

More students study foreign languages in Europe but perceptions of skill levels differ significantly

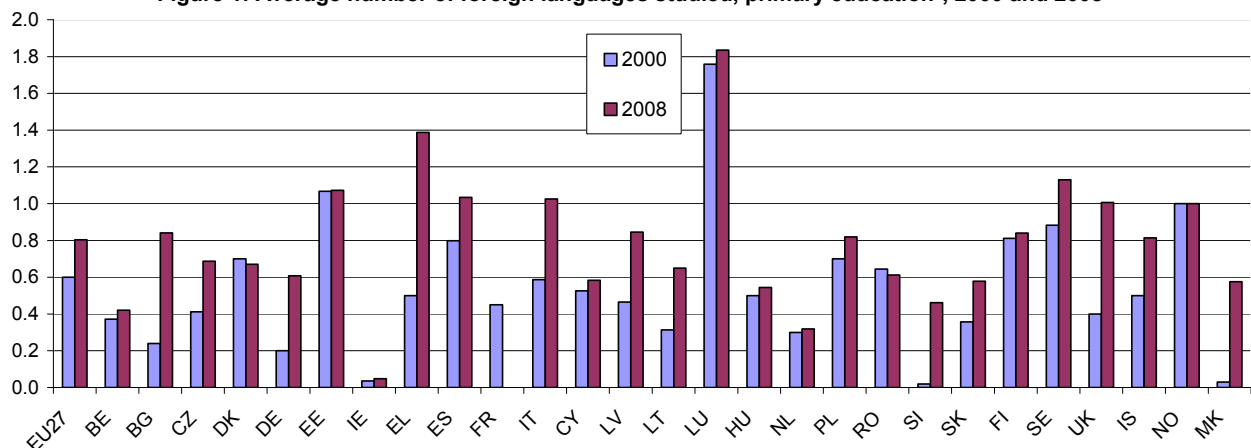
Linguistic diversity in Europe: language learning at school and how adults perceive their foreign language skills

At its meeting in Barcelona in 2002 the European Council set the target of ‘mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age’¹. Since then, linguistic diversity has been encouraged throughout the EU, in the form of learning in schools, universities, adult education centres and enterprises.

This issue of Statistics in Focus highlights the following findings:

- Significantly more primary school pupils were learning a foreign language in 2008 than in 2000. This is also the case in lower secondary education but there the progress was more modest.
- By contrast, no progress was made in the number of languages studied in upper secondary education from 2000 to 2008.
- Students in upper secondary general education study more languages than students in the vocational stream at the same level.
- English is by far the foreign language most studied at all levels of education, followed by French, German, Russian, and, to a lesser extent, Spanish.
- More than one-third of adults aged 25 to 64 perceive² that they do not know any foreign language. A slightly smaller proportion say that they know one foreign language.
- The best known foreign language by far is perceived to be English, followed by German, Russian, French and Spanish.
- A higher proportion of the younger adult population claim to speak foreign languages than of the older generations, except in some Eastern-European Member States.
- Likewise, a correlation was found between a high level of education and a higher perceived proficiency in foreign languages.

Figure 1: Average number of foreign languages studied, primary education*, 2000 and 2008



Source: Eurostat, Education statistics, UOE data collection ([educ_ilang](#))

Notes:

- MT, AT, PT missing, FR 2008 missing

* primary education = ISCED level 1

- the average number of languages learned is calculated using the number of pupils learning languages divided by the number of pupils, in primary education.

The starting age for learning languages as well as the number of languages learned explain the figures (see also methodological notes)

Two data sources are used in this issue of *Statistics in Focus*. First, the Eurostat data on foreign language learning (education statistics, UOE data collection) for the 2007/08 school year. All foreign languages (including all 23 official EU languages) that are taught as 'foreign languages' in schools are included.

Second, data from the adult education survey module on self-perceived language skills of the population aged 25 to 64 years old are also used. The adult education survey was carried out between 2005 and 2008, with 2007 used as a common reference year. Further information on data sources is given in the notes on 'Methodology'.

More and more primary school pupils are learning a foreign language, less so in lower secondary education

Figure 1 shows a marked upward trend in the average number of foreign languages studied by primary school pupils. Between 2000 and 2008 the average number of languages studied in the EU increased by roughly a third (from 0.6 to 0.8). There were significant increases in some countries, such as Greece, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, although the trend was also positive in most other countries.

These increases are basically due to the fact that, over the years, studying at least one foreign language at primary school level has become compulsory in every European country with the sole exception of Ireland³. However, the age at which a foreign language is taught for the first time varies significantly from one country to another.

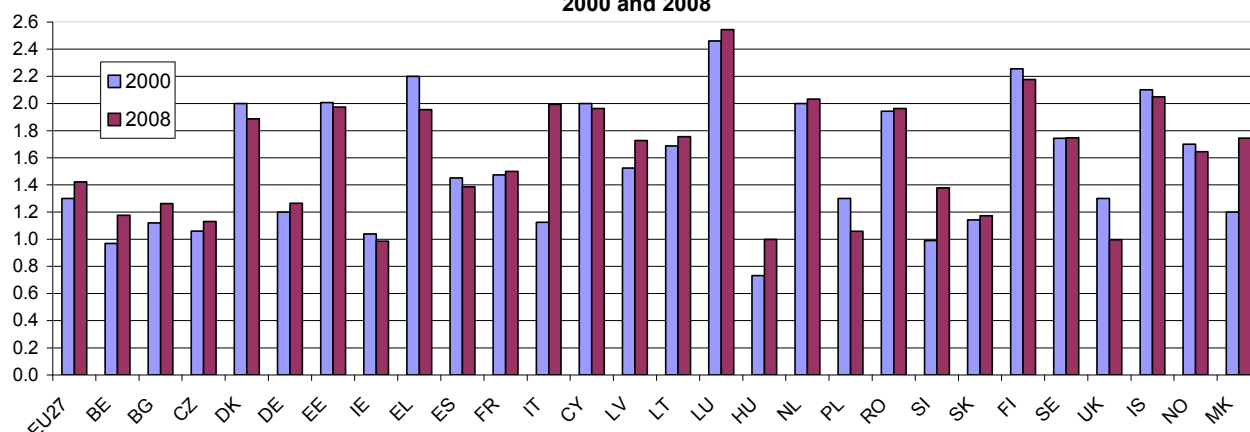
Figure 1 illustrates the number of languages studied, taking into account the whole period of primary education. Therefore, in countries where all children are taught a foreign language as a compulsory subject from the first year of primary education onwards, on average one language (or more) is studied. This is the case for Italy, Luxembourg and Norway. On the other hand, in several countries compulsory learning of a first foreign language begins some years after the start

