

# Foreign language teaching in schools in Europe

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## Statistics in focus

### POPULATION AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS

THEME 3 – 4/2001

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Foreign language learning has been a cause of concern in the Community for decades. The Commission's White Paper on Education and Training (1995) stressed how important it is for all school pupils to have at least two languages other than their own by the time they leave upper secondary education. Languages are one of the five key skills defined at the Lisbon summit of March 2000. Among other recent initiatives, the European Parliament and the Council have declared 2001 as the "European Year of Languages".

The results of a recently-published Eurobarometer survey on "Europeans and languages" show that 71% of Europeans believe that everybody should be able to speak at least one Community language in addition to his mother tongue, and 93% of parents believe that language learning is important. According to the same source, the first, second and third foreign languages are mainly learned at secondary school and on holiday abroad, and the learning method most frequently used by people in the EU is group classes with a teacher (46%), followed by informal conversation with a native speaker (17%), time spent in the country (15%) and home study (12%).

The following analysis sets out the language-learning situation in the primary and secondary levels of formal education (i.e. ISCED levels 1, 2 and 3). It does not deal with language learning in higher education. It shows the degree of contact available to pupils at school with modern, living languages as a preparation for mobility. This is why no reference is made to Latin, classical Greek or Esperanto.

"Foreign languages" generally form part of the curriculum as subjects to be taught, but they can also be used as the language in which other subjects are taught. The indicators set out in this publication relate to foreign languages taught as subjects in their own right.

The statistics are derived from Eurostat data on foreign language learning in the school system and (except where otherwise indicated) relate to the academic year 1998-99. The final comment relates to a time series. Data are presented for the 15 Member States of the European Union, the EFTA/EEA countries, the twelve candidate countries and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Except for the data relating to Malta and the FYROM, definitions and qualitative data on the organisation of foreign language teaching in the national educational systems are drawn from a study recently published by Eurydice, the information network on Education in Europe. References for that study are given in the bibliography.



## Foreign languages as subjects or as the medium for teaching another subject

Most usually, a foreign language is taught as a subject in a specific course. But it can also be used as the language for teaching a subject other than the language itself, i.e. as the medium for transmitting some other content (which may be oral, written, or both).

The use of two or more languages for teaching in the same school can have two distinct aims: either to improve the pupils' skills in certain very widely-used languages, or to meet the language needs of a community whose language is not that of the country's majority population (and hence preserve and promote the mother tongue of minority, regional or migrant populations) (Eurydice, p. 22).

In half the countries covered by the Eurydice study, some schools offer a regional or minority language as the only

teaching language (total immersion). This is most frequently found in compulsory schooling; at secondary level the minority or regional languages gradually give way to the language of the state as the principal teaching language. Parallel use of both a regional or minority language and the language of the state as teaching languages (partial immersion) can be found in half the countries. It frequently happens that the two methods exist side by side in the same region at the same level of education, but in separate educational establishments (Eurydice, p.33).

**Very few data are available on the language of teaching, and the remainder of this publication concerns only foreign languages as subjects in their own right.**

### The first foreign language as a compulsory subject usually begins at the end of primary or the start of secondary schooling

Pilot projects in which foreign language learning starts in pre-primary education are recent and involve only a small number of countries.

Table 1 shows the age at which the first foreign language

should be introduced as a compulsory subject, according to the official recommendations of the country's central and/or local education authorities. This means the age at which all pupils must start learning that language.

*Table 1- Age at which the first foreign language is introduced as a compulsory subject, 1998/99*

European Union															
Bfr	Bnl	DK	D	EL	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK
10	12	10	10	9	8	11	-	8	6	10	8	10	7-9	7-10	11

EFTA/EEA			CANDIDATE COUNTRIES & MK												
IS	LI	NO	BG	CY	CZ	EE	HU	LV	LT	MK	MT	PL	RO	SI	SK
11	8	6	11	9	9	9	10	9	9	11	6	11	9	11	10

Source: Eurydice

MK/MT: Source Eurostat

Belgium: in Brussels and the German-speaking Community, the study of the first compulsory foreign language starts at age eight.

Italy: since the beginning of the 1992/1993 academic year, the tuition of a foreign language as a compulsory subject has been gradually introduced for all pupils from age 7.

Sweden: a third of pupils start to learn the first foreign language at age 7, a third start at 9 years and of the remaining third, half start at 8 and half at 10 years.

United Kingdom: without Scotland

All countries except Ireland require all pupils to learn at least one foreign language. In Ireland, primary and secondary schoolchildren learn both Irish and English, but neither is held to be a "foreign" language.

