

Foreign language skills statistics

Statistics Explained

Data extracted in September 2024.
Planned article update: 2030.

Highlights

In 2022, 28% of working-age adults in the EU who knew at least 1 foreign language said they were proficient in their best-known foreign language.

In 2022, 90% of the adult working-age population of the EU with a high level of education knew at least 1 foreign language.

This article presents an overview of [European Union \(EU\)](#) statistics related to self-reported foreign language skills. It provides information on the number of languages known, as well as levels of proficiency. The data are analysed by age, sex, level of educational attainment and labour status.

Note that data for some EU countries may be missing depending upon the type of analysis being conducted¹.

This article is one of a set of statistical articles forming part of the online publication [Education and training in the EU - facts and figures](#) ; it provides a complement to information on [foreign language learning statistics](#) . The data presented in this article are all derived from the [adult education survey](#) (AES).

Number of foreign languages known

Around three-quarters of working-age adults in the EU know at least 1 foreign language

In 2022, one-quarter (25.3%) of working-age adults (defined here as people aged 25-64 years) in the EU reported that they did not know any foreign languages. A higher proportion (37.6%) reported that they knew 1 foreign language, while one-quarter (24.7%) knew 2 foreign languages, and less (12.3%) knew 3 or more.

Breaking down the data by **sex** reveals that there was almost **no gender gap** in language skills. In 2022, a slightly higher share of men did not know any foreign languages or knew only 1 (25.5% and 39.2% respectively), compared with women (25.2% and 36.1% respectively).

However, the share of women who knew 2 foreign languages (25.5%) was 1.6 [percentage points \(pp\)](#) higher than that for men, and the same could be seen for those who knew 3 or more (13.3% compared with 11.4%).

What constitutes a foreign language?

Bilingual people can have more than 1 native language, depending on the extent to which they use their languages

¹Ireland and Luxembourg did not participate in the 2007 adult education survey; Croatia did not participate in the 2011 adult education survey.

in the home. Languages they know but do not use in the home are considered to be foreign languages.

Some EU countries have more than 1 'official language' — for example, in Belgium there are 3 (German, French and Dutch). However, if a person only speaks 1 of these at home, any others are considered (for the purpose of this article) to be foreign languages.

Similarly, a relatively large proportion of people living in the EU were not born in the country where they are resident, so they may well have a different native language from the official language(s) in that country. In this case, the language of the country where they live is considered to be a foreign language.

Note that EU countries are allowed to implement national preferences when responding to the AES. For example Slovakian was not regarded as a foreign language in the Czech survey up until 2011.

More than half the adult working-age population in Slovenia and Luxembourg knew 3 or more foreign languages

The extent of language ability differed considerably between EU countries.

The share of the adult working-age population who knew 3 or more foreign languages peaked at 56.3% in Slovenia, followed by Luxembourg (54.1%), with the next highest shares in the Netherlands (40.2%) and Finland (38.1%).

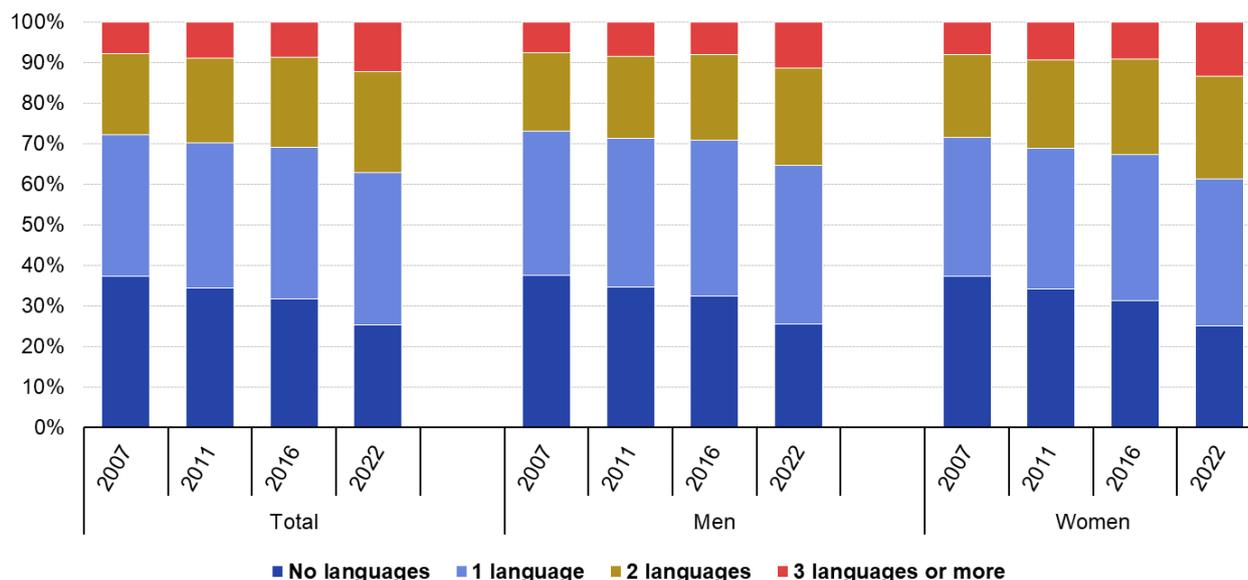
By contrast, the figures for Hungary, Greece, Bulgaria and Romania were less than 4%.