of primary education, lowering the average number of languages studied (see the notes on 'Methodology'⁴).

In lower secondary education (figure 2), learning at least one foreign language is compulsory in every country. The number of languages studied averaged 1.4 in 2008, up from 1.3 in 2000. In most EU countries the average number of foreign languages studied per pupil ranges from 1.0 to 2.0. The trend between 2000 and 2008 differs significantly between countries. In some, the average number of languages studied increased (as in Belgium⁵, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), whereas in others it decreased, as in Denmark, Greece, Spain, Poland, Finland, the UK, Iceland and Norway.

One interpretation of this pattern could be that, whereas at primary level the starting age is getting earlier, in secondary education the number of years for which foreign languages is a compulsory subject (and/or the number of languages studied) is decreasing slightly.

Figure 2: Average number of foreign languages studied in lower secondary education*, 2000 and 2008



Source: Eurostat, Education statistics, UOE data collection ([educ_ilang](#))

Notes: - MT, AT, PT missing

* lower secondary education = ISCED level 2

- the average number of languages learned is calculated using the number of pupils learning languages divided by the number of pupils, in lower secondary education.

The starting and ending ages for learning languages as well as the number of languages learned explain the figures (see also methodological notes).

A high percentage of students at upper secondary education are learning two or more foreign languages.

Table 1 shows that students continue studying languages after leaving compulsory education when they move on to upper secondary education (ISCED level 3). Like the figures for primary and lower secondary levels, the percentage of pupils in upper secondary education learning foreign languages is calculated as a proportion of all students in all years,

but the proportion studying no, one or two or more foreign languages is also reported by programme orientation. The aim is to classify each programme on the basis of its content. 'General orientation' means upper secondary type studies, whereas the vocational stream means education leading directly to a labour market qualification.

Table 1: Average number of foreign languages studied (2000 and 2008) and students by number of languages studied (%) at upper secondary level, 2008

| country | general orientation | | | | | vocational orientation*** | | | | |
|---------|-----------------------------|------|---|------|-----------|-----------------------------|------|---|------|-----------|
| | average number of languages | | Percentage of students by number of languages studied | | | average number of languages | | Percentage of students by number of languages studied | | |
| | 2000 | 2008 | none | 1 | 2 or more | 2000 | 2008 | none | 1 | 2 or more |
| EU** | 1.6 | 1.4 | 11.9 | 37.9 | 50.2 | 1.2 | 1.1 | 4.9 | 61.9 | 33.2 |
| BE | 2.2 | 2.2 | 1.2 | 10.9 | 87.9 | : | 1.3 | 24.9 | 25.6 | 49.5 |
| BG | 1.8 | 1.8 | 0.2 | 24.3 | 75.5 | 0.7 | 1.5 | 2.6 | 48.8 | 48.6 |
| CZ | 2.0 | 2.0 | - | - | 100.0 | 1.1 | 1.3 | 2.0 | 66.1 | 31.8 |
| DK | 1.8* | 1.6 | - | 38.9 | 61.1 | 0.9* | 0.9 | 6.0 | 94.0 | - |
| DE | 1.4 | 1.4 | : | : | : | 0.4 | 0.5 | : | : | : |
| EE | 2.3 | 2.3 | 0.7 | 1.7 | 97.7 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 10.4 | 11.9 | 77.8 |
| IE | 0.9 | 0.9 | 19.0 | 72.7 | 8.4 | 1.0* | 1.0 | 6.5 | 90.9 | 2.7 |
| EL | 1.1* | 1.1 | 1.0 | 91.1 | 7.9 | 0.9* | 0.8 | 20.8 | 78.3 | 0.9 |
| ES | 1.1 | 1.2 | 5.0 | 67.2 | 27.7 | 1.0 | 1.0 | - | 97.4 | 2.6 |
| FR | 1.9 | 2.0 | - | 9.8 | 90.2 | 1.0 | 1.1 | 1.9 | 88.2 | 9.9 |
| IT | 1.2 | 1.3 | 2.2 | 71.6 | 26.2 | 1.1 | 1.4 | 3.7 | 58.0 | 38.3 |
| CY | 2.0 | 1.8 | - | - | 100.0 | 1.0 | 1.2 | - | - | 100.0 |
| LV | 1.9 | 1.8 | 1.4 | 22.6 | 76.0 | : | : | : | : | : |
| LT | 1.9 | 1.5 | 1.8 | 44.1 | 54.1 | 1.6 | 0.9 | 24.7 | 61.3 | 13.9 |
| LU | 3.0 | 3.0 | - | - | 100.0 | 1.7 | 2.0 | 11.1 | 25.0 | 63.8 |
| HU | 1.2 | 1.4 | 1.7 | 55.2 | 43.1 | 1.2 | 0.8 | 21.7 | 77.6 | 0.7 |
| NL | 1.6* | 2.6 | - | 0.2 | 99.8 | : | : | : | : | : |
| PL | 1.9 | 1.5 | : | : | : | 1.1 | 1.6 | : | : | : |
| RO | 1.9 | 2.0 | - | 6.7 | 93.3 | 1.0 | 1.6 | - | 36.1 | 63.9 |
| SI | 2.0 | 2.0 | 1.8 | 1.9 | 96.3 | 1.3 | 1.3 | 5.6 | 63.0 | 31.4 |
| SK | 2.0 | 2.0 | - | 0.7 | 99.3 | 1.3 | 1.4 | 0.2 | 62.7 | 37.1 |
| FI | 2.8 | 2.7 | - | 0.4 | 99.6 | : | : | : | : | : |
| SE | 2.2 | 2.2 | - | 8.6 | 91.3 | 1.1 | 1.1 | 0.9 | 88.5 | 10.6 |
| UK | 0.8* | 0.6 | 50.7 | 43.0 | 6.3 | : | : | : | : | : |
| IS | 1.7 | 1.8 | 13.0 | 23.3 | 63.7 | 0.7 | 0.6 | 58.9 | 24.7 | 16.4 |
| NO | : | 1.6 | - | - | 100.0 | : | 0.6 | 37.0 | 63.0 | - |
| MK | : | : | - | 49.9 | 50.1 | : | : | : | : | : |