In most European countries, the theoretical age for beginning the first compulsory foreign language is between 8 and 11, i.e. the end of primary or very beginning of secondary education.

Only four countries escape this pattern. In Luxembourg, Norway and Malta, the first foreign language is begun at the age of six, and in the Flemish Community of Belgium, at 12.

The authorities in Finland and Sweden do not set any specific age for starting the first compulsory foreign language, and the decision is left to individual establishments.



Table 2 - The most taught foreign languages at primary level (ISCED 1) and percentage of pupils who study them, per country, 1998/99

	European Union															
	Bfr	Bnl	DK	D	EL	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK
1st foreign language	nl 32	▲ 33	● 31	● 14	● 46	● 73	● 36	▲ 2	● 48	■ 96	● 19	● 75		● 63	● 76	
2nd foreign language	● 5			▲ 4	▲ 1	▲ 2	■ 7	■ 1	▲ 8	▲ 80		▲ 1	(:)	■ 8	■ 5	(:)
3rd foreign language	■ 1						◇ 1	◇ 1	■ 1	● 2		it 1		sv 4	▲ 3	

	EFTA/EEA		
	IS	LI	NO
1st foreign language	dk 25		● 100
2nd foreign language	● 13	(:)	
3rd foreign language			

	Candidate countries & MK												
	BG	CY	CZ	EE	HU	LV	LT	MK	MT	PL	RO	SI	SK
1st foreign language	● 10	● 52	● 22	● 53		● 38	● 23		● 100	● 25	▲ 33	● 20	sk 7
2nd foreign language	◎ 2		■ 20	ee 25	(:)	■ 3	■ 6	(:)		■ 15	● 21	■ 2	● 5
3rd foreign language	■ 2		■ 12			◎ 2	▲ 1			◎ 13	■ 3		■ 3

● English ▲ French ■ German ◇ Spanish ◎ Russian

dk=danish ; ee=estonian ; it=italian ; nl=dutch ; s=swedish ; sk=slovak

Source: Eurostat

The percentages are calculated on total number of primary school pupils, even if foreign language learning is not introduced from the first years.

Italy: 1997/98 data

Hungary: data are not available separately for levels ISCED 1 and ISCED 2.

Poland: the ISCED 2 level data are included with the ISCED 1 level data.

The foreign language most widely taught in primary education is English. This applies in the Member States of the EU and amongst the candidate countries. Overall, 41% of the EU's pupils are studying English. In the EEA, the highest percentages of primary schoolchildren studying English are to be found in Spain, Austria, Finland, Sweden and Norway, and amongst the candidate countries, Cyprus, Estonia and Malta (where it is one of the official languages). Very few primary schoolchildren learn English in Belgium, Luxembourg and Slovakia.

French is the second most important language in the EU, studied in all by 5% of primary schoolchildren. As a rule the percentage does not exceed 10%, except in the Flemish Community of Belgium and in Luxembourg, where all children learn French from a certain age. French is an official language

of both countries. A third of all primary schoolchildren in Romania learn French, but in the remaining candidate countries the percentage is very small.

German is taught at primary school in most EU and candidate countries, though the percentage of pupils learning the language is relatively low except in Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic and Luxembourg, with 12%, 15%, 20% and 96% respectively.

Other languages taught at primary level include Dutch in the French Community of Belgium, Spanish in France and Ireland, Italian in Austria, Swedish in Finland and Danish in Iceland, Russian in Bulgaria, Latvia and Poland, plus the special cases of Estonian in Estonia and Slovak in Slovakia, both taught as foreign languages in some of the countries' schools.

## Foreign languages are taught throughout secondary education

All pupils in lower general secondary education learn at least one foreign language. The mean number of foreign languages learned by such pupils in the EU is 1.3. The lowest figures are found in the French Community of Belgium and in Slovenia. Relatively high figures are found in Greece, Luxembourg, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, Cyprus, Estonia, Lithuania and Romania.

Pupils in upper secondary education learn at least two languages in the Flemish Community of Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, Finland, Sweden, Cyprus, Estonia, Lithuania, Slovenia and Slovakia. The lowest figures are found in Spain, Ireland, Italy, Hungary, Malta and Romania.