Varying levels of knowledge

In Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria more than half the adult working-age population said that they did not know any foreign languages at all.

By contrast, there were 10 EU countries where this group accounted for less than 10% of the population. Foremost among these linguistic powerhouses was Slovenia, where only 4% said they did not know any foreign languages.

Number of languages known (other than native language, self-reported) by sex, EU, 2007, 2011, 2016 and 2022 (% of people aged 25-64)



Note: Break in series in 2011.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_aes_I21)

eurostat

Figure 1: Number of languages known (other than native language, self-reported) by sex, EU, 2007, 2011, 2016 and 2022 (% of people aged 25-64 years) Source: Eurostat (edat_aes_I21)

Over 9 out of every 10 people of working-age knew at least 1 foreign language in the Nordic and Baltic countries, as well as in Slovenia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Cyprus

In 18 EU countries, more than three-quarters of the adult working-age population knew at least 1 foreign language in 2022.

In 10 of these, at least 90% knew a foreign language: Slovenia (96.0%), Sweden (95.8%), Estonia (95.5%), Lithuania (95.3%), Latvia (95.0%), Luxembourg (94.5%), the Netherlands (92.9%), Finland (92.1%), Cyprus (91.9%) and Denmark (90.3%).

Figure 2 provides an analysis of the extent of self-reported language abilities in the EU.

Luxembourg's special case

The very high proportion in Luxembourg who speak at least 3 foreign languages may, at least in part, reflect the local administrative (3 official languages) and education systems (Luxembourgish, German and French at primary level for most pupils, with English and other languages introduced at secondary level).

Luxembourg also has a high share of foreign nationals working in an international environment: in 2022, some 61.9% of the resident working-age population had been born abroad.

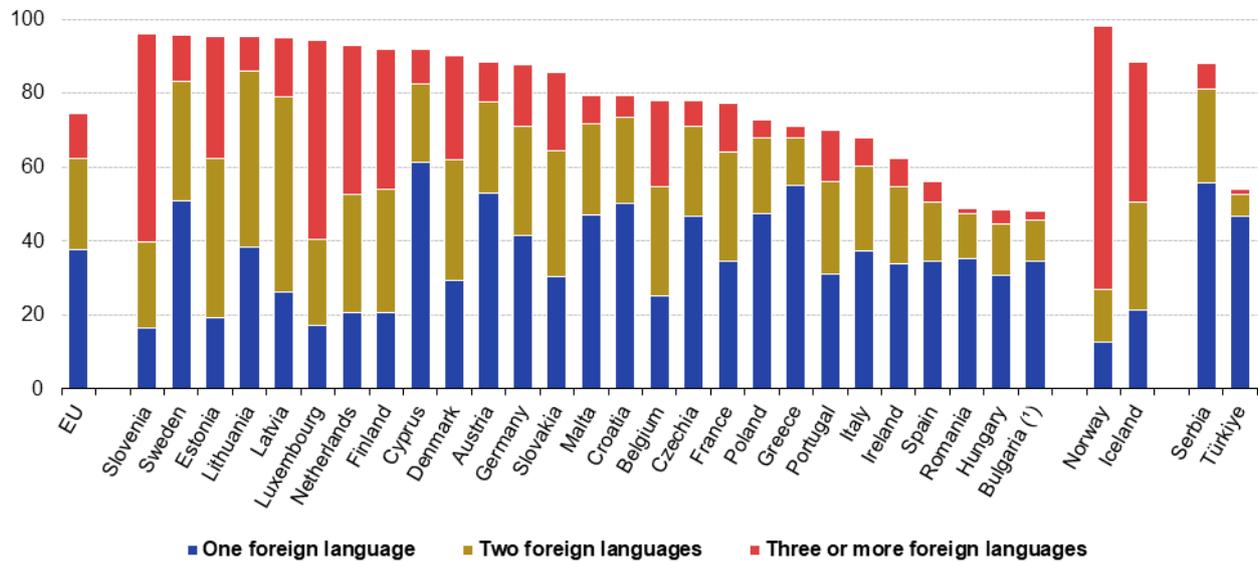
Other high flyers

Some of the other EU countries with high levels of linguistic capabilities are characterised by their **geographical and linguistic proximity**. For example, it is relatively common for people from some of the [Nordic](#), [Baltic](#), and eastern EU countries to understand the languages of some of their neighbours.

Some countries also have more than 1 official language: for example, there are 3 in Belgium (German, French and Dutch) and 2 in Finland (Finnish and Swedish), while minority languages exist in others. For example, in Slovenia the official language is Slovenian, with Italian and Hungarian considered to be co-official languages.

People aged 25–64 reporting they knew 1 or more foreign languages, 2022

(%)



(*) Three or more foreign languages: low reliability

Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_aes_I21)

eurostat

Figure 2: People aged 25-64 years reporting they knew 1 or more foreign languages, 2022 (%) Source: Eurostat (edat_aes_I21)

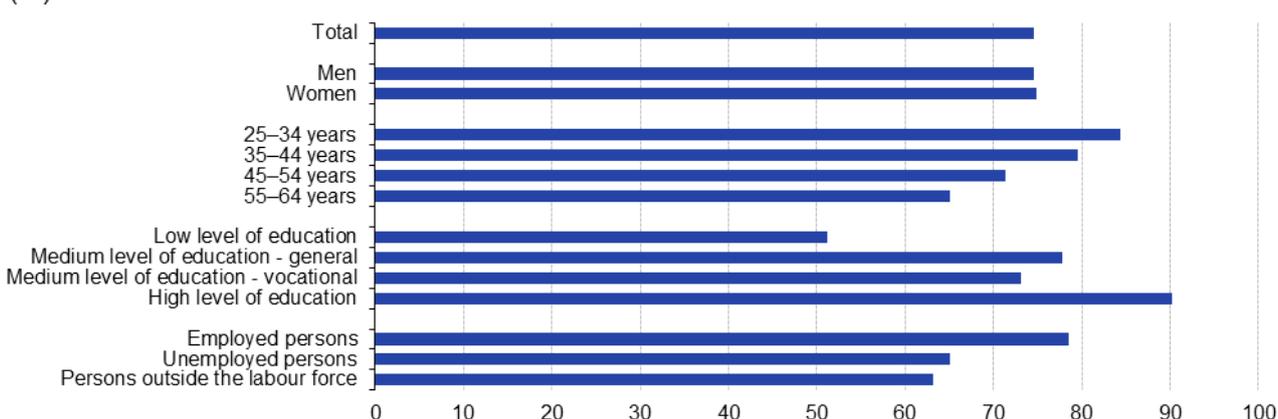
People who know 1 or more foreign languages

While there is almost no gender gap, knowing 1 or more foreign languages is more likely for:

- the **younger**
- the **highly educated**
- the **employed**.

Figure 3 presents information broken down by sex, age group, educational attainment and labour status.

People aged 25–64 reporting they knew 1 or more foreign languages by sex, age, educational attainment level and labour status, EU, 2022 (%)



Source: Eurostat (online data codes: edat_aes_I21, edat_aes_I22, edat_aes_I23 and edat_aes_I24)

eurostat

Figure 3: People aged 25-64 years reporting they knew 1 or more foreign languages by sex, age, educational attainment level and labour status, EU, 2022 (%) Source: Eurostat (edat_aes_I21), (edat_aes_I22), (edat_aes_I23) and (edat_aes_I24)

Younger people

In 2022, more than four-fifths (84.4%) of the EU's population aged 25-34 years knew at least 1 foreign language. This share fell for each successive age group, with the lowest proportion recorded among those aged 55-64 years (although the figure for this group is still 65.0%).

Countries with a generation gap

This gap between the generations was most pronounced among those EU countries in which a relatively **low share** of working-age adults knew at least 1 foreign language:

- Greece – 87.6% of those aged 25-34 years knew at least 1 foreign language, compared with 51.9% of those aged 55-64 years — a difference of 35.7 pp.
- There were also considerable generation gaps (29-36 pp difference) in Poland, Hungary and Romania.

Countries with a smaller gap

The gap between the generations was relatively small in those EU countries where a **high proportion** of the working-age adults knew at least 1 foreign language:

- Lithuania was the only country where the share of those aged 55-64 years who knew at least 1 foreign language was about the same as of those aged 25-34 years.
- In Lithuania and Latvia (and Estonia to a lesser degree), the relatively high proportion of older people who speak at least 1 foreign language may reflect the fact that the older generations learnt Russian, whereas the younger generations learnt English.

People with high level of education

In addition to a generation gap, there also appears to be an education gap in foreign language skills as shown in Figure 3. EU wide, the shares of those who knew at least 1 foreign language were:

- 90.2% – for those who had completed a **high** level of education (ISCED 2011 levels 5 to 8).
- 71.7% – for those with a **medium** level of education (ISCED levels 3 and 4).

This varies between those with a general education at this level (77.8%) and those who had a vocational orientation (73.1%).

- 51.2% – for those with a **low** level of education (ISCED levels 0 to 2).

For those with a **high** level of education, in only 5 countries was the share of those knowing a foreign language below 90%: Ireland, Spain, Bulgaria, Hungary and Malta.

Of those with a **low** level of education, there were:

- 9 countries where at least three-quarters of this group knew at least 1 foreign language: Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, Latvia, Estonia, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Sweden.
- 10 countries where less than half of this group said they know a foreign language (Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Ireland, Poland, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Czechia and Italy). In Romania and Hungary, this share fell to less than 15%.

As with the generation gap, the gap between the different levels of education was most pronounced for those EU countries with a relatively low share of working-age adults knowing at least 1 foreign language.

Especially Croatia, Poland, Hungary and Romania: those with a high level of education who reported knowledge of foreign languages was 60-81 pp higher than those with a low level of education.

People in employment

Figure 3 also provides a breakdown of those with knowledge of foreign languages by labour status:

- 78.5% of those in work
- 65.0% of the unemployed
- 63.2% of people outside the labour force.

These figures may support the view that, at least for some jobs, employers are keen to engage people who have some language skills, or to promote the learning of languages in training for their staff.

