



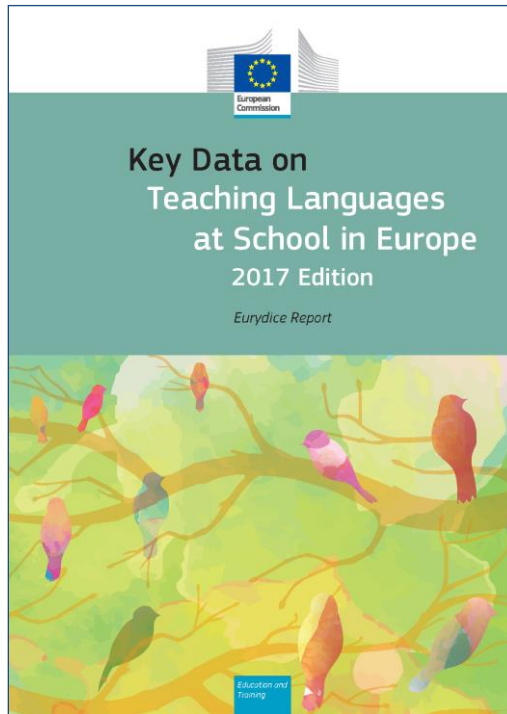
European  
Commission

### What is Eurydice?

The role of the Eurydice network is to understand and explain how Europe's different education systems are organised and how they work. The network provides descriptions of national education systems, comparative studies devoted to specific topics, indicators and statistics. Through its work, Eurydice aims to promote understanding, cooperation, trust and mobility at European and international levels. The network consists of national units located in European countries and is co-ordinated by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. All Eurydice publications are available free of charge on the Eurydice website or in print upon request. For more information about Eurydice, see <http://ec.europa.eu/eurydice>

## Eurydice Highlights

### Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe – 2017 Edition



*What languages are students learning in schools across Europe and at what age do they begin to study their first and second foreign languages? What level of language proficiency are students expected to reach by the end of compulsory education? How are the language skills of newly arrived migrants assessed and what types of language support are available to them? These are just some of the areas covered in Eurydice's new publication *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe*.*

The 2017 edition is very wide in scope and covers all the key aspects of language teaching and learning. The publication is part of the Key Data series, which combines statistical data with information on education policies and regulations.

This fourth edition contains 60 separate indicators, organised into five different chapters: Context, Organisation, Participation, Teachers and Teaching Processes. A variety of sources were used to build the indicators, and these include the Eurydice Network, Eurostat, and the OECD's PISA and TALIS international surveys. Eurydice data cover all countries of the European Union as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Turkey.

This edition of 'Eurydice Highlights' provides a snapshot of some of the main findings of the report.

### The full report

*Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe – 2017 Edition* is available in English on the Eurydice website <http://ec.europa.eu/eurydice>

**Printed copies of the report** are available upon request at: [eacea-eurydice@ec.europa.eu](mailto:eacea-eurydice@ec.europa.eu)

### Contact

Wim Vansteenkiste,  
Communication and Publications:  
+32 2 299 50 58

## Students are learning a foreign language from a younger age

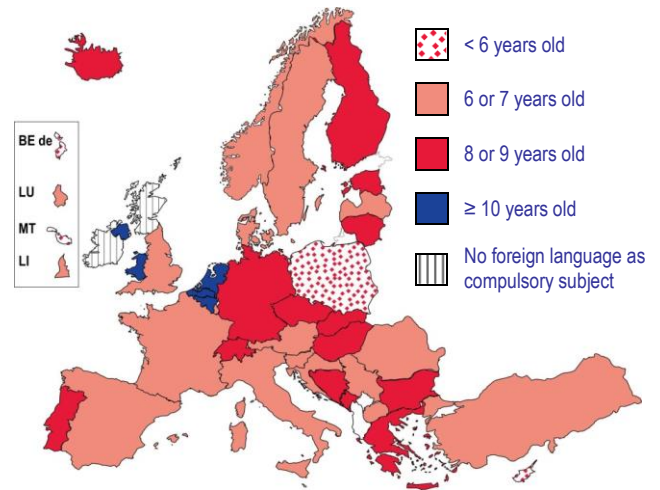
In most countries students begin studying a first foreign language as a compulsory subject between 6 and 7 years of age, in the first years of primary education. In a substantial minority of countries, they start learning languages around 8 or 9 years of age. Only three education systems have mandatory language learning from pre-primary level: Poland and Cyprus (which have recently enacted reforms to lower the starting age of compulsory foreign language learning) and Belgium (German-speaking Community).

In Belgium (French Community), Germany, Spain and Switzerland, the starting age varies slightly depending on the region or administrative area. Schools in Sweden, Estonia and Finland enjoy some flexibility in deciding when to make the first foreign language compulsory for all students.

At EU level, 83.8 % of all students enrolled in primary education studied one foreign language or more in 2014, a 16.5 percentage point increase since 2005. This confirms that students start

learning a foreign language at an earlier age than in the past.

### *Starting age of the first foreign language as a compulsory subject, 2015/16*



Source: Eurydice.