Table 3 - Percentage of pupils studying English, French, German and Russian in upper and lower general secondary school (ISCED3), 1998/99

	European Union																
	EU-15	B fr	B ni	DK	D	EL	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK
<b>ISCED 2</b>																	
English	92.5	39.2	49.0	100.0	93.8	99.0	97.4	94.4	.	80.8	53.0	.	98.4	.	98.4	100.0	.
French	32.9	.	97.2	4.5	22.3	80.7	44.9	.	74.9	40.7	96.9	.	4.1	.	8.7	22.1	.
German	12.9	1.8	.	60.4	.	12.3	1.7	18.6	27.2	2.4	96.2	.	.	.	22.4	42.3	.
Russian	1.1	.	.	.	2.7	.	.	0.2	.	.	.	.	0.3	.	1.7	0.0	.
<b>ISCED 3</b>																	
English	92.4	88.9	100.0	100.0	91.2	88.5	94.3	99.2	.	79.4	92.4	98.4	97.5	.	99.6	99.7	.
French	28.1	.	100.0	33.0	32.7	30.8	14.8	.	64.4	21.4	88.9	29.2	44.2	.	23.8	26.2	.
German	20.0	7.2	58.7	82.7	.	4.5	0.8	34.3	19.5	7.1	86.5	41.0	.	.	49.9	60.2	.
Russian	0.9	0.0	.	0.8	3.0	.	.	0.7	.	.	.	.	1.9	.	6.5	0.8	.

	EFTA/EEA			CANDIDATE COUNTRIES & MK												
	IS	LI	NO	BG	CY	CZ	EE	HU	LV	LT	MK	MT	PL	RO	SI	SK
<b>ISCED 2</b>																
English	99.5	.	100.0	50.9	100.0	54.3	84.1	33.1	83.0	71.4	73.1	100.0	.	61.7	82.1	57.9
French	2.0	.	12.1	16.1	100.0	1.7	1.5	0.9	1.2	7.4	37.2	47.8	.	80.3	.	2.8
German	8.2	.	35.2	14.8	.	45.5	31.1	36.2	26.8	33.8	3.7	9.5	.	10.2	14.5	53.0
Russian	.	.	.	25.0	.	0.2	51.6	0.7	42.1	54.7	4.8	0.0	.	13.0	.	7.7
<b>ISCED 3</b>																
English	56.4	.	.	75.8	100.0	95.6	87.3	54.9	88.6	73.9	74.8	100.0	86.0	76.0	94.6	94.2
French	12.2	.	.	22.7	100.0	17.1	4.0	6.0	4.5	8.8	35.5	12.8	16.7	83.7	9.1	10.8
German	29.4	.	.	34.1	.	81.3	44.6	46.4	57.2	36.7	9.3	2.0	61.0	11.7	82.4	82.0
Russian	0.1	.	.	39.7	.	1.8	60.1	1.3	32.6	70.5	7.1	.	23.7	10.6	0.1	3.5

Source: Eurostat

Hungary: the ISCED 1 level data are included in the ISCED 2 level data.

Poland: the data are not available separately for levels ISCED 1 and ISCED 2.

Iceland, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: at ISCED 3 level, vocational training programmes are included in general education.

**English** again appears as the most widely taught language at lower secondary level. Overall in the European Union, 93% of pupils learn English, with figures exceeding 90% in all EU and EFTA countries except the two Belgian Communities (39% and 49% respectively), Italy (81%) and Luxembourg (53%). In the candidate countries the proportion is smaller, generally between 50% and 85%, except in Cyprus and Malta where all pupils learn English.

English is even more widespread at upper secondary level. The percentage of pupils studying English is close to exceed 90% in all EU/EFTA countries except Italy and Iceland. It exceeds 80% and sometimes even 90% in most candidate countries and the FYROM; only Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania and Romania have lower figures (from 55% to 76%).

**French** is taught at lower secondary level in all EU/EFTA countries and all candidate countries except Slovenia. Overall, 33% of European Union pupils learn French at this level, but the figures vary widely from one country to another. The highest are in the Flemish Community of Belgium and in Luxembourg (97%), Greece (81%), Ireland (75%), Spain (45%) and Italy (41%), and in Cyprus (100%), Romania (80%), Malta (48%) and the FYROM (37%). At upper secondary level