Top and bottom performers

Language knowledge by those in employment:

- over 90% in 11 countries (Slovenia, Sweden, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Cyprus, Finland, Austria and Denmark)
- less than 60% in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary.

Gap by labour status

This was most pronounced for those countries which had a low share of people with language knowledge:

- more than 70% of people outside the labour force in Romania said they did not know any foreign language
- there were 4 other EU countries where this applied to more than half of the population outside the labour force (Greece, Spain, Bulgaria and Hungary)
- for the unemployed, more than half did not know a foreign language in Spain, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary.

Proficiency in strongest foreign language

The following section examines the level of foreign language skills in the EU. Note that:

- the data refer to **self-reported proficiency**
- proficiency is assessed only in people's **strongest foreign language** .

The share of those proficient in their strongest foreign language increased between 2007 and 2022

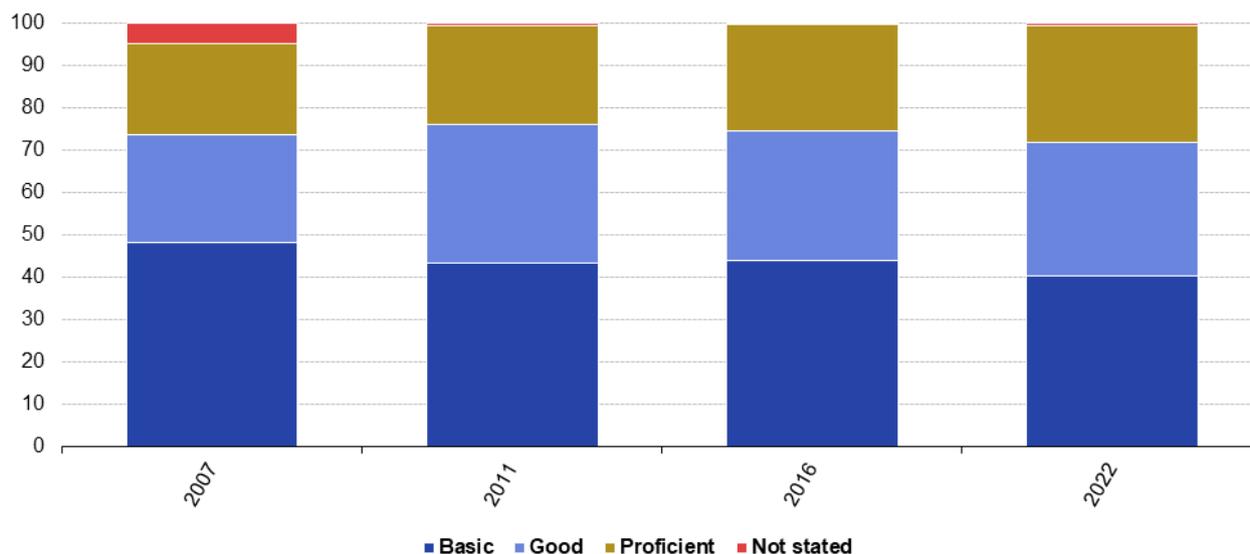
In the EU, over a quarter (27.6%) of working-age adults who knew at least 1 other language reported that their level in their strongest foreign language was proficient.

Figure 4 presents foreign language skills among working-age adults in 2007, 2011, 2016 and 2022.

Within the EU, the share who claimed proficiency in their strongest foreign language rose by 1.9, 1.6 and 2.5 pp respectively over the 3 periods under consideration, from a starting level of 21.6% in 2007.

Proficiency level of the strongest foreign language, EU, 2007, 2011, 2016 and 2022

(% of people aged 25–64 years who knew at least 1 foreign language)



(*) In the 2007, 2016 and 2022 surveys there was also a category titled 'very basic'; this is included in 'basic'.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_aes_I31)

eurostat

Figure 4: Proficiency level of the strongest foreign language, EU, 2007, 2011, 2016 and 2022 (% of people aged 25-64 years who know at least 1 foreign language) Source: Eurostat (edat_aes_I31)