Source: Eurostat, Education statistics, UOE data collection ([educ_ilang](#))

notes:

*: DK: 2004 data; IE: 2005 data; EL: 2001 data; NL: 2001 data; UK: 2004 data.

In 2000 ISCED 3 general included pre-vocational programmes.

**EU: the EU weighted average is calculated by using the available country data.

*** The vocational orientation includes the pre-vocational stream

Every country reports significant proportions of students learning foreign languages in general upper secondary education. Ireland and, particularly, the United Kingdom are the only countries where significant proportions of students at this level are not studying any foreign language (19% and 51% respectively)⁶. In 15 of the 22 EU countries for which data are available, more than three out of every four students in general upper secondary education programmes are learning at least two foreign languages.

The percentages of students who are not learning any foreign language are higher in vocational programmes than in general programmes for most countries. In approximately half of the countries (7 out of the 15 for which data are available), more than 10% of the students are not learning any foreign languages. In

addition, only two countries (Estonia and Cyprus) report more than 75% studying two or more languages, whereas half of the countries record more than 75% of students learning one language.

The same table shows the average number of foreign languages studied per pupil in 2000 compared with 2008. In most countries the average number of languages studied remained quite stable, or even decreased, in the general programme.

By contrast, in pre-vocational and vocational education, the pattern was more variable and some improvements were seen in foreign language learning, for instance in Bulgaria, Italy, Poland and Romania. Overall, the average number of languages studied is significantly lower in vocational education and training than in general education at upper secondary level.

Table 2: The two most studied foreign languages and percentage of students who study them, 2008

| Country | educational level* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------|--------------------|----|--------------|----|-----------------|----|--------------|----|-----------------|----|------------|----|-----|----|----|----|
| | primary | | | | lower secondary | | | | upper secondary | | | | | | | |
| | 1st language | | 2nd language | | 1st language | | 2nd language | | general | | vocational | | | | | |
| | % | | % | | % | | % | | % | | % | | | | | |
| EU** | 79 | - | 10 | - | 93 | - | 40 | - | 83 | - | 39 | - | 73 | - | 31 | - |
| BE | : | | : | | : | | : | | : | | : | | : | | : | |
| BG | 70 | en | 8 | ru | 78 | en | 26 | de | 87 | en | 37 | ru | 75 | en | 31 | ru |
| CZ | 55 | en | 12 | de | 87 | en | 21 | de | 100 | en | 58 | de | 74 | en | 49 | de |
| DK | 67 | en | - | - | 99 | en | 79 | de | 92 | en | 35 | de | 72 | en | 22 | de |
| DE | 56 | en | 4 | fr | 96 | en | 26 | fr | 91 | en | 27 | fr | 43 | en | 2 | fr |
| EE | 67 | en | 21 | ee | 94 | en | 64 | ru | 96 | en | 65 | ru | 83 | en | 47 | ru |
| IE | 3 | fr | 1 | es | 66 | fr | 21 | de | 58 | fr | 17 | de | 66 | fr | 17 | de |
| EL | 93 | en | 24 | fr | 99 | en | 54 | fr | 95 | en | 8 | fr | 69 | en | 10 | fr |
| ES | 98 | en | 5 | fr | 98 | en | 38 | fr | 94 | en | 27 | fr | 76 | en | 15 | fr |
| FR | : | | : | | 97 | en | 34 | es | 99 | en | 64 | es | 94 | en | 10 | es |
| IT | 99 | en | 2 | de | 100 | en | 75 | fr | 94 | en | 20 | fr | 92 | en | 32 | fr |
| CY | 56 | en | 2 | fr | 100 | en | 94 | fr | 90 | en | 34 | fr | 100 | en | 8 | fr |
| LV | 67 | en | 12 | ru | 96 | en | 59 | ru | 97 | en | 51 | ru | : | | : | |
| LT | 64 | en | - | - | 94 | en | 59 | ru | 88 | en | 39 | ru | 57 | en | 18 | ru |
| LU | 100 | de | 83 | fr | : | | : | | : | | : | | 76 | fr | 67 | de |
| HU | 33 | en | 19 | de | 60 | en | 38 | de | 78 | en | 49 | de | 42 | de | 35 | en |
| NL | 32 | en | - | - | : | | : | | 100 | en | 86 | de | : | | : | |
| PL | 67 | en | 13 | de | 77 | en | 26 | de | 81 | en | 49 | de | 76 | en | 62 | de |
| RO | 41 | en | 18 | fr | 97 | en | 87 | fr | 96 | en | 83 | fr | 83 | en | 75 | fr |
| SI | 44 | en | 2 | de | 97 | en | 33 | de | 97 | en | 72 | de | 85 | en | 35 | de |
| SK | 45 | en | 5 | de | 74 | en | 31 | de | 98 | en | 69 | de | 70 | en | 54 | de |
| FI | 68 | en | 5 | se | 99 | en | 92 | se | 99 | en | 92 | se | : | | : | |
| SE | 100 | en | 5 | es | 100 | en | 36 | es | 100 | en | 42 | es | 99 | en | 4 | es |
| UK | 69 | fr | 19 | es | : | | : | | 32 | fr | 12 | de | : | | : | |
| IS | 64 | en | 16 | da | 99 | en | 96 | da | 73 | en | 44 | da | 34 | en | 19 | da |
| NO | 100 | en | - | - | 100 | en | 25 | es | 98 | en | 24 | de | 63 | en | - | - |
| MK | 56 | en | - | - | 98 | en | 47 | fr | : | | : | | : | | : | |

Source: Eurostat, Education statistics, UOE data collection ([educ_ilang](#))

notes:

The EU weighted average is calculated by using the available country data including Belgium.

BE: in Belgium the official state languages are German, French and Dutch.

LU: in Luxembourg the official state languages are German, French and Letzeburgesch.

EE: the national language taught in schools where it is not the teaching language is counted as a foreign language. Source:

English is by far the most widely learned first foreign language at all levels of education

Table 2 shows that English is the most widely studied foreign language at every level of education. French is the second most popular language studied in schools. German, Spanish and Russian are studied as well in specific countries.

In primary education the proportion of pupils studying a second foreign language is, in most countries, almost negligible. This means that English is the only language learned at primary level except in a very few countries, such as Luxembourg where there are three official languages. In some countries only one language is studied at ISCED level 1, as in Denmark where 67% of primary school pupils study English.

In lower secondary education English is studied everywhere. In several countries more than 90% of pupils are learning English. In addition, many pupils

have an opportunity to study a second language, as, for example, in Denmark, Italy, Cyprus, Romania, Finland and Iceland where more than 75% are learning two languages.

At upper secondary level the pattern is the same, even if more students are taught a language other than English at this stage. In general, a higher proportion of pupils learn French or German than Spanish or Russian.

There are only a few cases where other foreign languages are taught. Those are normally related to the specific circumstances in the country concerned, such as Belgium (where Dutch and French are both compulsory in part of primary education), Danish in Iceland, Swedish in Finland and Estonian in Estonia (for the Russian-speaking population).

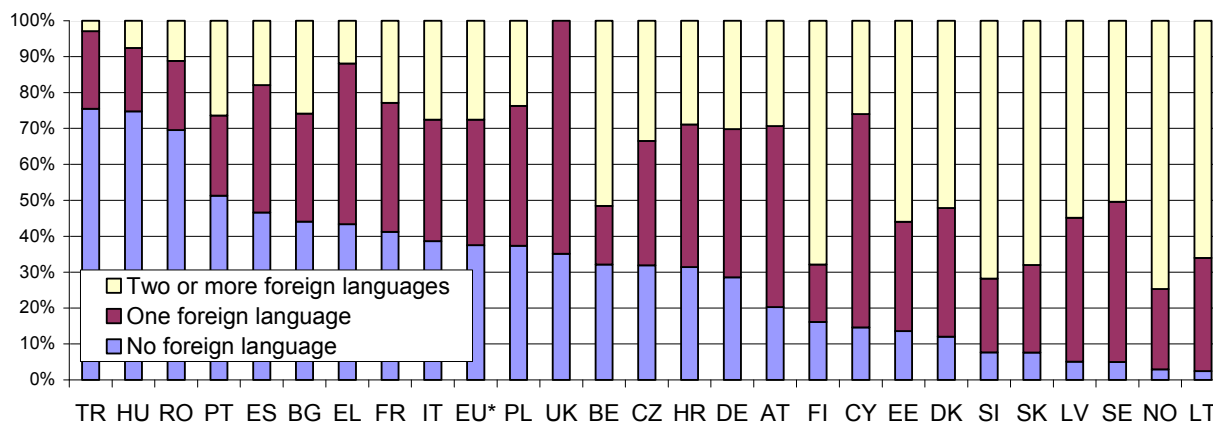
Almost 28% of adults declare that they speak at least two foreign languages

According to a self-assessment of their language skills by respondents participating in the adult education survey (see the notes on 'Methodology'), almost 28% of 25-64 year olds claim to speak two or more foreign languages. On the other hand, more than a third of the population consider that they do not

speak any. An almost equal proportion said that they speak one foreign language.

The most commonly spoken foreign languages, according to the survey, are English, French, German, Spanish and Russian (which are also the most commonly taught in schools).

Figure 3: Self-perceived knowledge of foreign languages (%)



Source: Eurostat, Adult Education Survey (AES)

The majority of 25-64 year olds stated that English is the foreign language they know best, corresponding to the fact that English is also the foreign language most widely taught in schools. However, in a number of Eastern European countries Russian is the best known foreign language (for historical reasons). French is perceived as the best known foreign language by respondents in the United Kingdom⁷.

Both the number of foreign languages spoken and the self-assessed skill levels vary considerably between countries. The highest shares of the population aged

25 to 64 who said that they speak two or more foreign languages were found in countries with a small population, such as Norway, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia (55% to 75%). In Denmark, Sweden and Belgium slightly above 50% of the population speak two or more foreign languages.

The highest shares of the population speaking no foreign language are found in Hungary, Portugal, Spain, Bulgaria and Greece (between 43% and 75%).

English, German and Russian are the most known foreign languages

Table 3 shows self-perceived knowledge of foreign languages and average numbers of foreign languages per respondent (regardless of proficiency level). The European average is approximately one and national averages range from 0.3 to 2.5. The Nordic countries, Slovenia, Belgium, Estonia and Slovakia report the highest numbers of foreign languages (1.5 and above). Countries with low averages include Hungary, Romania and Turkey (below 0.5).