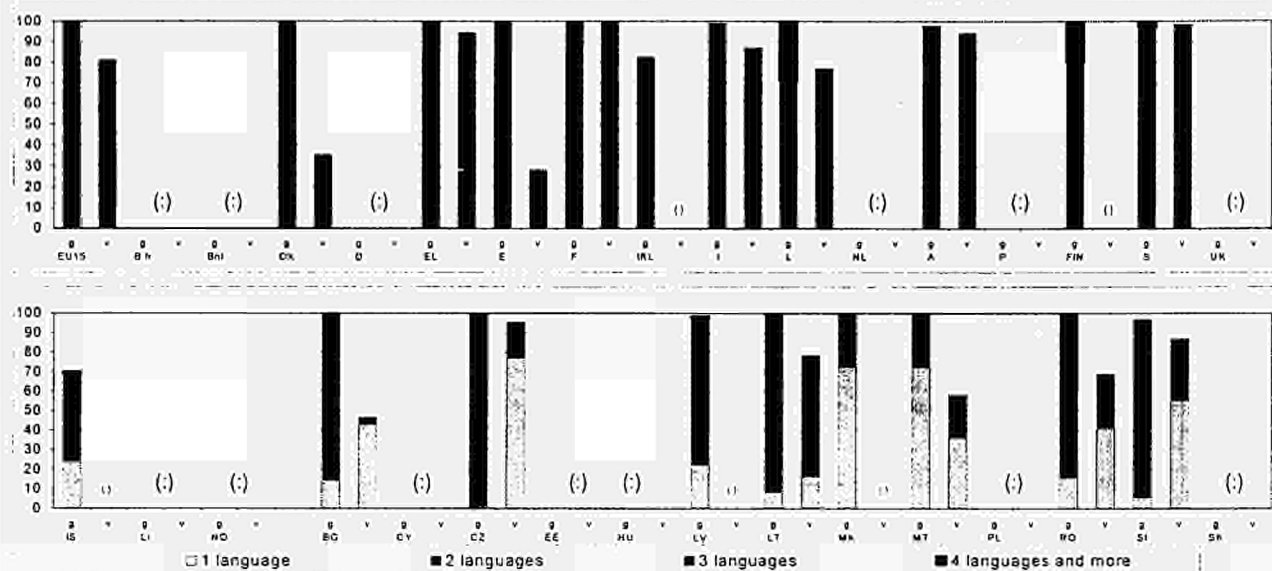
the EU percentage is slightly lower at 28%. The same countries produce the highest percentages, though in Greece, Italy, Spain and Malta they are not as high as in lower secondary education.

**German** is also taught in virtually all countries, though not at lower secondary level in the Flemish Community of Belgium and not at all in Cyprus. Overall in the European Union, 13% of pupils learn German in lower secondary and 20% in upper secondary education. In all candidate countries except Malta and Romania the figures are higher than the EU average at both levels. FYROM is also an exception. The countries with the highest percentages of pupils learning German in upper secondary education are the Flemish Community of Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, Finland and Sweden and, to a lesser extent, France, the Netherlands and Iceland. Figures are lowest in Greece, Spain and Italy.

The numbers of young people learning **Russian** in the EU are very low. At both secondary levels the figures for Russian are much higher in the candidate countries, notably in Bulgaria (25% and 40% respectively), Estonia (52% and 60%), Latvia (42% and 33%), Lithuania (55% and 70%) and Poland (24% in upper secondary education).

## In upper secondary education, pupils in general studies learn more languages than those following vocational courses

Figure 2 - Percentage of young people in general and vocational upper secondary education (ISCED 3) studying foreign languages, breakdown according to the number of languages studied, 1998/99



Quelle: Eurostat

g = general v = vocational

Denmark: the figure listed for vocational training is under-estimated.

France: a part of the training programmes is included in the general education.

Italy, Austria: data on the study of languages are not available for certain vocational programmes.

Iceland, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: professional training programmes are included in general education.

Latvia: 1997/98 data.

Generally, European Union pupils in general secondary education learn more languages than those following vocational courses. Two groups of countries can be distinguished: those where participation in language courses does not vary much with the course followed, and those where it varies significantly.

In the countries for which data are available, the percentage of

pupils learning foreign languages is much the same in vocational and general courses in Greece, France, Austria and Sweden, and in the Czech Republic and Lithuania. The difference is particularly striking in Spain, Bulgaria and Malta.

It can be noted throughout Europe that the proportion of pupils learning more than one language is higher in general education.

## Little change in foreign language learning over the last five years

Between 1995 and 1999, there was a slight rise in the average number of foreign languages learned by primary and upper secondary school pupils in the European Union (from 0.3 to 0.5 and from 1.2 to 1.5 respectively). In lower secondary it remained steady at 1.3.

