School and other educational institutions provide the main opportunity for the vast majority of people to learn languages, while linguistic diversity is actively encouraged within many further education establishments and workplaces. This article presents statistics on language learning in primary and secondary schools of the European Union’s (EU’s) Member States as well as in EFTA and candidate countries and forms part of an online publication on education and training in the EU.

Currently there are 24 official languages recognised within the EU which has been the situation since the accession of Croatia. In 1958, legislation specified German, French, Italian and Dutch as the official and working languages of the EU’s predecessor, the European Communities. There have always been fewer official languages than EU Member States, as some EU Member States share common languages, for example in Belgium where the official languages are Dutch, French and German, while in Cyprus the majority of the population speaks Greek. There are also a number of indigenous regional and minority languages (such as Catalan, Galician and Basque in Spain, or Welsh and Scottish Gaelic in the United Kingdom) found within the EU, as well as many other languages that have been brought into the EU by migrant populations, notably Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, Hindi and Chinese. Some regional languages, such as Catalan and Welsh, have gained a status as co-official languages of the EU and the official use of such languages can be authorised on the basis of an administrative arrangement concluded between the Council and the requesting Member State.

Primary education

Within primary education, a clear majority of pupils learn English in the vast majority of EU Member States. Indeed, learning English is mandatory in several countries within secondary education institutions, and so a number of EU Member States have close to 100 % of pupils learning this language already in primary education, as shown in Figure 1. All or nearly all (99-100 %) primary school pupils in Malta, Cyprus, Austria, Spain and Italy learnt English as a foreign language in 2016, as was also the case in Liechtenstein, Norway and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In addition, more than 9 out of every 10 primary school children learnt English in Latvia, Poland, France and Croatia. Note that the relative importance of English as a foreign language may be further magnified because pupils tend to receive more instruction in their first foreign language than they do for any subsequent languages they study.
Many of the eastern and northern European Member States that joined the EU in 2004 or 2007 were characterised by the fact that learning Russian was compulsory in the past. This situation has changed rapidly and in most of these countries there has been a marked increase in the proportion of pupils learning English — by 2016 this share often exceeded 50% of all primary school pupils. In Estonia, Lithuania, Czechia, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Romania it was between 69% and 85% in 2016, rising to more than 90% in Poland and Latvia (as noted above), as it also was in Croatia which joined the EU in 2013.

Luxembourg is also of particular interest, insofar as there are three official languages, with most pupils receiving instruction in Luxembourgish, German and French in primary education; English is only introduced at secondary school. A similar situation used to be observed in Belgium, with the focus in primary schools often on learning French or Dutch (depending on the community and/or region), however an increasing share of Belgian primary school pupils now study English as a foreign language.

Apart from Luxembourg, the next highest shares of primary school children learning French as a foreign language in 2016 were recorded in Greece, Belgium and Romania (14-17%; no recent information for the United Kingdom). In 2016, German was the principal foreign language taught to all primary school children in Luxembourg, while just over one fifth of primary school children were taught German in Hungary and Croatia.

Upper secondary education

Turning to language learning in upper secondary general education (ISCED level 3); as shown in Table 1 and Infographic 1, almost all (94.0%) EU-28 students at this level were studying English as a foreign language in 2016, compared with slightly more than one fifth (21.5) studying Spanish, while less than one fifth were studying German (17.2%) or French (16.4%); note that the 2016 data for EU-28 averages for languages other than English exclude the United Kingdom.
Between 2011 and 2016, the proportion of EU-28 students at ISCED level 3 (general) studying English remained at a high but relatively unchanged level, while the proportion of upper secondary (general) students studying Spanish rose by 3.2 percentage points while those studying German and French fell by 3.9 and 6.6 points respectively. Part of the changes observed between 2011 and 2016 — in particular part of the fall in the share for French and part of the rise in the share for Spanish — may be attributed to the exclusion of data for the United Kingdom in 2016, as in 2011 the United Kingdom’s share for French was just above the EU-28 average while its share for Spanish was considerably below the EU-28 average.

Almost three fifths (59.4 %) of upper secondary general education students (at ISCED level 3 general) in the EU-28 studied two or more foreign languages in 2016, up from 50.2 % in 2011; note that the 2011 value excludes Germany while the 2016 value is probably somewhat overestimated as it excludes the United Kingdom which historically had one of the lowest values for this indicator. Luxembourg stood out as the EU Member State with the highest proportion (100 %) of upper secondary general education students learning two or more foreign languages, although shares of 98.2 % or higher were also recorded in Slovakia, Czechia, Estonia, Romania, Finland and France; note this indicator includes all foreign languages, not just the selected ones shown in Figure 1 and Table 1. Ireland (14.3 %), Portugal (5.9 %) and Greece (0.8 %) recorded by far the lowest shares of students in upper secondary general education learning two or more foreign languages.
Figure 2: Proportion of students learning two or more languages in upper secondary education (general), 2011 and 2016 (%) Source: Eurostat (educ_thfrlan) and (educ_uoe_lang02)
Which are the foreign languages studied most commonly?
(% of students in general upper secondary education)

* EU

- English: 94%
- French: 22%
- German: 17%
- Spanish: 16%
- Russian: 3%
- Italian: 3%

Data from 2016.

