



The first issue of *Eurydice in Brief* devoted to our Network's comparative study on the evaluation of schools providing compulsory education was warmly welcomed, in particular for its user-friendly format and the summary nature of its content.

This second issue discusses the first edition of *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe*, a report that will henceforth appear once every two years.

We trust that the present bulletin will provide some of you with general information geared to your needs and that those to whom foreign language teaching is of direct concern will consult the full report (see reference on the back page).

If you have any comments or suggestions regarding possible improvements to *Eurydice in Brief*, please do not hesitate to contact us ([comments@eurydice.org](mailto:comments@eurydice.org)).

In the meantime, we hope you find this second issue of interest.

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## FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: A EUROPEAN PRIORITY

The European Commission has regarded language teaching as a priority for over 30 years. In 2002, the Barcelona European Council recommended that at least two foreign languages should be learnt from a very early age. So what is the situation today? Which languages are studied most? How are they taught? And how are those who teach them trained to do so? The indicators published by *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe* offer a broad overview of language teaching at school in Europe.

Since the mid-1970s, the Member States and the European Commission have considered that stronger provision for foreign language teaching is one of the main concerns of their joint action in the field of education. More recently, in 2002, the Barcelona European Council called for a sustained effort 'to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching two foreign languages from a very early age'. It has thus readjusted the foregoing priority with an eye to the strategic objective set for the European Union at its 2000 Lisbon European Council, namely that of becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world.

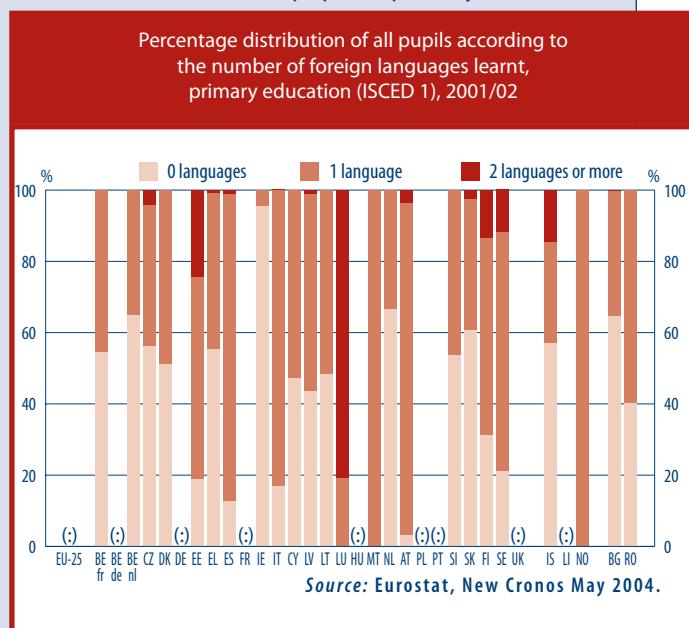
The importance attached to language learning has led the Eurydice Network to publish a set of indicators on how languages are taught at school. The 37 indicators concerned provide an overview of the position of languages in the curriculum, how language teaching is organized, the variety of languages taught, pupil participation rates and how language teachers are trained.

The language scene in Europe is unusually varied. The European Union recognises 20 official languages, which are the state languages of the Member States, in addition to which there are regional or minority languages (officially recognized or otherwise), as well as those spoken by migrant populations. Faced with this exceptional variety, school is the main gateway to language learning for the vast majority of pupils.

### **From at least one foreign language for everyone from primary school onwards...**

For several decades now, it has been mandatory for all children in most countries to learn at least one foreign language during their compulsory education from primary level onwards. Countries have also gradually increased the total period during which languages are taught. Between 1974 and 2004, this period was extended on average by two years, in particular through provision for learning at an increasingly early age, sometimes from pre-primary level. As a result of these measures, at least half of all pupils in primary education learn one foreign language in the great majority of countries. In some European countries, children at this level even begin to learn two languages – in addition to the language of instruction. This applies to at least 10 % of children in Estonia, Finland, Sweden and Iceland, and 80 % in Luxembourg (which is unusual in having three official State languages). In around ten countries, pilot projects have also been launched primarily to investigate how teaching of a foreign language may be extended to educational levels at which it is not yet compulsory.

Language teaching in primary education is in most cases carried out by general (non-specialist) teachers. Where such teaching is compulsory, the amount of time recommended for it is between 30 and 50 hours a year. The few programmes that specify varying levels of priority for the different major skills attach most importance to those of speaking and listening, rather than reading and writing.



### **... to two foreign languages in secondary education**

The Barcelona European Council recommendation is that pupils should be encouraged to learn two foreign languages. With few exceptions, it is in compulsory secondary education that this recommendation is implemented. Most European countries make it mandatory to learn a second language for at least a year, or at least ensure that this is possible by including an additional language in school core curriculum options. In the Czech Republic, Germany, Malta, Austria and Poland, this opportunity is provided only from post-compulsory secondary education onwards. In Ireland, in Italy and the United Kingdom, the introduction of a second language is at the discretion of each school.

Despite this effort in terms of provision, under 50 % of pupils learn two languages in lower secondary education. By contrast, the number of languages studied often increases in upper secondary education.

