



Examining Teacher Opinions of Age and Duration of English Language Support in International Schools

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Abstract

International school educators hold various opinions about language acquisition. These opinions are often formed during their training and previous teaching experiences in their home countries. This quantitative cross-sectional survey-based study explored and compared the opinions of 283 English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Primary, and Secondary English teachers in international schools in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America. The study examined the age EFL students should begin receiving EFL teacher support and for how long. The study revealed statistically significant differences between EFL and Primary teachers concerning the age for EFL students to begin receiving support from an EFL teacher. Further revealed were significant differences between EFL and Secondary English teachers concerning the duration of EFL support. Overall, participants' opinions about the duration of EFL support are well below previously reported data, which is troubling since EFL students in English-medium international schools are learning English for academic purposes.

Keywords:

EFL Support, English-medium, International Schools

INTRODUCTION

As the international school market continues to expand in non-native English-speaking countries, the number of local students attending English-medium international schools increases, and many local students enter English-medium international schools with little

to no English language ability. Two of the more common reasons parents enroll their child(ren) in an international school are to prepare them to study in a western university and improve their prospects for future employment (Sears, 2015). Although there are differences, such as geographical location and socio-economic level, between English as a foreign language (EFL) students in international schools and English as a second or additional language learners in public schools in western countries, EFL students in international schools demonstrate similar abilities as their counterparts in western countries (Sears, 1998).

This research study was undertaken due to the researcher's observations and experiences as an EFL specialist teacher and EFL Coordinator at English-medium international schools in East Asia. During this time, the researcher witnessed numerous occasions when practice was not aligned to what is considered best practice based on research findings by researchers who have dedicated time and energy to studying language acquisition. The researcher observed how the personal opinions of school staff and lack of knowledge or access to empirical data, usually provided during language-specific professional development (Lehman, 2021a), may and often did lead to less than desired outcomes for many EFL students. Ultimately, the problems with English language acquisition that many EFL students face in international schools stem from the very people the parents have entrusted to work with their child. Too often, these parents assume the school has their child's best interest at heart (Carder, 2011; Lehman, 2020).

In native-English speaking countries, teachers are generally accustomed to seeing students enter kindergarten in public schools to begin their formal education, usually in an all-English environment. Except for foundation-aged students, most students entering an English-medium international school will have received schooling in their native tongue. Therefore, the questions at hand are how quickly these students will make the linguistic transition to an English-medium environment and when they need to begin receiving specialized instruction from an EFL teacher – if it is needed at all – and for how long.

For this study, the term EFL teacher is used for teachers who work with students learning English as a foreign language. For example, English as a second language (ESL) and English as an additional language (EAL) teachers are designated as EFL teachers. The term Primary teacher is used for foundation, early years, and primary/elementary teachers. Lastly, the term English teacher is used to represent secondary English teachers who are English Language Arts teachers, not teachers working with English language acquisition, as the primary purpose of their position.

LITERAURE REVIEW

English as a Foreign Language Study

As the number of local students enrolling in English-medium international schools increases, many of those students will at some point require English language support. Although some researchers, academics, and educators posit that all teachers in English-medium international schools are teachers of the English language, this is not necessarily embraced by all staff in international schools. Additionally, there are often lines of

division between EFL teachers and other teachers, including Secondary English teachers (Carder, 2013; Creese, 2005).

One particular line of division stems from how a sizeable number of teachers serving as EFL teachers in international schools often do not have the specialized training needed for working with EFLs in the various stages, from the foundation and kindergarten years through secondary. In a study focusing on resources provided to EFLs in international schools conducted by Lehman (2021b), only 21 (4.3%) of 489 participants who were teachers and administrators working in international schools in East Asia revealed that a Master's Degree or above in TESOL/ESL/Linguistics was a minimum requirement to be an EFL teacher in their particular school. Of the 489 participants, 169 (34.6%) revealed that an Education Degree or a PGCE was the minimum requirement; 143 (29.2%) answered a university degree and TEFL certificate; 113 (23.1%) answered a university degree; 26 (5.3%) answered a TEFL certificate and no degree; 17 (3.5%) answered that EFL teachers did not need to have any professional qualifications (Lehman, 2021b). EFL teachers in international schools should be required to have specialized training and qualifications for working with EFL students, and international schools should hire qualified personnel to work with EFL students. As Carder (2013) exhorted, "a one-off six week course will not suffice" (p. 15).

There are many misconceptions amongst EFL, Primary, and Secondary teachers concerning second language acquisition. According to Harper and De Jong (2004), educators often have the misconception that exposure to and interaction with the target language is sufficient for students learning English to acquire English language ability. All too frequently, administrators and teachers assume that younger non-native English speaking students learning English will absorb the language and be competent users of English very quickly, especially when placed in an English-only environment (Cummins, 2014). While EFL students in international schools demonstrate similar abilities as their counterparts in western countries (Sears, 1998), not all non-native English-speaking students learn English similarly and at a similar rate (Harper & De Jong, 2004). A critical question that international schools must address is at what age should students whose mother tongue is not English begin receiving English language support from an EFL teacher

Normally, literacy development begins in the early years of life, and many researchers and educators urge literacy interventions in the early years of development. According to Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006), children who have limited exposure to language and the elements of literacy tend to struggle later with developing reading skills. Further complicating literacy development for EFL students in English-medium international schools is that they are expected to develop English language ability when often only receiving inputs and instruction in English during school. However, research is showing that early literacy development does have positive effects on EFL students. For example, studying the effects of public school pre-kindergarten programs in a school district in the state of Florida, Conger, Gibbs, Uchikoshi, and Winsler (2019) found that non-native English speaking students enrolled in the pre-kindergarten program had higher

levels of exiting English language support by first grade compared to non-native English speaking students who enrolled in kindergarten.

Many schools do not offer professional development in working with EFL students. Studying the frequency of language-specific professional development for working with EFL students, Lehman (2021a) found that a little more than half of the participants ($N = 531$), who were teachers and administrators in international schools in East Asia, reported the frequency of professional development at their school was low, very low, or non-existent. On the whole, English-medium international schools should ensure that EFL students entering school are exposed to evidence-based teaching practices that provide comprehensive support for EFL students at each stage in which the school enrolls EFL students.

Duration of English as a Foreign Language Study

There are many factors involved when considering the duration of EFL support that EFL students will require before reaching a level in which they will be able to cope with the rigors of the curriculum. Those factors include prior schooling received in their native tongue or an English-medium environment. Additionally, the age at which students first enroll in an international school can be an indicator of the time needed to acquire the level of English language proficiency needed to work independently with the curriculum. Further, it must be considered that EFL students are constantly working towards a moving target as they advance in grade or year levels (Carder, 1991).

Many parents assume that their children will develop language ability within three to six months (Carder, 2007). Studying parent knowledge and preferences of language learning and use in an international school in Viet Nam, Lehman (2020) found that 70% of 128 parents of EFL students thought that one year or less was the ideal time for their EFL child to receive EFL support, and close to a third of the EFL parents thought the ideal time was six months or less. Further complicating the matter of duration from the parents' perspective can be the extra fees involved for EFL support, which may have been a factor in the study by Lehman (2020). Lastly, extra fees for EFL support can place an additional financial burden on the parents and can place additional stress on EFL students (Carder, 2007, 2013).

Forty years ago, Cummins (1981) reported how non-native English language learners who had received as little as six months of language learning support were considered to have acquired enough English language ability to be ready for the mainstream English-medium classroom. While basic communicative English can be acquired in under two years, depending on multiple variables, Cummins (1981) reported that it took five to seven years on average for non-native English language learners to reach English proficiency for academic study. These variables include age, prior schooling, and prior language development in the target language.

Research by Thomas and Collier (1997) found that some non-native English language learners required additional time beyond the five to seven years; they also reported that younger non-native English language learners below the age of eight who had fewer years of formal education in their mother tongue required up to 10 years as

opposed to students who had more years of formal education in their mother tongue. Further findings by Thomas and Collier (2002) provided warnings about the dangers of short-term programs for non-native English language learners, and as a result, they advised that “Students with no proficiency in English must NOT be placed in short-term programs of only 1-3 years” (p. 7). Therefore, most non-native English language learners will require five or more years to reach a proficiency in English that enables them to function at an independent level in an academic English-medium environment. Consequently, another critical question that international schools must address is how long EFL students should receive English language support from an EFL teacher.

Research Questions

- 1) What differences, if any, exist between EFL, primary, and secondary English teachers in international schools in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America concerning EFL instruction and acquisition?
 - a) How do their opinions compare concerning the ideal age to begin receiving EFL support from an EFL teacher?
 - b) How do their opinions compare concerning the ideal length of time EFL students should receive EFL support from an EFL teacher?
- 2) How do the opinions of EFL, primary, and secondary English teachers in international schools align with current language acquisition research?

METHOD

An observational quantitative research design using cross-sectional surveys was used to collect data. A cross-sectional survey does not manipulate a variable; instead, the survey collects data at a single point in time (Creswell, 2012). Each group of participants received a separate survey containing questions that were applicable to their group; when cross-comparisons were to be made, the questions were identical. To establish content validity, three international school educators, who did not participate in the study, served as experts in the field (Creswell, 2012) and reviewed the research questions and survey questions.

For this study, two survey questions were used (see Appendix) that were part of longer surveys that gathered data for multiple studies. The first question was only in the surveys sent to EFL teachers and Primary teachers, while the second question went to all three groups. In the introductory email, potential participants were informed of the intentions of the study. Additionally, a website link was provided that allowed potential participants to view the research questions and additional information about the study, including biographical information about the researcher. The website also provided a contact box so potential participants could ask questions before and after choosing to complete the survey. The potential participants were not promised any reward and were not coerced into completing the survey. Participation was voluntary, and when taking the survey, none of the questions were mandatory. The researcher used Survey Monkey to host the surveys; all data were stored via a password-protected laptop and password-protected external hard drive.

Participants

A random sampling was used to search school websites for names, positions, and contact information for potential participants. For a school to be included in the search, the school must use English as the medium of instruction and a curriculum developed outside of the school's host country. Each participant received a survey request sent to their school email address; therefore, all participants were working in an international school at the time of completing the survey. Participants were located in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America; however, most participants were in East Asia. The researcher used separate surveys for each region listed above. Additionally, for each region, the researcher used three separate surveys for EFL, Primary, and Secondary teachers. The researcher purposefully sent a survey to each group of teachers. Therefore, identifying information was not requested on the surveys. The researcher sent a survey request to 476 EFL teachers, 1,836 Primary teachers, and 1,294 Secondary English teachers. Overall, 3,606 teachers received a survey request. After participants with partial answers to the two survey questions used for this study were removed, the participants from each survey were coded by groups and combined in a single IBM SPSS file. A total of 283 international school teacher responses formed the data set for this research study. Of the 283 participants, 87 were EFL teachers, 115 were Primary teachers, and 81 were Secondary English teachers. The surveys were completed during May and June of 2021.

Procedures

The researcher used SPSS software (v. 27) to perform Pearson chi-square tests (χ^2) with an alpha level of .05. The Pearson chi-square test is a nonparametric test used to measure the distribution of frequencies (Salkind, 2013). Additionally, the Pearson chi-square test can evaluate nominal data (Creswell, 2012; McHugh, 2013). For each of the omnibus chi-square tests, the expected count and adjusted residuals calculated by SPSS are provided in accompanying tables (Sharpe, 2015). Adjusted residuals that exceed ± 2.0 are given in bold print (Sharpe, 2015). All of the assumptions for the Pearson chi-square test were met (McHugh, 2013).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Age to Begin English as a Foreign Language Study

Participants were asked when students in English-medium international schools should begin receiving instruction from EFL teachers. The results of a Pearson chi-square test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in opinion about when students in English-medium international schools should begin receiving instruction from EFL teachers between EFL teachers (Group 1: $n = 87$) and Primary teachers (Group 2: $n = 115$), $\chi^2(2, N = 202) = 9.227, p = 0.010$. Further, the Likelihood ratio was $p = .010$. See Table 1 for the expected counts and adjusted residuals.

Table 1. *When Students Should Begin Receiving Instruction from ELL Teachers*

Teachers	2-3 Years Old	4-5 Years Old	6-7 Years Old	Total
ELL Teachers	15	29	43	87
Expected Count	19.8	34.5	32.7	87
Adjusted Residual	-1.63	-1.58	3.01	
Primary Teachers	31	51	33	115
Expected Count	26.2	45.5	43.3	115
Adjusted Residual	1.63	1.58	-3.01	
Total	476	80	76	202

Figure 1 provides a visual for when students should begin receiving EFL support by EFL teachers. Figure 1 shows data in percentages.