EU Member States with the highest share of students learning the given language
(% of students in general upper secondary education)

- **English**
  - Sweden: 100%
  - Finland: 100%
  - Romania: 100%
  - Austria: 100%
  - Malta: 100%
  - France: 100%

- **French**
  - Luxembourg*: 100%
  - Romania: 84%
  - Spain: 57%
  - Croatia: 57%

- **German**
  - Luxembourg*: 100%
  - Slovenia: 65%
  - Croatia: 64%

- **Spanish**
  - France: 73%
  - Sweden: 40%
  - Germany: 20%

- **Italian**
  - Malta: 38%
  - Croatia: 23%
  - Cyprus: 17%

- **Russian**
  - Estonia: 68%
  - Latvia: 57%
  - Lithuania: 30%

* Luxembourg: although the official languages in Luxembourg are French, German and Luxembourgish, for the purpose of education statistics, French and German are counted as foreign languages.

Upper secondary education typically begins at the end of full-time compulsory education. The entrance age to this level is typically 15 or 16 years. Only foreign languages studied as compulsory subjects or as compulsory curricular options are included. The study of languages where the subject is offered in addition to the mainstream curriculum is not included.

Data from 2016.

Infographic: Foreign language learning in the European Union, 2016 Source: Eurostat (educ_uoe_lang01)
Between 2011 and 2016, Malta observed a very large increase in the proportion of students in upper secondary general education learning two or more foreign languages, up from 38.9% to 65.0%; there were 12 other EU Member States which reported an increase in their share of students learning at least two foreign languages between 2011 and 2016 (no comparison available for Germany or the United Kingdom), while the share was unchanged at 100.0% in Luxembourg. The largest decreases — reductions of more than 10 percentage points in the share of students in upper secondary general education learning at least two foreign languages — were recorded in Cyprus and Sweden.

Source data for tables and graphs

- Foreign language learning: tables and figures

Data sources

Data on the number of pupils studying foreign languages are related to the corresponding numbers of students enrolled; students enrolled in special schools are excluded.

The average number of foreign languages learned per pupil is collected for different ISCED levels. The information shown for upper secondary education (ISCED level 3 general) covers general education; it excludes information for vocational education at this level. The data refer to all pupils, even if teaching languages does not start in the first years of instruction for the particular ISCED level considered. This indicator is defined as the sum of language students divided by the total number of students enrolled in the educational level considered. Each student studying a foreign language is counted once for each language he or she is studying, in other words students studying more than one language are counted as many times as the number of languages studied.

The educational curriculum drawn up in each country defines the languages considered as foreign languages in that country and this definition is applied during data collection. Regional languages are included, if they are considered as alternatives to foreign languages by the curriculum. Only foreign languages studied as compulsory subjects or as compulsory curriculum options are included. The study of languages when the subject is offered in addition to the minimum curriculum is not included. Non-nationals studying their native language in special classes or those studying the language(s) of the host country are excluded.

Context

Foreign languages are essential for European citizens who would like to move, work, and study across the EU. Learning a foreign language is also considered as an important factor for participation in European society.

For several decades it has been mandatory for most European children to learn at least one foreign language during their compulsory education. In 2002, the Barcelona European Council recommended that at least two foreign languages should be taught to all pupils from a very early age. This recommendation has been implemented to varying degrees, usually for compulsory secondary education, either by making it mandatory to teach a second language, or ensuring that pupils have the possibility to study a second foreign language as part of their curriculum.

In September 2008, the European Commission adopted a Communication titled 'Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment' (COM(2008) 566 final), which was followed in November 2008 by a Council Resolution on a European strategy for multilingualism (2008/C 320/01). These addressed languages in the wider context of social cohesion and prosperity and focused on actions to encourage and assist citizens in acquiring language skills. The Resolution invited the EU Member States and the European Commission to:

- promote multilingualism with a view to strengthening social cohesion, intercultural dialogue and European construction;
- strengthen lifelong language learning;
- promote (better) multilingualism as a factor in the European economy’s competitiveness and people’s mobility and employability;
• promote linguistic diversity and intercultural dialogue by increasing assistance for translation, in order to encourage the circulation of works and the dissemination of ideas and knowledge in Europe and across the world;

• promote EU languages across the world.

Other articles
• Education and training statistics introduced

Publications
News releases
• 84 % of primary school children study foreign languages
• What languages are studied the most in the EU?
• 60% of lower secondary level pupils studied more than one foreign language in 2015

Statistical books
• Key data on education in Europe 2012
• Key data on teaching languages at school in Europe 2012

Main tables
• Education and training (t_educ)

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Methodology
• Education administrative data from 2013 onwards (ISCED 2011) (ESMS metadata file — educ_uoe_enr_enr_esms)
• International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)
• UNESCO OECD Eurostat (UOE) joint data collection – methodology

External links
• European Commission — Multilingualism
• European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice — Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe