

European Day of Languages

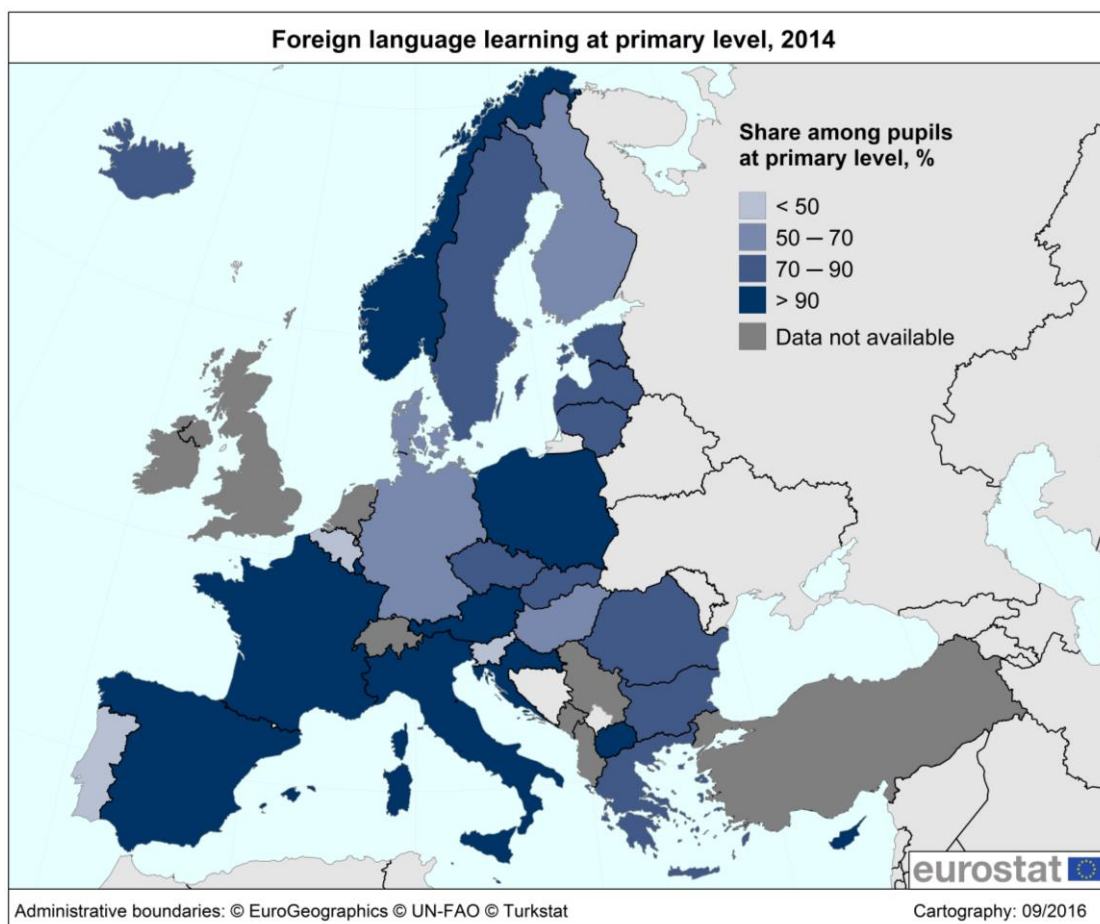
# More than 80% of primary school pupils in the EU were studying a foreign language in 2014

## English clearly dominant

In 2014, more than 18 million primary school pupils (or 84% of all the pupils at this level) in the **European Union** (EU) were studying at least one foreign language, including nearly 1 million (around 5%) studying two foreign languages or more. At primary level, English was by far the most popular language, studied by over 17 million pupils.

The dominance of English is confirmed at the lower secondary level (pupils aged around 11-15 depending on the national educational system) with over 17 million pupils in the **EU** learning English as a foreign language (97% of all the pupils at this level) in 2014. French (5 million or 34% of the relevant population) came second, followed by German (3 million or 23%), Spanish (2 million or 13%), Russian (0.5 million or 3%) and Italian (0.2 million or 1%).

On the occasion of the European Day of Languages, celebrated each year on 26 September, **Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union**, publishes data on language learning at school. Currently there are 24 official languages recognised within the **EU**. In addition there are regional languages, minority languages, and languages spoken by migrant populations. It should also be noted that several EU Member States have more than one official language.



## Less than half of primary school pupils study a foreign language in Portugal, Belgium and Slovenia

All or nearly all pupils at primary level in 2014 attended foreign language classes in **Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta** (all 100.0%), **Croatia, Italy and Austria** (all 99.9%), **Spain** (99.5%), as well as in **France** (99.0%) and **Poland** (97.7%). At **EU** level, this share stood at 83.7%. In some Member States, young pupils were studying two or more foreign languages, particularly in **Luxembourg** (83.5%), followed at a distance by **Estonia** (32.6%) and **Greece** (28.7%). In contrast, less than half of primary school pupils were studying a foreign language in 2014 in **Portugal** (36.2%), **Belgium** (37.0%) and **Slovenia** (48.4%).

English is the most common foreign language studied at primary level in every EU Member State, except **Belgium** and **Luxembourg**, both multilingual countries. The second most common foreign language gives a more varied picture. German, which is the most learnt foreign language in **Luxembourg**, was the second main foreign language studied by primary school pupils in eight other Member States, with the highest shares of learners recorded in **Hungary** (20.1%) and **Croatia** (20.0%). French occupied this position on the **EU** level and in seven Member States, with the largest proportions being notably recorded in **Luxembourg** (83.5%), **Greece** (16.1%) and **Romania** (13.2%).

**Foreign language learning at primary level (% of pupils), 2014**

	Total	of which:		Most common foreign language		Second most common foreign language	
		1 language	2 or more languages				
<b>EU</b>	<b>83.7</b>	<b>79.2</b>	<b>4.6</b>	English	79.4	French	3.7
<b>Belgium</b>	37.0	37.0	0.1	*	*	English	5.1
<b>Bulgaria</b>	82.8	81.5	1.3	English	73.9	Russian	5.9
<b>Czech Republic</b>	73.0	72.2	0.8	English	72.3	German	1.2
<b>Denmark</b>	57.0	57.0	-	English	57.0	-	-
<b>Germany</b>	66.4	65.2	1.2	English	62.3	French	3.7
<b>Estonia</b>	77.8	45.2	32.6	English	70.1	Estonian*	22.7
<b>Ireland*</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Greece</b>	81.2	52.5	28.7	English	80.7	French	16.1
<b>Spain</b>	99.5	93.7	5.8	English	99.1	French	5.3
<b>France</b>	99.0	97.2	1.7	English	92.7	German	5.5
<b>Croatia</b>	99.9	81.1	18.7	English	91.2	German	20.0
<b>Italy</b>	99.9	97.6	2.3	English	99.0	German	1.9
<b>Cyprus</b>	100.0	91.9	8.1	English	99.8	French	2.1
<b>Latvia</b>	74.0	59.3	14.7	English	72.0	Russian	10.9
<b>Lithuania</b>	73.9	73.6	0.3	English	73.0	German	0.5
<b>Luxembourg</b>	100.0	16.5	83.5	German*	100.0	French*	83.5
<b>Hungary</b>	59.1	57.7	1.4	English	40.3	German	20.1
<b>Malta</b>	100.0	96.7	3.3	English*	100.0	Italian	1.5
<b>Netherlands</b>	:	62.1	:	English	62.1	:	:
<b>Austria</b>	99.9	97.8	2.1	English	99.6	Slovenian	0.7
<b>Poland</b>	97.7	86.8	11.0	English	94.8	German	6.2
<b>Portugal</b>	36.2	35.8	0.4	English	35.9	Spanish	0.1
<b>Romania</b>	83.3	81.8	1.4	English	69.3	French	13.2
<b>Slovenia</b>	48.4	47.9	0.5	English	47.0	German	1.8
<b>Slovakia</b>	85.6	80.1	5.5	English	82.1	Slovak*	6.8
<b>Finland</b>	68.6	55.3	13.3	English	66.0	Swedish*	4.5
<b>Sweden</b>	86.8	77.3	9.5	English	86.8	Spanish	5.2
<b>United Kingdom</b>	:	:	:	:	:	:	:
<b>Iceland</b>	72.9	55.2	17.6	English	73.0	Danish	17.3
<b>Liechtenstein</b>	100.0	100.0	0.0	English	100.0	-	-
<b>Norway</b>	100.0	100.0	-	English	100.0	-	-
<b>FYR of Macedonia</b>	100.0	99.3	0.7	English	100.0	German	0.4

\* See country notes.

: Data not available - Not applicable

Data for the EU include estimates for Netherlands and exclude the United Kingdom.

The source dataset for the number of languages can be found [here](#), and for the languages studied [here](#).

## French ranked second at lower secondary level

English, which is mandatory in several countries, was studied in 2014 by an overwhelming majority of pupils at lower secondary level in almost all EU Member States. Only in **Belgium** (46.3%), **Luxembourg** (54.0%), **Hungary** (69.3%) and **Bulgaria** (87.2%) was the share of pupils learning English below 90%.

French was the second most popular foreign language studied at lower secondary level in the EU. The highest proportions of pupils learning French as a foreign language were registered in **Luxembourg** (100.0%), **Cyprus** (88.1%) and **Romania** (84.6%). French was widely studied as a foreign language also in **Italy** (67.7%), **Portugal** (64.7%), **Ireland** (60.0%) and the **Netherlands** (57.2%).

German – the third most popular foreign language in the EU at lower secondary level – was particularly taught in **Luxembourg** (100.0%), **Denmark** (73.6%), **Poland** (69.0%), **Slovakia** (55.2%) and the **Netherlands** (51.1%).

Spanish was popular in **Sweden** (43.9% of lower secondary school pupils), followed by **France** (37.8%), **Italy** (22.0%), **Portugal** (20.8%) and **Ireland** (15.4%), while Italian was mainly taught in **Malta** (59.8%) and **Croatia** (11.6%).

Russian, the most popular non-EU language at lower secondary level in the EU (almost 0.5 million learners), was most commonly studied in the Baltic Member States – **Lithuania** (66.7%), **Estonia** (64.7%) **Latvia** (60.4%) – as well as in **Slovakia** (21.2%) and **Bulgaria** (17.9%).

Foreign languages studied at lower secondary level (% of pupils), 2014

	English	French	German	Spanish	Russian	Italian
<b>EU</b>	<b>97.3</b>	<b>33.7</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>13.1</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>1.1</b>
<b>Belgium</b>	46.3	*	0.7*	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Bulgaria</b>	87.2	2.7	6.8	1.5	17.9	0.4
<b>Czech Republic</b>	97.1	3.3	41.7	2.0	11.8	0.1
<b>Denmark</b>	100.0	10.4	73.6	-	-	-
<b>Germany</b>	:	24.3	0.0	4.0	1.5	0.3
<b>Estonia</b>	97.3	2.6	13.2	0.2	64.7	0.0
<b>Ireland</b>	-	60.0	21.4	15.4	0.0	0.8
<b>Greece</b>	98.1	48.5	46.5	:	-	:
<b>Spain</b>	100.0	41.1	3.6	0.0	0.0	0.2
<b>France</b>	98.6	-	14.7	37.8	0.1	3.1
<b>Croatia</b>	97.6	1.5	43.8	0.1	0.0	11.6
<b>Italy</b>	100.0	67.7	8.8	22.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Cyprus</b>	99.9	88.1	1.4	0.5	0.7	0.2
<b>Latvia</b>	96.8	1.4	12.8	0.0	60.4	0.0
<b>Lithuania</b>	97.4	3.4	11.2	0.0	66.7	0.0
<b>Luxembourg</b>	54.0	100.0*	100.0*	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Hungary</b>	69.3	0.5	31.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
<b>Malta</b>	100.0*	34.0	11.6	8.1	0.4	59.8
<b>Netherlands</b>	95.2	57.2	51.1	1.9	-	-
<b>Austria</b>	99.8	5.3	0.0	1.0	0.2	2.5
<b>Poland</b>	97.1	3.6	69.0	1.9	7.4	0.4
<b>Portugal</b>	95.4	64.7	0.8	20.8	0.0	0.0
<b>Romania</b>	99.4	84.6	10.7	0.5	0.2	0.4
<b>Slovenia</b>	99.7	2.9	47.8	2.1	0.0	2.8
<b>Slovakia</b>	95.9	2.5	55.2	0.7	21.2	0.1
<b>Finland</b>	99.4	5.7	9.9	1.9	2.4	0.1
<b>Sweden</b>	100.0	15.6	19.3	43.9	0.0	0.1
<b>United Kingdom</b>	:	:	:	:	:	:
<b>Iceland</b>	99.2	1.5	1.0	2.9	0.0	0.0
<b>Liechtenstein</b>	100.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Norway</b>	100.0	13.6	25.1	32.0	0.1	0.0
<b>FYR of Macedonia</b>	100.0	47.5	48.0	0.0	0.9	1.7

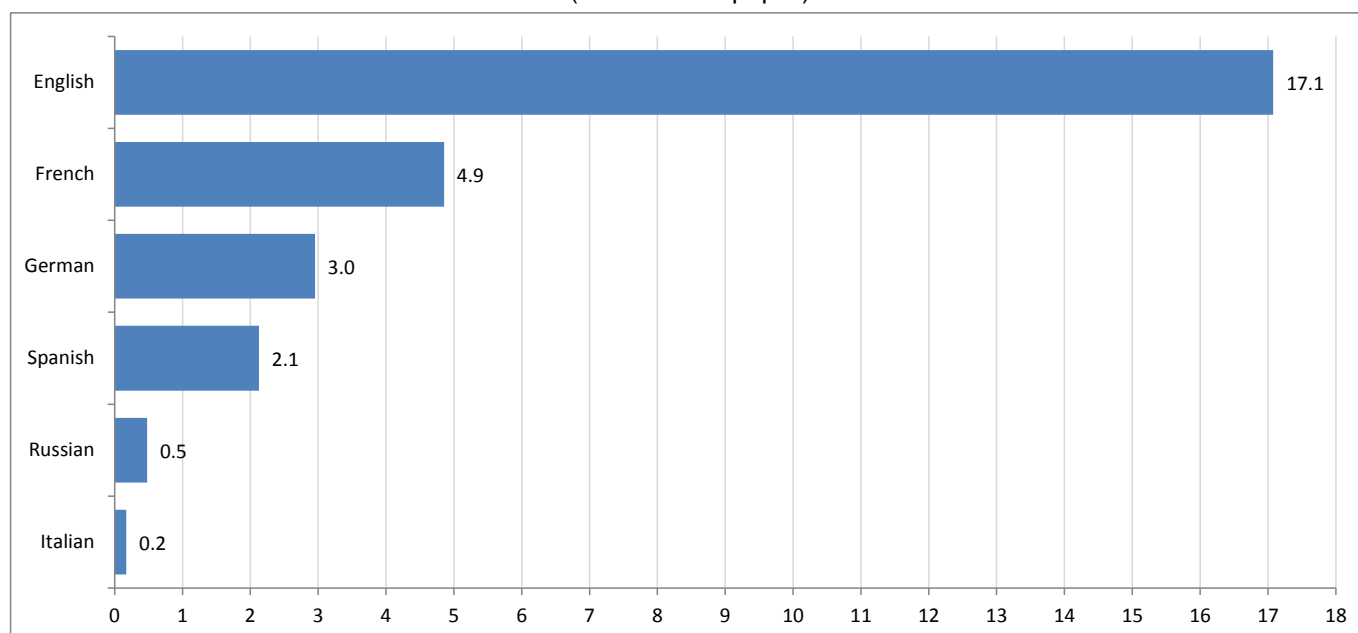
\* See country notes

: Data not available - Not applicable

Data for the EU are estimated.

The source dataset can be found [here](#).

## Foreign language learning in the EU at lower secondary level, 2014 (in millions of pupils)



### Methods and definitions

**Primary education** (International Standard Classification of Education level 1) begins between five and seven years of age, is generally the start of compulsory education and covers six years of full-time schooling.

**Lower secondary education** (International Standard Classification of Education level 2) continues the basic programmes of the primary level, although teaching is typically more subject-focused. Most often, pupils enter lower secondary education at the age of 11 or 12, and the end of this level coincides with the end of compulsory education.

The main source of data is the Eurostat specific questionnaire on foreign language learning closely linked to the UOE (UNESCO, OECD and Eurostat) data collection on education statistics.

### Country notes

**Belgium:** the official state languages are Dutch, French and German; notably French is considered as a foreign language in the Belgian Flemish Community and Flemish (Dutch) is considered as a foreign language in the Belgian French Community. At primary level, the most popular foreign language in the Belgian French Community is Dutch (37.2% of pupils), and in the Belgian Flemish Community, it is French (27.0%). At lower secondary level, 99.9% of pupils study French in the Flemish community, and 51.1% study Dutch in the French community.

**Estonia:** in schools where Estonian is not the language of instruction, Estonian is counted as a foreign language for statistical purposes.

**Ireland:** in addition to English, all pupils at primary level study Irish. However, Irish is not considered a foreign language.

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

**Malta:** English is an official language alongside Maltese, but for the purpose of education statistics, it is counted as a foreign language.

**Slovakia:** in schools where Slovakian is not the language of instruction, Slovak is counted as a foreign language for statistical purposes.

**Finland:** Swedish is an official language alongside Finnish, but for the purpose of education statistics, it is counted as a foreign language.

### More information

Metadata of foreign language learning statistics.

Eurostat Statistics Explained article on foreign language learning statistics.

Eurostat infographics on foreign language learning at upper secondary level.

The Council of Europe's website of the European Day of Languages.

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