Variation by country

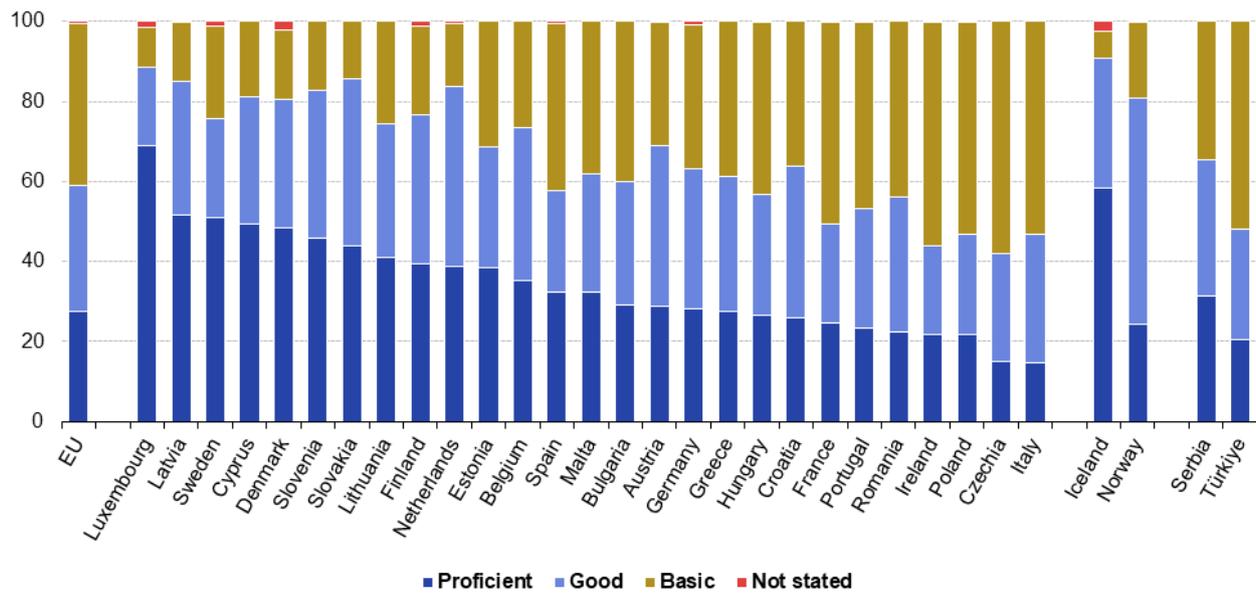
Between 2007 and 2022 the proficiency share fell in 6 out of the 22 EU countries for which data are available; the largest reductions were recorded in Latvia and Slovakia.

By contrast, there was a relatively rapid increase in proficiency levels in Bulgaria, Finland and Cyprus.

In 2022, almost three-quarters (68.8%) of the population in Luxembourg claimed proficiency in their strongest foreign language (see Figure 5). The only other EU countries with more than half of working-age adults claiming proficiency were Latvia (51.5%) and Sweden (51.0%).

Proficiency level of the strongest foreign language, 2022 (*)

(% of people aged 25–64 years who knew at least 1 foreign language)



(*) Ranked on the share with a proficient command of their best-known foreign language.
 Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_aes_I31)



Figure 5: Proficiency level of the strongest foreign language, 2022 (1) (% of people aged 25-64 years who know at least 1 foreign language) Source: Eurostat (edat_aes_I31)

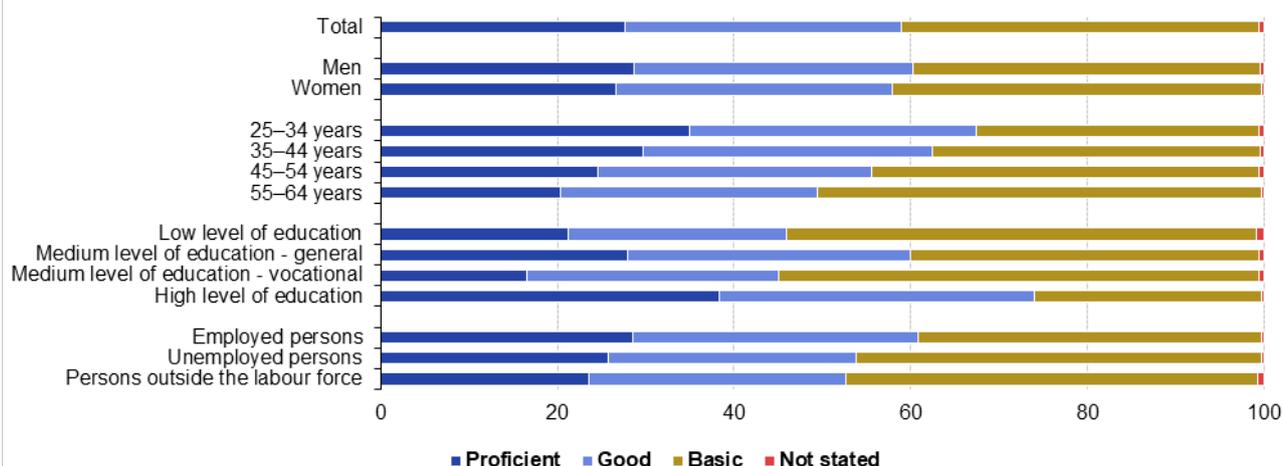
By contrast, there were 2 EU countries in 2022 where less than one-fifth of people claimed proficiency in their strongest foreign language: Czechia and Italy (both with shares of about 15%).

Deep dive into those claiming proficiency in their strongest foreign language

Figure 6 provides an overview for the EU of the different aspects of foreign language proficiency.

Proficiency level of the strongest foreign language, EU, 2022

(% of people aged 25–64 years who knew at least 1 foreign language)



Source: Eurostat (online data codes: edat_aes_I31, edat_aes_I32, edat_aes_I33 and edat_aes_I34)

eurostat

Figure 6: Proficiency level of the strongest foreign language, EU, 2022 (% of people aged 25-64 years who know at least 1 foreign language) Source: Eurostat (edat_aes_I31), (edat_aes_I32), (edat_aes_I33) and (edat_aes_I34)

In this group, the highest degrees of proficiency were for those who were male, young (aged 25-34 years), tertiary-educated and employed.