After English, German is the second most widely known foreign language according to the survey with almost 20% of 25-64 year olds from the 24 countries for which data are available putting German as one of the languages they can use. The highest proportions with knowledge of German are found in Norway, Denmark and Slovenia (46% to 48%) and the lowest in Spain, Portugal (3% each) and Greece (4%).

Knowledge of Russian is concentrated mainly in the Eastern European countries, where it is spoken mostly by the 'older generation', for example in the Baltic states which were part of the former Soviet Union until the beginning of the 1990s. Knowledge of Russian in Western European countries is generally very low. Germany is the non-Eastern European country with the highest proportion of respondents with a knowledge of Russian (9%).

Knowledge of French is generally low within Europe compared with German and Russian. About 12% of adults aged 25 to 64 in Europe put French as one of the foreign languages they can use. The countries with the highest proportions declaring at least a basic knowledge of French are led by the United Kingdom (40%), Italy (34%) and Portugal (29%). French is one of the national languages in Belgium, where the survey showed that 38% of the population indicated a knowledge of French as a foreign language.

Four per cent of Europeans aged 25 to 64 declared Spanish as one of the foreign languages they know. The highest proportions are found in Spain's neighbours — Portugal (13%) and France (12%).

There are a considerable number of adults whose mother tongue is not the main or official language in the country where they live. These are normally immigrants and/or

minorities who then selected the main/most commonly spoken language in their country of residence as their best known foreign language. This phenomenon is observed in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria and Spain. Almost 7% of the UK population declared English as their best known foreign language. The corresponding figures are almost double that in the other countries: Germany 14% and Austria 13% for German, Spain 12% for Spanish and France 13% for French.

Table 3: Self-perceived known foreign language of adults (25-64 years), 2007, percentages.

| | English | French | German | Spanish | Russian | average number of languages |
|-----|---------|--------|--------|---------|---------|-----------------------------|
| BE | 56.8 | 38.2 | 25.2 | 7.4 | 0.6 | 1.5 |
| BG | 20.7 | 9.0 | 10.4 | 1.0 | 40.2 | 0.9 |
| CZ | 33.4 | 2.8 | 33.4 | 1.4 | 34.6 | 1.1 |
| DK | 83.4 | 7.0 | 47.1 | 2.8 | 0.3 | 1.6 |
| DE | 56.3 | 15.0 | 13.4 | 4.6 | 9.4 | 1.1 |
| EE | 46.1 | 1.2 | 14.4 | 0.7 | 57.8 | 1.7 |
| EL | 45.3 | 6.1 | 3.9 | 0.7 | 1.1 | 0.7 |
| ES | 32.4 | 15.6 | 2.5 | 11.9 | 0.4 | 0.8 |
| FR | 44.3 | 13.3 | 9.0 | 12.2 | 0.4 | 0.9 |
| IT | 45.5 | 33.9 | 6.4 | 7.7 | 0.4 | 1.0 |
| CY | 80.7 | 10.8 | 4.6 | 2.0 | 2.8 | 1.2 |
| LV | 41.2 | 1.3 | 17.7 | 0.2 | 61.4 | 1.6 |
| LT | 37.9 | 5.5 | 20.1 | 0.9 | 87.2 | 1.9 |
| HU | 14.5 | 0.9 | 12.1 | 0.1 | 2.6 | 0.3 |
| AT | 67.8 | 12.8 | 12.8 | 4.0 | 2.5 | 1.2 |
| PL | 25.0 | 3.2 | 17.7 | 0.6 | 41.5 | 0.9 |
| PT | 36.1 | 29.3 | 3.3 | 13.4 | 0.2 | 0.9 |
| RO | 18.9 | 12.8 | 2.4 | 0.8 | 3.5 | 0.4 |
| SI | 60.3 | 4.3 | 46.1 | 1.7 | 2.9 | 2.1 |
| SK* | 30.0 | 2.2 | 31.4 | 0.8 | 47.6 | 2.0 |
| FI | 80.3 | 9.6 | 31.6 | 5.8 | 6.5 | 2.1 |
| SE | 89.8 | 10.4 | 30.2 | 6.4 | 1.5 | 1.7 |
| UK | 6.6 | 39.7 | 6.3 | 4.7 | 0.0 | 0.7 |
| NO | 92.6 | 11.4 | 47.5 | 7.7 | 1.3 | 2.5 |
| HR | 43.7 | 3.3 | 30.9 | 0.9 | 4.5 | 1.1 |
| TR | 74.0 | 7.1 | 11.0 | 0.2 | 2.0 | 0.3 |

Source: Eurostat, Adult Education Survey (AES)

* Slovakian was not recorded as a foreign language in the Czech survey whereas Czech was recorded as a foreign language in the Slovakian survey

** The table shows the proportion of respondents who listed foreign languages they can use (up to 7 languages, regardless of level of knowledge).