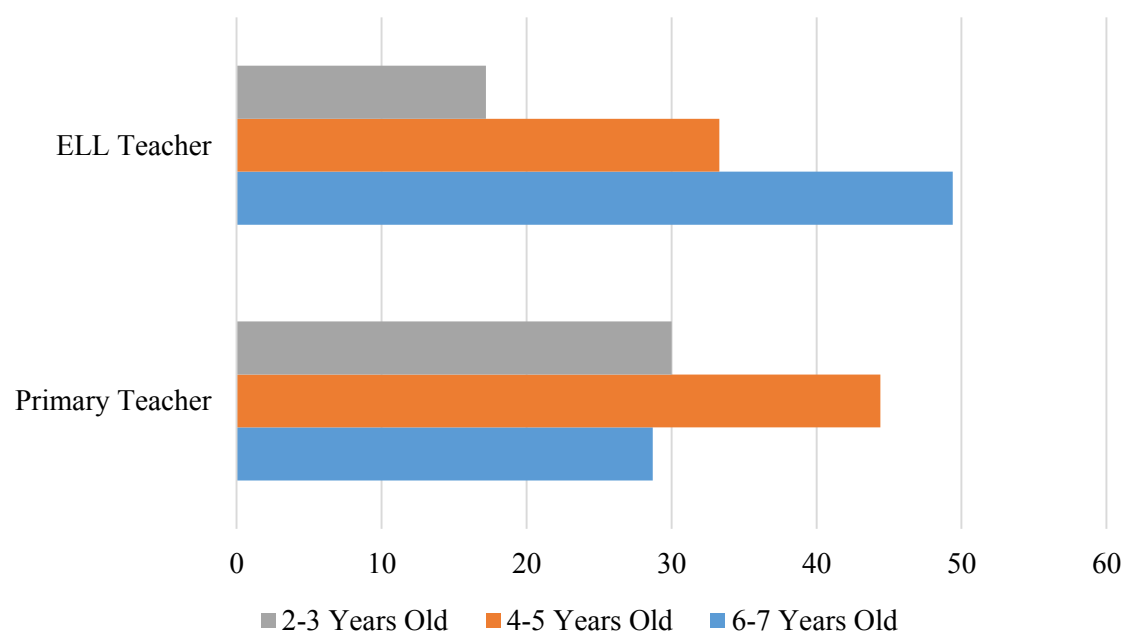


Figure 1. When to begin receiving EFL support (in percentages).

Duration of English as a Foreign Language Study

Participants were asked to identify the ideal time for an EFL student to receive EFL support. The results of a Pearson chi-square test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in opinion about the duration of time EFL students should receive EFL instruction in English-medium international schools between EFL teachers (Group 1: $n = 87$) and Primary teachers (Group 2: $n = 115$) and Secondary English teachers (Group 3: $n = 81$), $\chi^2(8, N = 283) = 19.349, p = 0.013$. Further, the Likelihood ratio was $p = .005$. See Table 2 for the expected counts and the adjusted residuals.

Table 2. *Duration of Time for ELL Support*

Teachers	1-6 months	7-12 months	1 - 2 years	2 - 3 years	3 or more years	Total
ELL Teachers	3	2	34	20	28	87
Expected count	5.8	9.8	26.7	20.6	24.0	87
Adjusted residual	1.46	-3.19	2.03	-0.18	1.16	
Primary Teachers	10	15	30	25	35	115
Expected count	7.7	13.0	35.4	27.2	31.7	115
Adjusted residual	1.10	0.76	-1.40	-0.63	0.89	
English Teachers	6	15	23	22	15	81
Expected count	5.4	9.2	24.9	19.2	22.3	81
Adjusted residual	.30	2.43	-0.54	0.87	-2.16	
Total	19	32	87	67	78	283

Figure 2 provides a visual for the duration of time each group thinks EFLs should receive EFL support from EFL teachers. Figure 2 shows data in percentages.