However, in most countries, the share of instruction time dedicated to foreign languages remains modest in primary curricula. In the majority of countries the proportion ranges between 5 and 10 % of total instruction time.

## Learning a second foreign language is not compulsory in all countries

More students are learning a second foreign language at lower secondary level. At EU level, in 2014, 59.7 % of all lower secondary students were learning two foreign languages or more. This is a marked increase from 2005 where the figure was 46.7 % of all students. This reflects a policy change in several countries which aimed to lower the starting age of the second language as a compulsory subject; this increased the proportion of students learning two foreign languages. Indeed, unlike in 2003, learning a second foreign language is now compulsory for all students from the later years of primary education in Denmark, Greece and Iceland and from the beginning of lower secondary education in the Czech Republic, France, Italy, Malta and Poland.

Rather than making two foreign languages compulsory for all students, some national curricula seek to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn two or more foreign languages. For example, in Belgium (French Community), Spain, Croatia, Slovenia, Sweden, Liechtenstein and Norway, learning two foreign languages is not an obligation for all students before leaving full-time compulsory education; however, all students have an entitlement to learn two languages during this phase. In all these education systems, except Belgium (French Community), the opportunity to learn two languages is granted to all students by the beginning of lower secondary education at the latest.

## English is the most studied foreign language

In nearly all European countries English is the foreign language most learnt by students during primary and secondary education. At EU level, almost all students (97.3 %) learnt English during

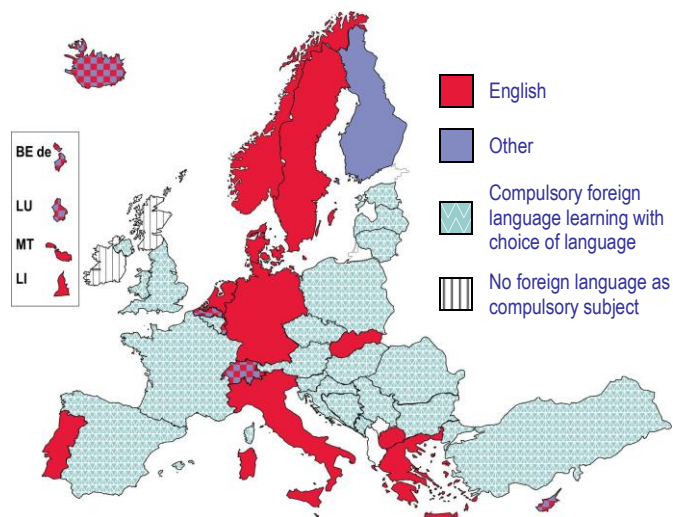
lower secondary education in 2014. In addition, the proportion of students learning English at primary level has increased at EU level by 18.7 percentage points since 2005, reaching a total of 79.4 %. French

is the next most common foreign language studied in lower

secondary education, with 33.3 % of students at EU level learning the language in 2014. German is the third most popular foreign language with 23.1 % of students, followed by Spanish with 13.1 %.

In education systems that require a specific foreign language to be studied, English is usually the language specified. This is the case in nearly half of the countries examined.

**Mandatory foreign languages during compulsory education, 2015/16**



Source: Eurydice.

When a foreign language other than English is mandatory, it is often one of the official state languages. French is the first mandatory foreign language in the German-speaking and Flemish Communities of Belgium, and it is the second mandatory language in Cyprus. German, English and French are all mandatory in Luxembourg; while in Switzerland, in addition to English, depending on

the Canton, German, French, Italian or Romansh are mandatory. Both Danish and English are mandatory in Iceland. In contrast, Finland is the only country which does not specify English among its mandatory languages. In Finland, Swedish is mandatory in schools where Finnish is the language of schooling, while Finnish is mandatory in schools where Swedish is the language of schooling.

## **Students are expected to reach 'independent user' level in their first foreign language by the time they finish school**

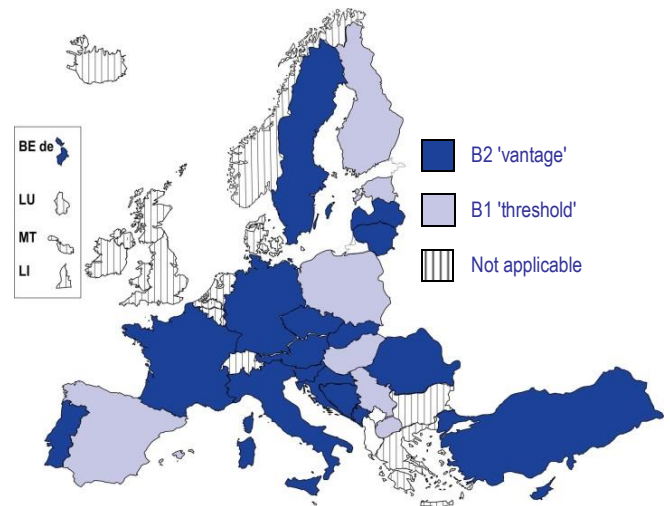
A vast majority of countries use the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) established by the Council of Europe to set internationally comparable attainment levels for foreign languages.