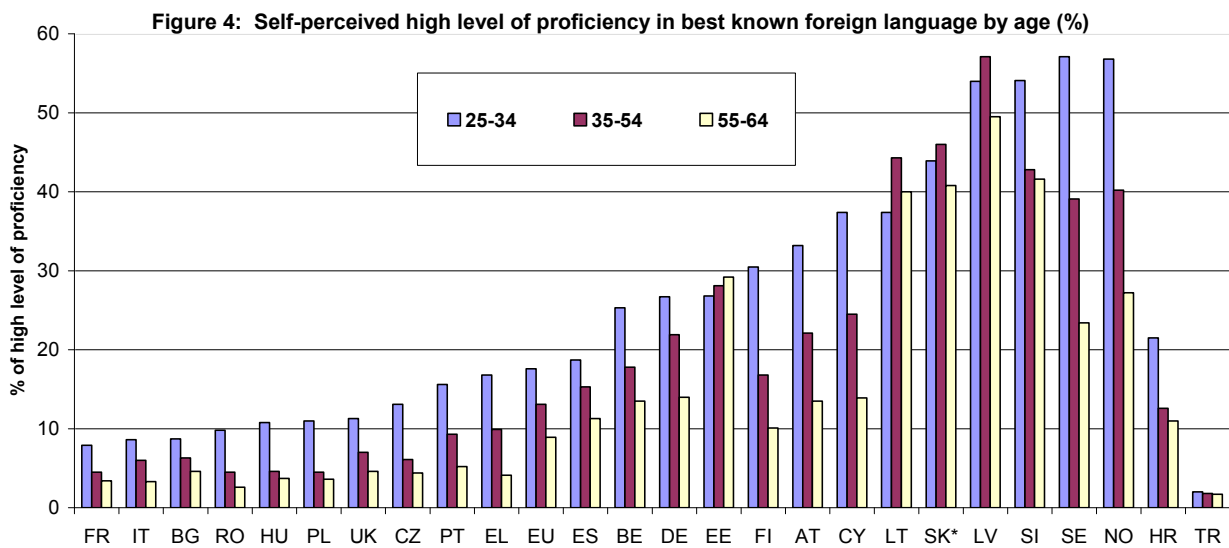
There is a correlation between population size and the number of languages the population perceives it can speak. In smaller countries the population perceives itself as speaking, on average, more languages than in bigger countries. There are, however, some notable exceptions to this general trend, in particular in Germany, which is a big country but where the inhabitants generally perceive themselves as speaking one or more foreign languages.

Young people perceive themselves as being more proficient in foreign languages

Figure 4 shows that young people perceive themselves to be proficient in their best known foreign languages to a larger extent than the upper age groups. At European level, the proportion who said that they are proficient in their best known foreign language was twice as high amongst young people aged 25 to 34 (18%) as in the 55-64 age group (9%).

Countries with significant differences between the 'younger' and 'older' age groups are Greece and Romania (four times higher in the 25-34 age group),

Finland, Poland, the Czech Republic and Portugal (three times higher in the same age group). There are, however, exceptions in Eastern Europe, particularly in the Baltic countries where Russian is the most known foreign language, — partly due to the large Russian speaking populations in some of these countries. The Eastern European countries also show the smallest differences in proficiency levels between the age groups, as a result of the combined effect of an older population speaking Russian and the younger generations reporting relatively high levels of proficiency in English.



Source: Eurostat, Adult Education Survey (AES)

*Slovakian was not recorded as a foreign language in the Czech survey whereas Czech was recorded as a foreign language in the Slovakian survey

Skill levels in best known foreign languages were not measured in Denmark

Systematic relationship between educational level and self-perceived language knowledge

A systematic relationship between educational attainment and self-perceived foreign language skills can be observed from the data available. Adults aged 25 to 64 years old with tertiary education perceive themselves as having comparatively high skill levels in foreign languages in every country, as shown in Figure 4. Persons with a low level of educational attainment (primary or lower secondary) tend to have low skill levels in foreign languages.

The effect of educational attainment can also be seen in the number of foreign languages spoken. Persons with a high educational level form a large part of the group knowing two or more foreign languages, while those with low education are the majority in the category 'no foreign language spoken'.

The gap between the level of education and the level of proficiency varies between countries. Countries

with low levels of proficiency in the best foreign language seem to have the biggest differences between the highly educated and the section of the population with a low level of educational attainment. Examples include France, Bulgaria and Poland. The United Kingdom has, by comparison, more uniform proficiency levels between the low and highly educated. Immigration patterns could be part of the explanation for this.

Among countries with high levels of proficiency, the biggest gap between the low and highly educated respondents is found in Cyprus. Countries with relatively smaller differences in proficiency between the low and highly educated include Latvia, Slovenia and Norway. A few countries show no significant differences between those with low and medium (upper secondary) education, for example the United

Table 4: Self-perceived high level of proficiency in best known foreign language by highest level of educational attainment

| | Educational attainment | | |
|-----|------------------------|--------|------|
| | Low | Medium | High |
| EU | 5.7 | 11.7 | 27.4 |
| BE | 7.3 | 16.4 | 31.2 |
| BG | 0.8 | 3.5 | 19.8 |
| CZ | 1.9 | 4.7 | 26.2 |
| DE | 17.5 | 18.5 | 30.4 |
| EE | 14.4 | 22.8 | 41.6 |
| EL | 1.5 | 8.5 | 29.9 |
| ES | 8.2 | 18.0 | 26.3 |
| FR | 1.1 | 2.6 | 14.4 |
| IT | 1.9 | 6.6 | 19.8 |
| CY | 3.3 | 18.6 | 56.5 |
| LV | 44.5 | 49.2 | 73.5 |
| LT | 15.4 | 38.4 | 57.8 |
| HU | 1.3 | 2.8 | 23.3 |
| AT | 9.6 | 20.0 | 48.7 |
| PL | 0.6 | 2.7 | 22.0 |
| PT | 3.6 | 18.5 | 36.7 |
| RO | 1.2 | 2.7 | 23.3 |
| SI | 31.6 | 42.1 | 65.6 |
| SK* | 28.8 | 42.0 | 55.5 |
| FI | 10.0 | 13.7 | 29.6 |
| SE | 22.7 | 34.7 | 61.1 |
| UK | 4.7 | 4.8 | 12.4 |
| NO | 30.8 | 32.3 | 62.4 |
| HR | 8.8 | 12.8 | 31.1 |
| TR | 1.0 | 2.6 | 6.3 |

Source: Eurostat, Adult Education Survey (AES)

*Slovakian was not recorded as a foreign language in Czech survey whereas Czech was recorded as a foreign language in the Slovakian survey
Skill levels in best known foreign languages were not measured in Denmark

Kingdom, Germany, Norway and Latvia. The biggest gap between the two groups is found in Portugal.

As the last two sections show, there is a high correlation between being young and knowing foreign

languages and also between being highly educated and perceived as having good foreign language skill levels. This correlation is reinforced by the fact that young people have, in general, a higher level of education than the older population groups.