Proficiency by age

Proficiency was generally higher among younger age groups. For the EU as a whole, over one-third (34.9%) of people aged 25-34 years claimed proficiency in their strongest foreign language, compared with only 20.4% of people aged 55-64 years.

This pattern was repeated across most EU countries. People aged 25-34 years had the highest shares of proficiency in all but 6 countries: Bulgaria, Ireland, Spain, Cyprus, Lithuania and Malta.

At the other end of the range, those aged 55-64 years had the lowest shares of proficiency in all but 3 EU countries: Bulgaria, Spain and Lithuania.

Proficiency by education

Across the EU there was a clear link between foreign language proficiency and levels of educational attainment. This may, at least in part, be explained by some students in higher education improving their proficiency because they have to continue their language studies as part of their course, while others may choose or be required to follow courses that are given in a foreign language.

In 2022, more than one-third (38.4%) of the EU's working-age population with a high level of education claimed proficiency in their strongest foreign language.

This was almost twice as high as proficiency levels among those with a medium or low level of education (19.3% and 21.2% respectively).

Of people with a medium level of education, 28.0% of those who hold a general qualification were proficient while the figure for those with a vocational qualification was only 16.5%.

An analysis across EU countries shows that, in almost all countries, the share of people who claim proficiency in their strongest foreign language was higher among those with tertiary education, regardless of comparisons against those with a medium or a low level of education.

Proficiency by labour status

People in employment are more likely to have a higher level of proficiency. In 2022, over one-quarter (28.6%) of those aged 25-64 years in the EU who were employed claimed proficiency in their strongest foreign language. The corresponding shares for the unemployed (25.7%) and people outside the labour force (23.6%) were somewhat lower. In most EU countries, people in employment were generally the most likely to report foreign language proficiency when compared with the unemployed and people outside the labour force of the same age.

What about people aged 18-24 years?

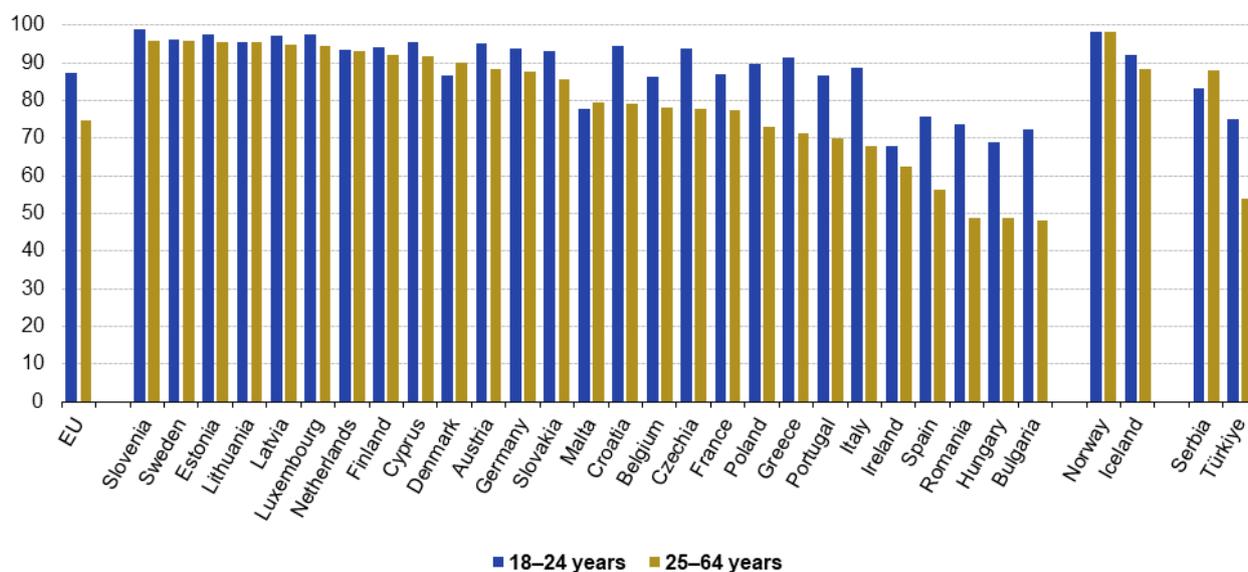
As expected, the share of people aged 18-24 years who knew at least 1 foreign language was substantially higher than for adults of working-age (25-64).

For the EU as a whole, the figure was 87.3%, 12.6 pp higher than people aged 25-64 years. Across countries, this rate ranged from over 95% in Austria, Cyprus, Lithuania, Sweden, Latvia, Estonia, Luxembourg and Slovenia to below 70% in Hungary and Ireland.

Only 2 countries, Denmark and Malta, had older people (25-64 years) knowing at least 1 foreign language than the young (18-24) (see Figure 7).

People reporting they knew 1 or more foreign languages, by age, 2022

(%)



Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_aes_I22)

eurostat

Figure 7: People reporting they knew 1 or more foreign languages, by age, 2022 (%) Source: Eurostat (edat_aes_I22)

The young and the working-age

Figure 8 compares young people (aged 18-24 years) with those of working-age (25-64 years) according to:

- sex
- educational attainment level.

