



European Survey on Language Competences: Language Proficiency in England

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Background

This study compares the foreign language skills of secondary school pupils in fourteen European countries. (Belgium tested its French, Flemish and German communities separately, so there are results for sixteen jurisdictions.) The survey's objectives are to provide information on the foreign language knowledge of pupils in European countries; and to provide context information to policymakers and teachers, covering culture, policies and practices.

The survey assessed pupils' ability to understand spoken or written texts and express themselves in writing. The tested languages were the five most widely-taught in Europe: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. Each jurisdiction tested their pupils in two of these languages. In England these were French and German. Only those pupils in England who had chosen to take either French or German at Key Stage 4 were included in the sampling frame.

Main findings

In most jurisdictions (13 out of 16), the first taught language was English. The remaining three, including England, tested in French. The highest performers overall, taking reading, listening and writing together, were Sweden, Malta and the Netherlands. These countries all tested English as their first target language. England and France were among the lowest performers overall.

The range of second taught languages covered all five of the tested languages. The highest performers were the German and Flemish communities of Belgium, where English was tested. England's performance was relatively poor, with most pupils only achieving the lowest levels. However, England had significantly fewer pupils at the very lowest level (below the level of basic user) than Sweden, Poland and Greece in all three skills. England's achievement in the second taught language (German) is about as good as in its first language (French).

Across all jurisdictions, pupils with higher economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) performed at a higher level in all three language skills, in both target languages. However, in England pupils with higher ESCS performed at a higher level only in Target Language 1 (TL1, French) writing, and in Target Language 2 (TL2, German) writing and listening.

In England, pupils' involvement in intercultural exchanges had a significant positive association with TL1 (French) writing skill.

Languages and skills measured

The tested languages were the five most widely taught in Europe: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. Each jurisdiction tested their pupils in two of these languages. In England these were French and German. These were the most widely taught languages, measured by the number of pupils taking GCSEs in them in 2008.

The survey assessed pupils' ability to understand spoken or written texts and express themselves in writing. Each pupil took tests in one language, in two of the skills (reading, listening and writing).

Reporting the results

The survey reports results in reading, listening and writing against the lowest four of the six skill levels of the European Council's Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

The results are shown as the percentage of pupils in jurisdiction achieving each of the CEFR levels (A1-B2):

- A1 and A2: Basic User
- B1 and B2: Independent User

The results also identify the percentage of pupils who have not reached the level of competence described in level A1 – these pupils are described as pre-A1.

Higher performance is defined as:

- relatively more pupils at level B1 and B2
- relatively fewer pupils at level Pre-A1 and A1.

This definition attempts to reflect performance across the possible range of achievement.

Contextual information

The survey included questionnaires for pupils, teachers and schools, covering general background, attitudes to foreign language learning, and experience of it.

To avoid clashing with GCSE preparations, England did not test in Spring 2011 as all other participants did. England tested in Autumn 2011. Consequently the timetable for analysis and reporting was relatively short. An initial national report in June 2012 contained headline findings on performance. The current report also draws on results from the pupil, teacher and school questionnaires, and from national questionnaires, to report in more detail on the context.

Survey coverage

Over 50,000 pupils in more than 2,000 schools in 16 jurisdictions across 14 countries¹ took part. The minimum sample was 1,500 pupils per jurisdiction per language. Pupils were mostly in the final year of compulsory education, the typical age of the students tested was 14-15.

Jurisdictions taking part were: Belgium (Flemish), Belgium (French), Belgium (German), Bulgaria, Croatia, England, Estonia, France, Greece, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain

¹ The Flemish, French and German communities in Belgium tested separately.

and Sweden. European countries that had opted not to take part included Germany, Ireland and Italy. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland did not participate.

Fifteen jurisdictions tested in English, six in French, eight in German, one in Italian and two in Spanish.

The survey in England

Eligible pupils were currently studying a language and had done so for at least one year. As a consequence England's sample, of Year 11 pupils, did not include those who had dropped languages after Year 9. In all other participating jurisdictions, foreign language learning is compulsory for the age-group tested. The pupil sample was therefore likely to represent the whole cohort.

In England fifty-three schools and 1,444 pupils participated in the French assessment. This represented 72 per cent of the sampled schools and 92 per cent of the sampled pupils.

Fifty-five schools and 1,428 pupils took part in the German assessment. This represented 71 per cent of the sampled schools and 91 per cent of the sampled pupils.

Proficiency in the first taught language

In most jurisdictions (13 out of 16), the first taught language was English. The remaining three, including England, tested in French. The highest performers overall, taking reading, listening and writing together, were Sweden, Malta and the Netherlands. These countries all tested English as their first target language.

England and France were among the lowest performers overall. In the first taught language, England had significantly more pupils at the lower CEFR levels and significantly fewer at the highest levels.

Proficiency in the second taught language

The range of second taught languages covered all five of the tested languages. In general the grade of onset for the second target language was later than for the first target language. German was the most common second taught language. It was tested in England and seven other jurisdictions. The highest performing jurisdictions were the German and Flemish communities of Belgium, where English was tested.

England's performance was relatively poor, with most pupils only achieving the lower CEFR levels and smaller proportions at the higher levels. However, England had significantly fewer pupils at level Pre-A1 (below the level of basic user) than Sweden, Poland and Greece in all three skills. England's achievement in the second taught language (German) is about as good as in its first language (French).

Proficiency in French

French was the first target language for three jurisdictions (England, Flemish community of Belgium and German community of Belgium). In three jurisdictions (Greece, Portugal and Spain) French was the second taught language.

