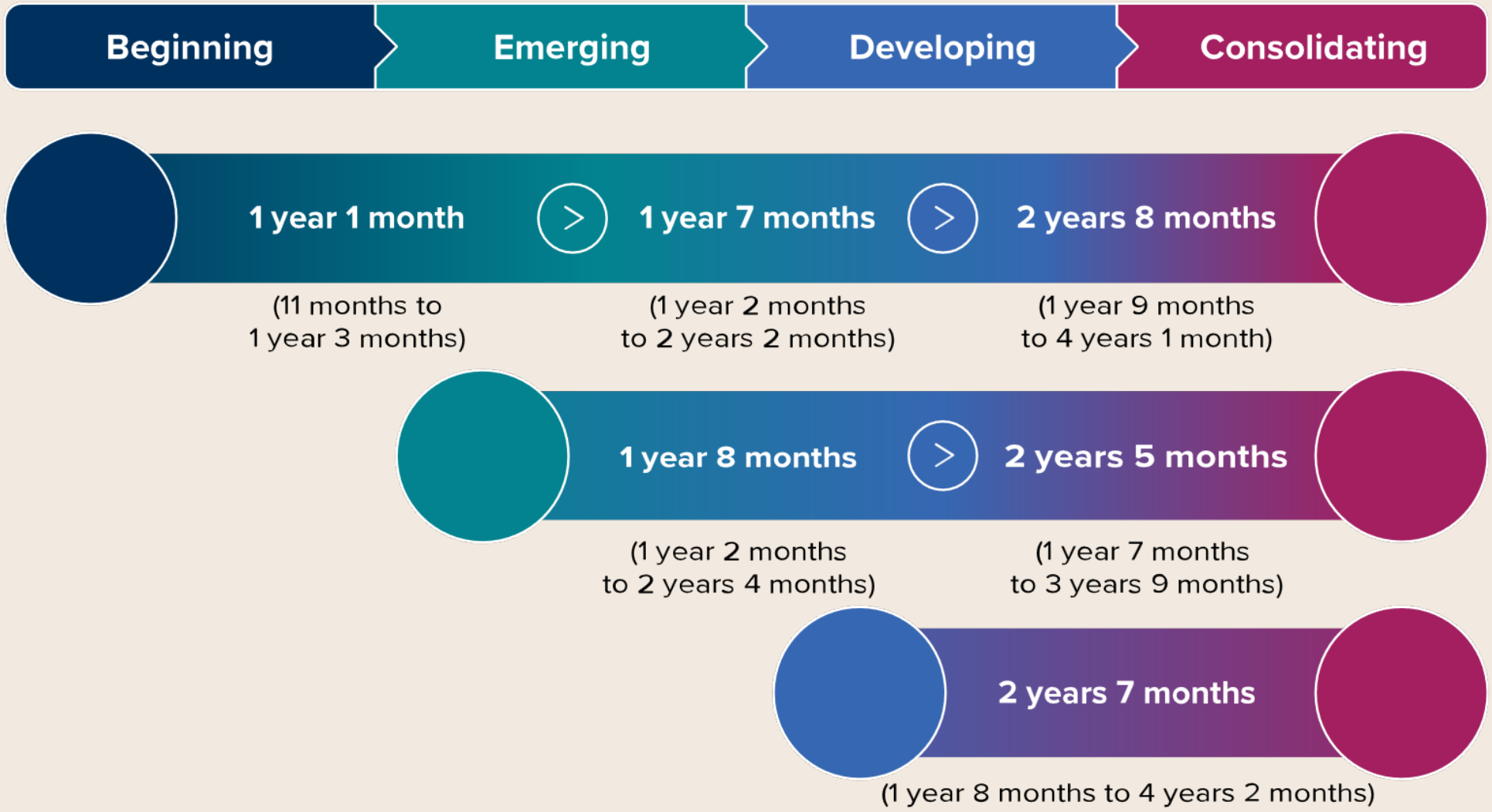
How long it takes EAL students in NSW public schools to participate equitably in curriculum learning

When students commence school, and they are assessed at the:

- Beginning phase – on average, it takes at least 6 years of schooling.
- Emerging phase – on average, it takes 4 years of schooling.
- Developing phase – on average, it takes 3 years of schooling.
- Consolidating phase – on average, students most likely have the skills to equitably participate in curriculum learning.