Footnotes

¹ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/71025.pdf

² In the adult education survey the respondents were asked about their mother tongue and other languages they perceived knowing. A person's language skills therefore relates to his/her own evaluation/assessment.

³ All students in Ireland study Irish in primary and secondary schools (i.e. ISCED levels 1, 2 and 3). As Irish is one of the official languages of Ireland it is not counted as a foreign language. Data for full-time students.

⁴ The methodological notes show the age at which the first compulsory foreign language is learned. Also the first mandatory language studied is shown. In most European countries, the theoretical age for starting learning a foreign language in the education system is between 6 and 9, i.e. in primary education.

⁵ In Belgium the official state languages are Dutch, French and German. Notably French is considered as a foreign language in the Belgium Flemish Community whereas Dutch is considered as a foreign language in the Belgium French Community

⁶ Also, the somewhat unusual situation in Iceland (13% of the students do not study any language) may be attributable to the fact that this level is 4 years long and foreign language learning is not compulsory in all 4 years for all programmes.

⁷ The questionnaire for the UK only distinguishes "no foreign language" and "one foreign language". Therefore the answer 'one foreign language' (65%) could also include the knowledge of more languages.

METHODOLOGY

Data sources used in this Statistics in Focus:

The UOE collection on education and training systems and the Adult Education Survey (AES) are parts of the EU Statistics on education and lifelong learning,

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/education/introduction>.

The UOE collection (UOE = UIS-UNESCO, OECD and Eurostat), uses mainly existing administrative sources at national level, where available. The language learning data cover the whole population classified in ISCED levels 1, 2 and 3 except for some specific exclusion such as pupils with special education needs (see also the country-specific notes). Data in this publication are for the 2007/08 school year (reference year 2008) and covers approximately 25 millions pupils at ISCED level 1, 21 millions at ISCED level 2 and 9.5 for the general - and 7.3 millions for the vocational orientation at ISCED level 3. Further information about the UOE can be found via the following link:

http://circa.europa.eu/Public/irc/dsis/edtc/library?l=/public/unesco_collection&vm=detailed&sb=Title.

Country-specific notes for the UOE data collection:

| | |
|------|---|
| EU27 | EU totals are calculated on the basis of the countries for which data are available. |
| AT | 2006 and 2007 figures: national estimates. |
| BE | Data for the German community are excluded. Data exclude independent private institutions. |
| CZ | Data for full-time pupils. In the 2006/07 school year teaching time in primary schools was increased (by three hours per week). These hours were used to increase foreign language lessons at ISCED level 1. |
| EE | Estonian taught in schools where it is not the teaching language is counted as a foreign language. 2006 figures: national estimates. |
| FI | Finnish taught in schools where it is not the teaching language is counted as a foreign language. |
| FR | Language learning data cover only students in institutions monitored by the Ministry of Education. Estimated coverage is 80 to 90 % of total enrolment figures at ISCED level 3. 1998-2007 data cover the French metropolitan area. |
| HU | Data for full-time pupils. Pupils with a disability in cognitive development are included in the total number of pupils. |
| IT | Students with special educational needs are included. |
| LU | Luxembourgish is excluded. All pupils in primary and secondary schools in Luxembourg learn Luxembourgish. |
| PL | Data for full-time pupils only. |
| SE | Data exclude adult education. |
| SI | Data for the end of the school year. Students learning second languages in the regions where minorities live are not taken into account (ISCED levels 1 and 2). |
| SK | Data for full-time pupils only. |
| UK | Until 2004: data for England only. Coverage is public (state) schools (approximately 94 % of relevant pupils). 2004 estimates are based on sample data at local education authority level. |

The table below shows the data presented in this Statistics in Focus separately for the Flemish and French Communities of Belgium (for UOE data):

| | | general orientation | | | | | | vocational orientation | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|---------------------|-----|-----------------------------|------|---|------|------------------------|-------|-----------------------------|------|---|-----------|-------|--|
| Fig 1 | | Fig 2 | | average number of languages | | Percentage of students by number of languages studied | | | | average number of languages | | Percentage of students by number of languages studied | | | |
| 2000 | | 2008 | | 2000 | 2008 | none | 1 | 2 or more | 2000 | 2008 | none | 1 | 2 or more | | |
| Average number of foreign languages | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| BE (fl) | 0.3 | 0.3 | 1.4 | 1.5 | 2.6 | 2.5 | 2.0% | 0.0% | 97.9% | 1.8 | 1.5 | 14.5% | 17.8% | 67.8% | |
| BE (fr) | 0.4 | 0.5 | 0.7 | 0.9 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 0.3% | 21.5% | 78.2% | 0.5 | 0.8 | 41.4% | 37.8% | 20.8% | |

| | | primary | | | | lower secondary | | | | upper secondary | | | | | | | |
|---------|--|--------------|----|--------------|----|-----------------|----|--------------|----|-----------------|----|-------|----|------------|----|-----|----|
| | | 1st language | | 2nd language | | 1st language | | 2nd language | | general | | | | vocational | | | |
| | | % | | % | | % | | % | | % | | % | | % | | % | |
| BE (fl) | | 31.9% | fr | 0.2% | en | 93.0% | fr | 46.6% | en | 97.9% | fr | 97.9% | en | 84% | fr | 57% | en |
| BE (fr) | | 42.9% | nl | 10.3% | en | 33.2% | en | 1.6% | de | 90.3% | en | 7.3% | es | 40% | en | 1% | de |

The adult education survey (AES) was carried out by 29 EU, EFTA and candidate countries between 2005 and 2008 (the number of countries reported on in this issue of *Statistics in Focus* varies, depending on data availability for the module on self-perceived language skills). The EU AES is a pilot exercise which proposed, for the first time, a common framework, in the form of a standard questionnaire, tools and quality reporting for measuring lifelong learning, including language knowledge. The reference year is set at 2007 and the approximate population size equals more than 200 million. Further information about the AES method can be found via the following link: http://circa.europa.eu/Public/irc/dsis/edtc/library?l=/public/measuring_lifelong/education_survey&vm=detailed&sb=Title.