At the end of general upper secondary education, most countries require a minimum of level B2 ('vantage') for the first foreign language. Several countries have set the minimum at level B1 ('threshold').

None of the European education systems set the minimum attainment at advanced or proficient language user levels (C1 or C2).

Attainment levels for the second language learnt are usually lower than for the first. The requirement in most countries is set at B1 ('threshold'). Correspondingly, the second foreign language is learnt for fewer years in all countries, and the amount of instruction time is also less than that allocated to the first foreign language.

*Expected minimum level of attainment (CEFR) for the first foreign language at the end of general upper secondary education (ISCED 3), 2015/16*



Source: Eurydice.

## **VET students learn fewer foreign languages than their counterparts in general education**

Students on general and vocational pathways tend to study the same languages. However, in terms of participation, there is a clear trend for learning fewer foreign languages in vocational education than in general education. The participation statistics give a true reflection of the differences in language provision as set out in official curricula for general education students, on the one hand, and VET students on the other.

At EU level, in 2014, the proportion of the total VET population at upper secondary level learning two languages or more was 34.5 %. This is nearly

20 percentage points less than their counterparts in general education. At country level, 11 education systems had at least 90 % of their general upper secondary students learning two or more foreign languages in 2014 (Belgium (Flemish Community), the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Croatia, Luxembourg, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland and Liechtenstein). Only Romania reached this percentage in vocational upper secondary education.

In addition, the proportion of students in vocational upper secondary education not learning a foreign language is higher than in general upper secondary education. In 2014, there were only two education systems where a third or more of the total general

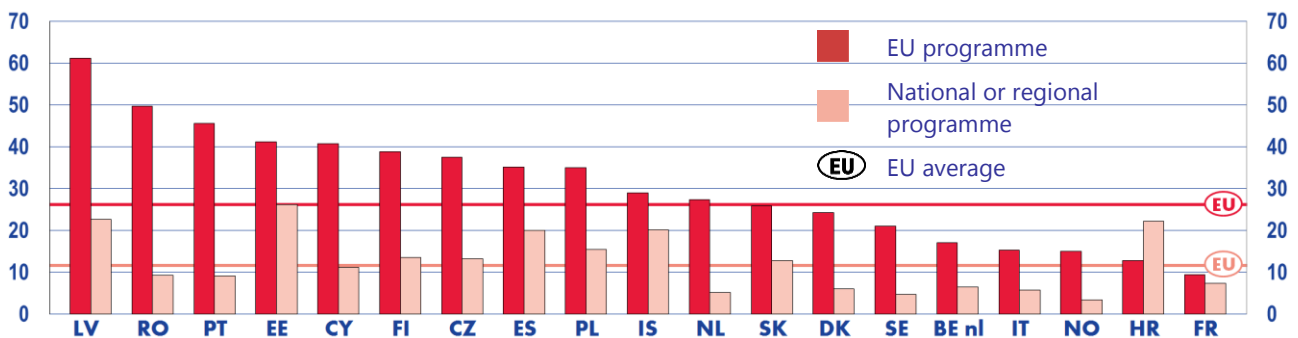
upper secondary education population was not participating in foreign language learning (United Kingdom and Norway). In contrast, in vocational upper secondary education, the same level of non-participation in language learning occurred in seven education systems (Belgium (French Community), Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, Iceland and Norway).

## More than half of all foreign language teachers have travelled abroad for professional reasons

In TALIS 2013, 56.9 % of lower secondary teachers reported that they had travelled abroad for professional reasons during initial teacher education or while in service. This is a higher percentage than teachers of other subjects, as only 19.6 % of these had travelled abroad. Funding and difficulties in replacing teachers may contribute to the lack of mobility. EU funding is the main source

of financial support for foreign language teachers who do travel for such reasons. In 2013, 26.1 % of lower secondary foreign language teachers who reported having travelled abroad for professional reasons had received funding from an EU programme such as Erasmus+. Only 11.5 % had travelled with the support of a national or regional programme.

### Proportion of modern foreign language teachers in lower secondary education who have been abroad for professional purposes with support from a transnational mobility programme, 2013



Source: Eurydice, on the basis of TALIS 2013.

## The majority of European countries provide language support for newly arrived migrant students

Determining the appropriate types of support needed for newly arrived migrant students entering the education system is an important first step in addressing their needs. Currently, central recommendations on testing the language of schooling for newly arrived students exist in approximately one third of European countries, while in the rest of Europe the reception of newly arrived students is a matter for school autonomy, and institutions are free to establish their own assessment procedures.

One support measure for newly arrived students is the provision of separate classes in which intensive

language teaching is provided with the intention of preparing students for rapid entry into mainstream classes. These preparatory classes are available in less than half of European countries. Most countries choose to integrate newly arrived migrants directly into mainstream classrooms (into the grade corresponding to their age), providing additional language support as necessary.

Almost all countries provide additional classes in the language of schooling for migrant students, and more than a third of European education systems provide personalised teaching or an individual curriculum.

**The full report *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe – 2017 Edition***

is available in English on the Eurydice website: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurydice>

EC-04-17-438-EN-N

ISBN 978-92-9492-503-9

doi:10.2797/62028

© EACEA, 2017.