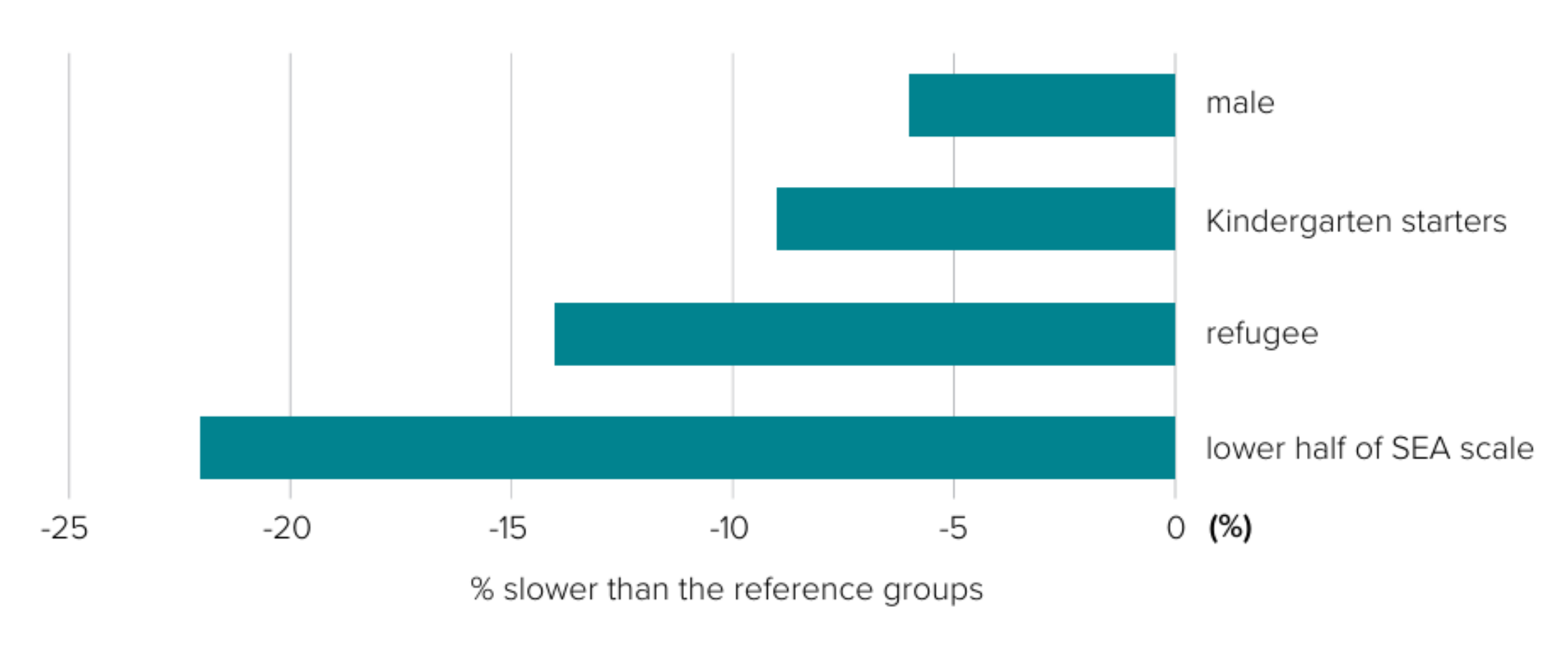
Findings

How long it takes to progress through phases



Findings

The impact of demographic characteristics of students on their language learning progress



Implications

Resourcing and support for EAL students in schools

- Reflect the typical time it takes
- Be consistently supported according to best practices
- Provision of support to EAL students in their first formal year of schooling

Advantage of being bilingual

- Encourage use of first and other languages

Image credit: AERO

Image credit: AERO

Implications

Knowledge of individual students

- Have access to information about students

Knowledge about language learning

- Understand the process of language development
- Know how to plan and implement programs that support their EAL students

Implications

Visibility of EAL/D students

- Raise the profile and visibility of this group
- Priority equity cohort

Consistent measurement, assessment and reporting

- For system policy and equity
- To monitor individual student progress

Image credit: AERO

Where to go for more...

edresearch.edu.au/research/projects/learning-english-while-learning-curriculum

Reports:

- Research report
- Additional results
- Research summary

Journal articles:

- Lu, Hammond, Groves and Wan, 2025 **The 'how long' question: language learning trajectories of EAL learners in NSW schools.** *AJLL* **49**, 141–159 (2026). https://doi.org/10.1007/s44020-025-00097-7
- Lu, Hammond, Groves and Wan, 2026. **The 'how long' question: EAL students' progression through phases of English language development in Australian schools**. *AJLL*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44020-026-00124-1

Watch:

- Webinar recording 28 Aug 2025

Media:

- Article in The Conversation 17 June 2025

Listen:

- SBS Mandarin Radio interview with Dr Lucy Lu

Thank you!

Please reach out if you have any questions or feedback.

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