### In secondary education, more time is spent teaching languages and specialist teachers are employed

As in primary education, all curricula in secondary education aim for proficiency in the four major language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) but in this case with the same priority attached to each. Very few curricula indicate formal class size requirements specifically for language teaching. Only a small group of countries, and new Member States in particular, advocate reducing the number of pupils in a class, with Hungary doing so by as much as half. As regards the amount of time recommended for language learning, this is 90 hours a year on average (but reaches 200 hours in Denmark and Malta, as well as in the *Gymnasium* in Germany). It represents 10-15 % of the total amount of planned teaching time, with substantial variations between countries, ranging from 9 % in Poland to 34 % in Luxembourg.

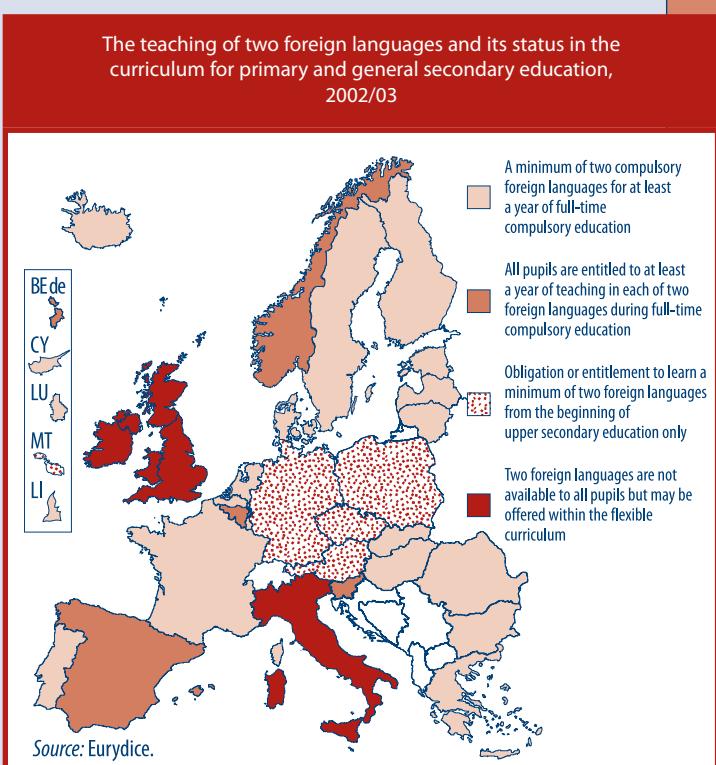
In most European countries, teachers in secondary education are specialists in the language that they teach and have a university level education. Training institutions are granted considerable autonomy. However, certain common trends may be identified, in that prospective teachers learn one or several foreign languages as part of their training and generally undertake school placements. By contrast, in very few education systems is it compulsory to spend a period of time in a country in which the target language is spoken.

### Whether chosen or mandatory, English is the dominant language

The dominance of English is clearly apparent from primary school onwards and has been tending to increase for some years.

In secondary education, English, French, German, Spanish and Russian account for 95 % of all language learning in the majority of countries. Pupils thus seem to choose the most widespread languages. And among them, English is unquestionably the leader. Several indicators each point to this conclusion. First, in 13 European countries, learning English in compulsory education is mandatory, which logically leads 90 % of pupils to learn it ahead of any other language. Neither is this a recent development, since most countries in which English was a mandatory language in 2002/03 had already made it one in 1982/83. In this respect, the countries of central and eastern Europe are in an unusual situation since they no longer make it compulsory to learn Russian, and generally leave the choice of language open.

At a time when some are questioning the effect of insisting that a certain specific language should be learnt, the issue currently appears to resolve itself as far as English is concerned, since when pupils have a free choice, 90 % of them opt for this language. The percentage of pupils learning English is therefore virtually the same in all European countries. It is interesting to note that the increasing tendency to learn English has been especially marked in the countries of central and eastern Europe, whereas in general German and French are falling behind. These two languages come second and third among the most taught languages, but English is unquestionably in pole position. Its dominance is bolstered still further by the fact that the first foreign language accounts for a greater amount of hourly teaching time than other languages. Furthermore, English is the most popular language for European in-service training grants for teachers.





### What level of proficiency does sustained effort yield?

The various indicators published in the Eurydice Network publication emphasise the importance that all European countries attach to foreign language learning. Even if English is the most widely taught language, most countries are determined to encourage learning of a second or even a third language and offer a wide variety of possibilities in this respect. The Barcelona European Council recommendations that languages should be learnt at an increasingly early age seem to be having an effect. Yet one question beyond the scope of Eurydice activity seems essential given the effort invested in language learning by education systems, teachers and pupils alike, namely what level of foreign language proficiency have pupils managed to achieve at the end of their compulsory education? Only in-depth empirical studies might provide a satisfactory answer. Moreover, at the Barcelona European Council, the Heads of State or Government asked for an evaluation of this kind in order to measure the progress achieved.

### References

Title of the publication:	Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe		
Language versions:	English, French and German - See the Eurydice website for further information on the availability of electronic versions in other languages		
Online location:	<a href="http://www.eurydice.org/Doc_intermediaires/indicators/en/frameset_key_data.html">http://www.eurydice.org/Doc_intermediaires/indicators/en/frameset_key_data.html</a>		
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