England was the lowest performer for all three skills, though not significantly different from Portugal. The highest performing jurisdictions in French reading were Spain and the German community of Belgium with approximately 40% of pupils achieving B1 or B2 (Independent User).

Reading

England was the worst performing jurisdiction in French reading with approximately 90% of pupils achieving level A2 or lower (Basic User). In the three highest performing jurisdictions, pupil performance was significantly different from England at all levels, with England having more pupils at the lower levels and fewer pupils at higher levels.

Listening

In French listening the German community of Belgium was the highest performing with 40% of pupils achieving level B1 or above. They outperformed England at all five levels. England was the lowest performer with approximately 75% of pupils achieving level A1 or lower (Basic User). However, pupils in England did not perform significantly differently from those in Greece and Portugal.

Writing

In French writing the highest performer was the German community of Belgium with 40% of pupils achieving B1 or above. They outperformed England at all five levels. Portugal was the lowest performer for French writing. However, the proportion of pupils at each level was not significantly different from those in England.

England's performance in French writing was similar to the other skills, with about 75% of pupils at level A1 or below.

Proficiency in German

Eight jurisdictions tested in German. It was the second taught language for all eight.

England and Poland were consistently the lowest performers for all three skills. Pupils in the Netherlands and the French community of Belgium performed consistently well.

Reading

In German reading England was the lowest-performing jurisdiction. Over 90% of pupils in England achieved level A2 or lower and fewer than 10% achieved B1 or higher. England was outperformed on the highest CEFR level (B2) by all adjudicated entities with the exception of Poland. The Netherlands was the highest performer with over 50% of pupils achieving the level of Independent User (B1 and B2).

Listening

In German listening England is one of the lowest performers, with a very small percentage of pupils at the higher CEFR levels. In England the proportion of pupils at each of the CEFR levels for listening is very similar to that for reading with the vast majority of pupils at level A1 or below. England did outperform Poland with a significantly smaller percentage of pupils achieving level A2 or below.

As with reading the Netherlands were the highest-performing jurisdiction with nearly 60% of pupils achieving B1 or above for listening.

Writing

In German writing the order is broadly similar to that for reading and listening for the lowest and highest performers. Poland was the lowest-performing jurisdiction and the Netherlands were the highest-performing. England had a significantly smaller proportion of pupils at level A1 or below compared with Poland.

Pupil characteristics and language proficiency

Across the majority of jurisdictions, there was an overall effect of gender on writing proficiency for both target languages, with boys performing at a lower level (this effect was not seen for reading or listening). However, in England, gender does not appear to have any effect on proficiency in any of the three skills in either target language.

The overall effect of socio-economic status on language proficiency was pronounced. Across all jurisdictions, pupils with higher economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) performed at a higher level in all three language skills, in both target languages. However, this pattern was not reflected in England.

In England, socio-economic status has some effect on language proficiency. Pupils with higher ESCS performed at a higher level in French writing, and in German writing and listening. No significant effects were found in French reading and listening, or for German reading.

Pupils and language learning

In England, pupils' perception of the usefulness of learning the target language had a significant positive relationship with all three skills (reading, listening and writing) for both French and German. That is, pupils who perceived the target language as being useful tended to perform at a higher level. However, for the majority of other jurisdictions this pattern was only seen for their first target language (English for most participating jurisdictions), whereas for their second target language this effect this was only true for reading and writing.

Across participating jurisdictions, pupils who liked learning the language 'a lot' performed significantly higher in listening and reading in their first target language, and in reading and writing in their second target language (compared with pupils who *hardly like* or *do not like at all* learning the language). However, this was not the case in England where a significant positive relationship

was only found for German reading (pupils who liked learning German 'a lot' had higher levels of proficiency in reading).

The findings for the association between intercultural exchanges and attainment were varied. In England, pupils' involvement in intercultural exchanges was found to have a significant positive association with French writing skills. However, for most jurisdictions there was no significant association between pupils' involvement in intercultural exchanges and attainment in any of the first target language skills. For the second target language for the majority of jurisdictions (including England) there were no significant associations.

There were several other pupil factors that were found to have a significant positive relationship with language proficiency for the majority of jurisdictions, but not England:

- Pupils 'quite like' learning a language (significant for writing skills in second target language)
- Duration of language education (significant for all three skills in first target language, and for listening and writing skills in second target language)
- Exposure to target language at home (significant for all three skills in first target language)
- Parents' knowledge and visits abroad (significant for listening skills in second target language)
- Pupils' use of target language (significant for all three skills in first target language)
- Individual pupil activities used/teacher speaking to the whole class in lessons (significant for writing skills in first target language).

School and teacher factors and language learning

The school/teacher level factors that had a significant effect on language proficiency were not the same for French and German.

For French, the factors that were significant for all three language skills were school policies/practices in terms of foreign language learning (the number of languages a school offers, and schools' specialist language profile).

For German, the factors significant across all three skills were the training and experience of teachers (teachers' experience of teaching German, and teachers' receiving training in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)).

For both French and German, the number of financial incentives offered by schools for teachers had a significant association with two language skills (listening and writing for French, and reading and writing for German).

In terms of the school/teachers factors that were significant for just one language skill: the picture was again mixed between French and German, with different variables having an effect on different skills across the two target languages. There were no messages here that were consistent for both target languages.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report are available to download free of charge at:

www.nfer.ac.uk/ESLC

Copies of the full report and of this Research Brief (RB278) are available to download free of charge at: www.education.gov.uk/research

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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.