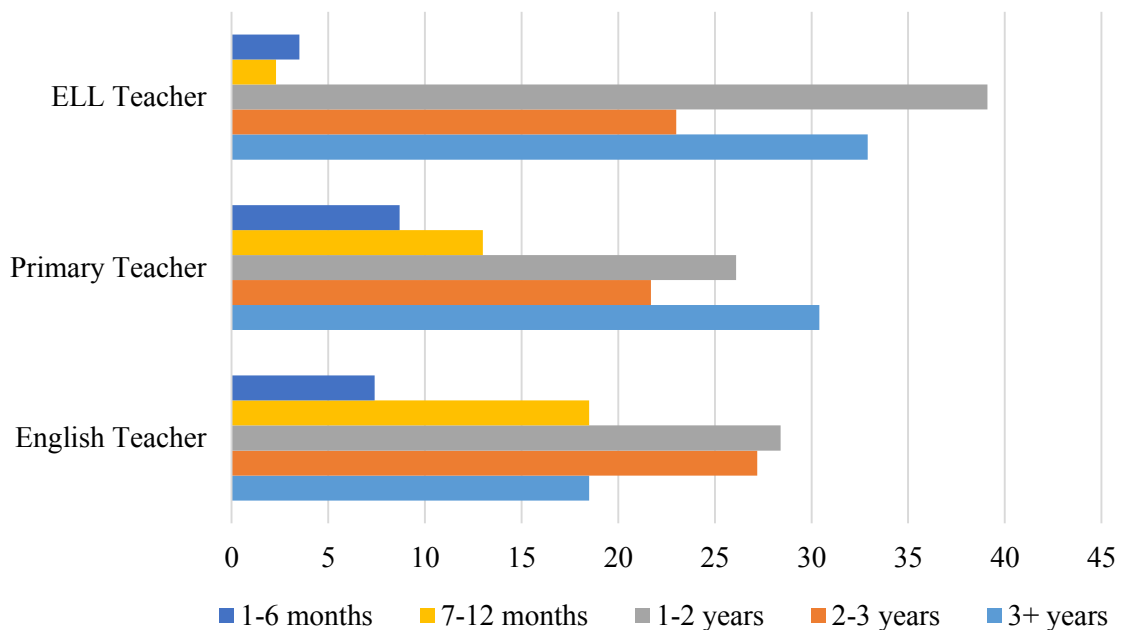


Figure 2. Duration of time ELL students should receive ELL instruction (in percentages).

DISCUSSION

Age to Begin English as a Foreign Language Study

Overall, a majority of Primary teachers favored students beginning to receive EFL support from an EFL teacher earlier than the EFL teachers. While a statistically significant difference between EFL and Primary teachers is observable by looking at the adjusted

residuals (Sharpe, 2015) in Table 1 for beginning at 6-7 years of age, the trend can be seen developing earlier between the percentages as seen in Figure 1. Questions immediately arise as to why there are these differences and why almost 50% of EFL teachers favor starting EFL instruction at six or seven years of age.

Many EFL teachers in international schools lack in-depth training in second language acquisition. According to Lehman (2021b), of 489 teachers and administrators working in international schools, 38.9% revealed a Master's Degree in TESOL/ESL/Linguistics or an Education Degree or a PGCE with a TEFL certificate were minimum requirements to be an EFL teacher in their particular school. Of that 38.9%, only 4.3% answered that a Master's Degree in TESOL/ESL/Linguistics was required to be an EFL teacher in their particular school (Lehman, 2021b). Therefore, a large number of EFL teachers lack qualifications that reflect the in-depth study of second language acquisition. This could explain why almost 50% of the EFL teachers in the current study favor starting EFL instruction at the ages of six or seven. Additionally, many EFL teachers lack training in working with young language learners, especially in the foundation, early years, and kindergarten levels. Considering the benefits EFL students can receive from early literacy development in the pre-kindergarten years (Conger et al. 2019), EFL teachers should be trained and comfortable working with young EFL students.

As discussed by Harper and De Jong (2004) and Cummins (2014), educators often incorrectly assume that younger non-native English language learners will quickly develop language ability when they are immersed in the language. While working in international schools, the researcher has heard teachers say things such as "they are like sponges and will be speaking English in no time." While some EFL students rise to the challenge, many fall victim to the classroom environment of English-only submersion, also known as sink-or-swim (Krashen, 1981).

Early literacy development is seen as crucial for all students, and there should be no difference with students in international schools, especially EFL students. To help teachers hone their knowledge and skills, Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) recommend that schools provide professional development that informs teachers of current scientific knowledge and best practices for developing reading and writing. According to Lehman (2021a), many international schools are providing little to no professional development to their staff that is specific to working with EFL students.