In most countries the average number of languages studied remained stable or fell slightly. Some Member States saw a slight rise at some levels of education, and this may indicate some enhancement of language-learning policy at those levels

of the educational system: primary school in France, Italy, Austria and Sweden, lower secondary in Spain, upper secondary in the Flemish Community and throughout secondary in Greece. In Sweden the figures have risen quite sharply throughout.

The pattern is less clear in the candidate countries. But the data have been collected in these countries only since 1998 (academic 1996/97). Slight improvements have been noted in Lithuania (lower secondary) and Slovenia (upper secondary).

## ➤ ESSENTIAL INFORMATION – METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

### Abbreviations

: not available      . not applicable      0 negligible      - nil

**B** Belgium, **DK** Denmark, **D** Germany, **EL** Greece, **E** Spain, **F** France, **IRL** Ireland, **I** Italy, **L** Luxembourg, **NL** Netherlands, **A** Austria, **P** Portugal, **FIN** Finland, **S** Sweden, **UK** United Kingdom, **IS** Iceland, **LI** Liechtenstein, **NO** Norway, **BG** Bulgaria, **CY** Cyprus, **CZ** Czech Republic, **HU** Hungary, **EE** Estonia, **LV** Latvia, **LT** Lithuania, **MK** Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, **MT** Malta, **PL** Poland, **RO** Romania, **SI** Slovenia, **SK** Slovakia

**EU-15**: European average (estimated)

**Sources** - Data on participation in language courses and on the number of languages studied in education systems at ISCED levels 1, 2 and 3 are derived from the Eurostat questionnaire on foreign languages. Information on the theoretical age at which the first compulsory foreign language is introduced is taken from Eurydice, the Information Network on Education in Europe ([www.eurydice.org](http://www.eurydice.org)).

### Description of levels of teaching according to the ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education, revised 1997)

**ISCED 0** (pre-primary) - Precedes primary education and in all but a few cases is not compulsory. Data related to establishments whose aim is educational and whose staff must be qualified in education.

**ISCED 1** (primary) - Begins between age 4 and age 7 according to country, is always compulsory and as a rule lasts five or six years. Programmes are normally designed to give students a sound basic education in reading, writing and mathematics and an elementary understanding of other subjects.

**ISCED 2** (lower secondary) - Forms part of compulsory schooling in all the countries considered. Programmes are usually on a more subject-oriented pattern. The end of this level frequently coincides with the end of compulsory full-time education.

**ISCED 3** (upper secondary) - Normally begins around the age of 15 or 16 years with the completion of compulsory full-time education. Programmes are more specialised and teachers often need to be more qualified than for ISCED level 2. Teaching may be general, pre-vocational, or vocational. Many offer pupils access to ISCED level 5 (tertiary education).

### Some definitions

**Teaching language**: the language used as a medium for teaching a greater or lesser part of the curriculum

**Foreign language**: any language described as such or similarly (modern language, second language) in the curriculum or other official document relating to education.

**Official language**: a language used for legal and administrative purposes in a specific region of a given state. Official status may relate to part of the whole of the state's territory. Languages which have official status throughout a state are known as Official state languages.

**Regional or minority language**: a language which is traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population [and] different\* from the official language(s) of that state. (This definition is taken from the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, Council of Europe, 1992) Regional or minority languages may have the status of official languages, but by definition their official use is restricted to the area where they are spoken.

It may happen that in certain countries the number of pupils registered at a given level and taken into account in the preceding analysis differs slightly from the total number registered at that level. As a rule the difference is accounted for by pupils in special education (who do not follow language courses and are therefore not included in the figures) or because data are not available on the number of pupils registered for language courses in some curricula or some establishments.

**B**: at ISCED levels 2 and 3, modular social promotion programmes are not included – **F**: at ISCED levels 2 and 3, data relate only to programmes organised by the Ministry of Education – **IRL**: at ISCED levels 2 and 3, data relate only to full time pupils in programmes organised by the Ministry of Education – **I**: adult education programmes are not included – **L**: international schools and -private non-subsidised establishments are included – **NL**: At ISCED level 3, only full-time pupils are included – **FIN**: at ISCED level 2, tenth-year *Peruskoulu/Grundskola* pupils are not included; adults not included in ISCED levels 2 and 3 – **S**: only compulsory schooling (*Grundskola*) is included – **IS**: data for ISCED levels 1 and 2 estimated from the programme of studies – **CZ**: at ISCED levels 2 and 3, data relate only to full time pupils – **HU**: at ISCED levels 2 and 3, data relate only to full time pupils – **PL**: adult education programmes are not included – **SI**: adult education programmes are not included.

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## For information on methodology

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