Sex

A small gender gap (1 pp) in favour of women can be observed for young people.

In the working-age group, knowledge of 1 or more foreign languages was about the same for men and women.

Education

Of those with tertiary education, the share who knew 1 or more foreign languages was quite similar for both age groups – 91.4% for the young and 90.2% for the working-age group.

The highest share of young people with foreign language skills was those who hold a general qualification at medium level (92.9%). The largest gap between both age groups was for people with a low level of education. Here the share of people aged 18-24 years with foreign language skills was 27.3 pp higher than those aged 25-64 years.

Note that many of these young people may still be at school or university, on their way to obtaining a higher qualification.

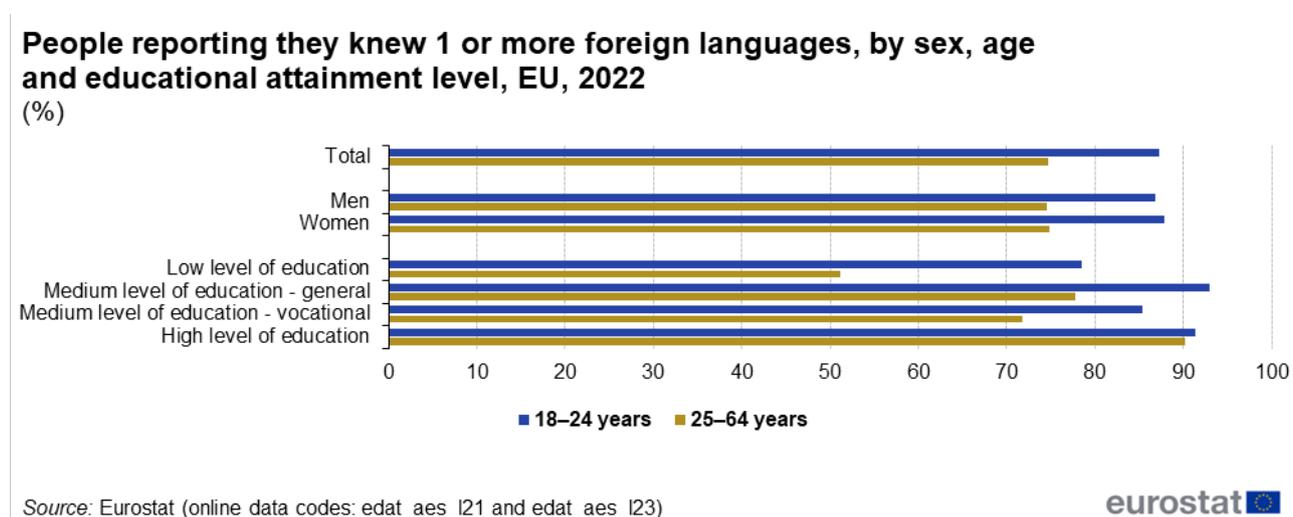


Figure 8: People reporting they knew 1 or more foreign languages, by sex, age and educational attainment level, EU, 2022 (%) Source: Eurostat (edat_aes_I21) and (edat_aes_I23)

Source data for tables and graphs

- [Foreign language skills: tables and figures](#)

Data sources

Key concepts

Within the 2011 [adult education survey](#) (AES), 3 levels of foreign language knowledge were identified:

- **Basic** —“I can understand and use the most common everyday expressions. I use the language in relation to familiar things and situations” ;
- **Good** —“I can understand the essentials of clear language and produce simple text. I can describe experiences and events and communicate fairly fluently” ;
- **Proficient** —“I can understand a wide range of demanding texts and use the language flexibly. I master the language almost completely” .

In 2007, 2016 and 2022 there was a 4th level:

- **Very basic** — "*I only understand and can use a few words*".

To facilitate comparisons between 2007/2016/2022 and 2011, the information collected for this 4th category in 2007, 2016 and 2022 has been added to the category covering 'basic'.

Data source

The [adult education survey \(AES\)](#) is the source of all information in this article. It provides information on **self-reported foreign language skills** – in contrast to qualifications obtained in the formal education system or from specialist language schools.

Until 2016, the AES covered adults of working-age (25-64 years).

Since 2022 it covers all adults aged 18-69 years.

The survey has been carried out 4 times so far – in 2007, 2011, 2016 and 2022.

The 2007 survey was a pilot exercise, carried out on a voluntary basis, whereas the 2011, 2016 and 2022 surveys were underpinned by a legal act and thus mandatory ([EU regulation 823/2010](#) , [EU regulation 1175/2014](#) and [EU regulation 2021/861](#)).

Specific breaks in series on self-reported language skills

Czechia : Up to the 2011 survey, Slovakian was not considered to be a foreign language in the Czech survey.

Classification

Levels of educational attainment

Common definitions for education systems have been agreed between the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), the OECD and Eurostat.

They are contained in the International standard classification of education (ISCED) developed by UNESCO to facilitate comparisons across countries, on the basis of uniform and internationally agreed definitions.

In 2011, a revision to the ISCED was formally adopted, referred to as ISCED 2011. Prior to this, ISCED 1997 was used as the common standard for classifying education systems. For more information, see the article on the [ISCED classification](#) .