Duration of English as a Foreign Language Study

A key revelation of the data was that only 32% of EFL teachers think that three or more years is the ideal time for EFL students to receive EFL support, which means that 68% may lack an understanding of the time needed for the majority of EFL students to become proficient in English for academic purposes. Additionally, seeing that approximately 46% of Secondary English teachers responded that two to three or three or more years is the ideal time for EFL students to receive EFL support was encouraging. According to Thomas and Collier (1997), older students may require less time to develop sufficient levels of academic English needed for their grade level than younger students who have received fewer years of formal education in their mother tongue.

When all three groups are combined, about 28% of the 283 participants answered that three or more years was the ideal time for EFL students to receive EFL support. Of concern is that 18% of all the participants think the ideal time for EFL support is one year or less. This is reminiscent of Cummins (1981) reporting that non-native English language learners who had received as little as six months of language learning support were considered to have developed sufficient ability in the English language. Further, Thomas and Collier (2002) warned against short-term programs for non-native English language learners, which could subject EFL students to situations of sink-or-swim (Krashen, 1981).

Many parents of EFL students in English-medium international schools have unrealistic expectations concerning their child's rate of English acquisition (Carder, 2007; Lehman, 2020). Compared to 70% of EFL parents reporting that one year or less is an ideal time for their child to receive EFL support (Lehman, 2020), the current data coming from teachers paint a more optimistic picture. However, the data clearly show that the majority of teachers in English-medium international schools lack knowledge and understanding of the duration of time EFL students need to acquire language for academic purposes.

CONCLUSION

This research study aimed to explore the opinions of teachers in English-medium international schools concerning two critical aspects of English language support in English-medium international schools. Firstly, at what age should students whose mother tongue is not English begin receiving English language support from an EFL teacher. Secondly, what opinions are held by teachers concerning how long EFL students should receive English language support from an EFL teacher. The data revealed significant differences between EFL teachers and Primary teachers concerning the ideal age for EFL students to begin receiving support from an EFL teacher. Further, the data revealed significant differences between EFL teachers and Secondary English teachers concerning the duration of time students should receive EFL support. Overall, the data revealed that the prevailing thought amongst EFL teachers, Primary teachers, and Secondary English teachers concerning the ideal duration of time for EFL support for helping EFLs to develop proficiency in English is well below data reported by Cummins (1981) and Collier and Thompson (1997, 2002).

Assumptions and Limitations

The researcher assumed that the participants responded to questions with understanding and truthfulness. An additional assumption was that the researcher provided an appropriate array of responses from which participants were able to choose. The researcher further assumed that the participants from each of the three groups formed representative samples. Although assumptions for the Pearson chi-square tests were not violated, a limitation of the study was the number of participants for each group. Another limitation was that the study only included participants from schools whose contact information was available on the school website or the Internet.

Recommendations for Future Practice

The researcher recommends that administrators in English-medium international schools hire fully qualified EFL teachers to work with the EFL students in their schools (Carder, 2013; Lehman, 2021b). Further, the researcher recommends that administrators in English-medium international schools regularly seek ways to provide the teaching staff with relevant and research-based professional development, specifically for working with EFL students (Carder, 2013; Lehman, 2021a). Lastly, the researcher recommends that English-medium international schools educate the staff and parents concerning the length of time according to Cummins (1981) and Thomas and Collier (1997, 2002) that is generally needed for EFL students to achieve competency in using the English language in an academic environment (Lehman, 2020).

Suggestions for Future Research

Based upon the data from the current study, the researcher suggests future research exploring the opinions of EFL teachers concerning EFL support in the early years. Additionally, the researcher encourages future research into TEFL certificate programs to discover if an imbalance in the curricula between working with younger and older EFL students exists and whether changes need to be made to better prepare EFL teachers for working with young EFL learners in international schools. Lastly, the researcher suggests research into ways to effectively raise teacher, administrator, and parent awareness of second language acquisition in English-medium international schools.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

In your opinion, when should students in English-medium international schools begin receiving instruction from an EFL/ESL/EAL teacher? (EFL and Primary Teachers Only)

2 - 3 yrs old

4 - 5 yrs old

6 - 7 yrs old

Which of the following is the ideal time for a student to receive EFL/ESL/EAL support? (EFL, Primary Teachers, and Secondary English Teachers)

1 month to 6 months

7 months to 12 months

1 year to 2 years

2 years to 3 years

3 years or more