English as an additional language pupils: how long does it take to acquire English fluency
Demie, F. (2013) Language and Education

A UK Local Authority (LA) collected annual data to show the linguistic progress made by pupils learning English as an Additional Language (EAL). Using data for pupils in Years 6-11, researchers tracked back year on year to determine how long it had taken each pupil to become fluent in English.

4 stage criteria used across the LA to assess pupil progress

Stage 1
Beginner
Need support to operate in English

Stage 2
Familiar with English
Engage with all class activities orally; literacy skills need support

Stage 3
Confident
Engage through oral and written English; need support with more subtle aspects of language in the

Stage 4
Fluent
English proficient enough not to require additional support

What the study found was that...
...despite the good progress of its EAL learners, pupils in the authority still took, on average, 6 years to become fluent and catch up with monolingual peers.

Time spent reaching the levels also varied:

Stage 1
Beginner
1.5 year to acquire beginner level

Stage 2
Familiar with English
2 further years to acquire familiar level

Stage 3
Confident
2.5 years more to reach confident level

Stage 4
Fluent
Overall, fluency took 5-7 years

The research strongly suggests:
Pupils in the LA from an African Commonwealth background (French, Yoruba, Somali, Akan, plus Polish) achieved fluency up to a year earlier than pupils from other countries (Turkish, Lingala, Spanish, Bengali, Portuguese).

Conclusion: Implications for Schools
School leaders need to take a long-term, strategic view of EAL and set long-term expectations around the learning and support for EAL pupils.