ISCED levels and fields of education: Data are classified in accordance with the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), 1997 version. Further information is available on the UNESCO Institute for Statistics website: <http://www.uis.unesco.org/DOCUMENTS/Classifications & Manuals/ISCED97>.

ISCED level 0: Pre-primary education — Preceding primary education, not compulsory in most countries. Data refer to education-oriented institutions that obligatorily recruit staff with specialised qualifications in education.

ISCED level 1: Primary education — Depending on countries, it begins between 4 and 7 years of age and generally lasts five to six years. Programmes are designed to give pupils a sound basic education in reading, writing and mathematics along with an elementary understanding of other subjects.

ISCED level 2: Lower secondary education — Is part of compulsory schooling in all countries analysed. Programmes are typically more subject-focused. Usually, the end of this level coincides with the end of full-time compulsory education.

ISCED level 3: Upper secondary education — Typically starts at 15 or 16 years, at the end of full-time compulsory education. Instruction is even more subject-oriented and teachers often need to be more qualified than at ISCED level 2. Education can be general or pre-vocational (these two types of education are often aggregated) or vocational. Many programmes open up access to ISCED level 5.

Programme orientation. Programmes at level 3 can also be subdivided into two categories based on their main orientation:

- **general:** covers education that is not designed explicitly to prepare participants for a specific class of occupations or trade or for entry into further vocational or technical educational programmes. The programmes give access to higher levels of education.

- **vocational:** covers education that prepares participants for direct entry, without further training, into specific occupations. Successful completion of such programmes leads to a labour-market relevant vocational qualification.

Pre-vocational programmes is education that is mainly designed to introduce participants to the world of work and prepare them for entry into further vocational or technical education programmes. Student numbers in pre-vocational training are very low. In 2000 this group was aggregated with the general orientation whereas in 2008 it was aggregated with the vocational stream.

ISCED level 4: Post-secondary non-tertiary education — These programmes straddle the boundary between upper secondary and tertiary education from an international point of view. They serve to broaden the knowledge of ISCED 3 graduates. Typical examples are programmes designed to prepare students for studies at level 5, while other programmes prepare students for direct entry into the labour market.

ISCED level 5: First stage of tertiary education (not leading directly to an advanced research qualification), covering programmes of at least two years' duration.

ISCED level 6: Second stage of tertiary education, covering programmes leading to an advanced research qualification (e.g. PhD or Doctorate), which are devoted to advanced study and original research and not based on course-work only.

Highest level of education successfully completed (educational attainment) (AES):

- **low** means pre-primary, primary and lower secondary (ISCED levels 0, 1 and 2);
- **medium** means upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED levels 3 and 4);
- **high** means tertiary education (ISCED levels 5 and 6).

Definition of foreign language learning (UOE data collection): All modern languages that are taught as 'foreign languages' are included. The curriculum drawn up by the central education authorities in each country defines the languages which are to be considered 'foreign languages' in that country.

Language skill levels (AES):

1. **Basic:** Ability to understand and use the most common everyday expressions in relation to familiar things and situations
2. **Fair:** Ability to describe experiences and events fairly fluently and able to produce simple text.
3. **Proficient:** Ability to understand and produce a wide range of demanding texts and use the language flexibly.

Age at which compulsory foreign language learning starts and language studied

| | | | | | |
|--------------|----------------|-------------|-----------|------|-------------|
| BE fr | 10 | no specific | HU | 9 | no specific |
| BE de | 3 | fr | MT | 5 | en |
| BE nl | 10 | fr-en | NL | 10 | en |
| BG | 8 | no specific | AT | 6 | no specific |
| CZ | 8 | no specific | PL | 10 | no specific |
| DK | 9 | en | PT | 8-10 | no specific |
| DE | 8-10 | en | RO | 8 | no specific |
| EE | 7-10 | no specific | SI | 9 | no specific |
| IE | not compulsory | none | SK | 10 | no specific |
| EL | 8 | en | FI | 7-9 | fi-se |
| ES | 3-8 | no specific | SE | 7-10 | en |
| FR | 7-8 | no specific | UK | 11 | no specific |
| IT | 6 | en | IS | 10 | en-da |
| CY | 9 | en-fr | LI | 8 | en |
| LV | 9 | no specific | NO | 6 | en |
| LT | 10 | no specific | MK | 6 | : |
| LU | 6 | de-fr-en | TR | 10 | no specific |

Source: Eurydice - Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe. 2008. See also: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/key_data_en.php

notes:

MK: the source is Eurostat, UOE data collection, Eurostat specific tables.

No specific: no specific language is compulsory.

None: no foreign language is compulsory

Abbreviations and symbols

EU: available EU Member States; BE: Belgium; BG: Bulgaria; CZ: Czech Republic; DK: Denmark; DE: Germany; EE: Estonia; IE: Ireland; EL: Greece; ES: Spain; FR: France; IT: Italy; CY: Cyprus; LV: Latvia; LT: Lithuania; LU: Luxembourg; HU: Hungary; MT: Malta; NL: Netherlands; AT: Austria; PL: Poland; PT: Portugal; RO: Romania; SI: Slovenia; SK: Slovakia; FI: Finland; SE: Sweden; UK: United Kingdom.

Other countries

IS: Iceland; NO: Norway; LI: Liechtenstein; CH: Switzerland;

HR: Croatia; MK: the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; TR: Turkey.

da: Danish, ee: Estonian, en: English, es: Spanish; fi: Finnish; fr: French; de: German; ru: Russian; se: Swedish.

Further information

Eurostat Website: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>

Data on "Education and training"

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/education/data/database>

Select "education indicators – non finance"

More information about "Education and training"

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/education/introduction>

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