Levels of educational attainment are as follows:

- less than primary, primary or lower secondary level of education (ISCED 2011 levels 0-2; referred to as a low educational attainment level or low level of education);
- upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED 2011 levels 3 and 4; referred to as medium educational attainment level or medium level of education); at this level, information whether the programme had general or vocational orientation is available;
- tertiary education (ISCED 2011 levels 5-8; referred to as a high educational attainment level or high level of education).

Key concepts – labour status

In the AES, the self-perceived activity status is collected, i.e. the information if an individual is employed, unemployed or outside the labour force refers to the person's own perception of his/her current main activity status. It does not apply criteria of a specific concept or definition, e.g. of labour market participation as defined by the International Labour Organisation as it is done in the [EU labour force survey](#) .

Note on symbols used in tables

The colon (:) is used to show where data are not available.

Context

Language and cultural barriers are 2 aspects which restrict the level of geographic mobility within the EU – the ability to study, work and live abroad. So foreign language skills have the potential to improve Europeans' mobility, employability and personal development. Indeed, they can give people a competitive advantage in labour markets: this is particularly true for those working in senior management, multinational firms or sales and marketing.

English language skills are well-established as an important (business) skill, and English is by far the most widely-spoken foreign language in the EU. But in a world of increasing international exchanges, the ability to speak other languages is of particular importance in large markets where there is relatively little English spoken — for example, in China or Brazil.

The EU role

Helping people improve their language skills is at the heart of the EU's role in education, as enshrined in the [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#) (Article 165).

To this end, in 2019 the EU's education ministers adopted the [Council Recommendation on the teaching and learning of languages](#) . This act urges EU countries to explore ways to help all young people to acquire – before the end of upper secondary education/training:

- the language of their schooling
- competence in at least 1 other European language, i.e. the ability to use the language effectively for social, learning and professional purposes, and
- an additional (third) language to a level which allows them to interact with a degree of fluency.

Under the [European Education Area](#) , with its policy objective of improving quality and equity in education and training, language skills are 1 of 8 'key competences' needed for personal fulfilment, a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, employability, active citizenship, and social inclusion, as outlined in the [2018 Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning](#) .

Learning languages is also essential for mutual understanding across borders in the EU, promoting diversity and European values. And it was strongly supported by citizens in 1 of the recommendations that came out of the [Conference on the future of Europe](#) in 2022.

Promoting and supporting language teaching, learning and use is among the concrete actions underpinning the strategic priorities in the [Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training \(2021-2030\)](#) – in particular to improve quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training.

Footnotes

Explore further

Other articles

- [Education and training in the EU — facts and figures](#) (online publication)
- All pages on [education and training](#)
- [Foreign language learning statistics](#)

Database

- [Education and training](#) , see:

Languages (educ_lang)

Self-reported language skills (educ_lang_00)

Number of foreign languages known (edat_aes_l2)

Number of foreign languages known (self-reported) by sex (edat_aes_I21)
 Number of foreign languages known (self-reported) by age (edat_aes_I22)
 Number of foreign languages known (self-reported) by educational attainment level (edat_aes_I23)
 Number of foreign languages known (self-reported) by labour status (edat_aes_I24)
 Number of foreign languages known (self-reported) by occupation (edat_aes_I25)
 Number of foreign languages known (self-reported) by degree of urbanisation (edat_aes_I26)
 Level of best-known foreign language (edat_aes_I3)
 Level of the best-known foreign language (self-reported) by sex (edat_aes_I31)
 Level of the best-known foreign language (self-reported) by age (edat_aes_I32)
 Level of the best-known foreign language (self-reported) by educational attainment level (edat_aes_I33)
 Level of the best-known foreign language (self-reported) by labour status (edat_aes_I34)
 Level of the best-known foreign language (self-reported) by occupation (edat_aes_I35)
 Level of the best-known foreign language (self-reported) by degree of urbanisation (edat_aes_I36)
 Level of the foreign language reported as best-known in the country (edat_aes_I5)
 Level of the foreign language reported as best-known in the country (self-reported) by sex (edat_aes_I51)
 Level of the foreign language reported as best-known in the country (self-reported) by age (edat_aes_I52)
 Level of the foreign language reported as best-known in the country (self-reported) by educational attainment level (edat_aes_I53)
 Level of the foreign language reported as best-known in the country (self-reported) by labour status (edat_aes_I54)
 Level of the foreign language reported as best-known in the country (self-reported) by occupation (edat_aes_I55)
 Level of the foreign language reported as best-known in the country (self-reported) by degree of urbanisation (edat_aes_I56)

- [Skills \(sks\)](#)

Thematic section

- [Education and training](#)
- [Skills](#)

Methodology

- [Adult education survey](#) (ESMS metadata file — trng_aes_12m_esms)
- [Adult education survey — reference manuals](#)

External links

- [European Commission — An agenda for new skills and jobs](#)
- [European Commission — Education and training — adult learning](#)
- [European Commission — Education and training — strategic framework for education and training](#)
- [European Commission — Language levels — self-assessment grid](#)
- [European Commission — About multilingualism policy](#)

Legislation

- [Education and training](#)