



First European Survey on Language Competences

Executive Summary

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Background to the Survey

This Executive Summary presents a brief overview of the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) and its most important findings. The full analysis is presented in two documents: *First European Survey on Language Competences: Final Report* and *First European Survey on Language Competences: Technical Report*.

The ESLC was established to provide participating countries with comparative data on foreign language competence and insights into good practice in language learning; 'not only ... a survey of language competences but a survey that should be able to provide information about language learning, teaching methods and curricula'¹. The ESLC is also intended to enable the establishment of a European language competence indicator to measure progress towards the 2002 Barcelona European Council Conclusions², which called for 'action to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age'³. It is the first survey of its kind.

In 2005 the European Commission outlined a detailed strategic approach for the ESLC. The contract for the survey was awarded in 2008 to the SurveyLang Consortium, a group of eight expert organisations in the fields of language assessment, questionnaire design, sampling, translation processes and psychometrics. The main study was carried out in spring 2011.

An Advisory Board comprising representatives of all EU Member States and the Council of Europe provided strong support for the European Commission throughout the process of developing and implementing the survey.

Conducting the Survey

Fourteen European countries took part in the survey: Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, France, Greece, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and UK-England. Belgium's three linguistic communities participated separately to give a total of 16 educational systems. The survey for England was conducted a few months later and is reported in an appendix to the main ESLC report.

The ESLC collected information about the foreign language proficiency of European pupils in the last year of lower secondary education (ISCED2) or the second year of upper secondary education (ISCED3). Note that in some educational systems these levels are considered to be primary education. Only pupils who had had instruction in the foreign language for at least one whole school year were eligible. The level chosen reflected the organisation of language learning in different countries, e.g. the age at which pupils begin to learn a second foreign language.

This first administration of the ESLC tested a representative sample of almost 54,000 pupils. Each educational system tested the two languages most widely taught in that entity (so-called first and second foreign languages) from the five tested languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. Each sampled pupil was tested in one language only.

The survey was completed to international education survey standards similar to surveys such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS.

The language tests covered three language skills: Listening, Reading and Writing (Speaking was considered logistically difficult for this first round). Each pupil was assessed in two of these three skills. Each pupil received a test at an appropriate level on the basis of a routing procedure. This targeted approach favoured the collection of more valid responses.

The ESLC was administered in both paper and computer-based formats.

The results of the survey are reported in terms of the levels of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: teaching, learning and assessment* (CEFR)⁴. The CEFR has been widely adopted in Europe and beyond as a framework for language education, and also for developing a shared understanding of levels of language competence. It defines six levels of functional competence from A1 (the lowest level) to C2. The ESLC focused on levels A1 to B2. It was also necessary to define a pre-A1 level in order to identify an A1 threshold.

The terms "basic user" and "independent user" are adopted to designate the broad A and B levels, as well as denotations for each of the five levels, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of ESLC and CEFR levels

ESLC level		CEFR level	Definition
Independent user	Advanced independent user	B2	An independent language user who can express herself clearly and effectively
	Independent user	B1	An independent language user who can deal with straightforward, familiar matters
Basic user	Advanced basic user	A2	A basic user who can use simple language to communicate on everyday topics
	Basic user	A1	A basic user who can use very simple language, with support
Beginner		Pre-A1	A learner who has not achieved the level of competence described by A1

Much effort was devoted to making the language tests comparable over the five tested languages in terms of the skills measured and interpretation in terms of *Common European Framework* levels. Examples of the language test tasks are included in the ESLC Final Report.

Additional information collected for validation of standards included a multilingual study comparing samples of writing, and a section in the questionnaire where pupils were asked to self-assess their language skills on 16 Common European Framework can-do statements.

Questionnaires were administered to the pupils tested and to the foreign language teachers and principals in their institutions. In addition, system-wide information was collected through the National Research Coordinators.

Findings: language proficiency

Overall Performance

Language competences provided by educational systems still need to be significantly improved

The ESLC results show an overall low level of competences in both first and second foreign languages tested. The level of independent user (B1+B2) is achieved by only 42% of tested students in the first foreign language and by only 25% in the second foreign language. Moreover, a large number of pupils did not even achieve the level of a basic user: 14% for the first and 20% for the second foreign language.

Table 2: Percentage of pupils achieving each CEFR level in first and second foreign language (global average across educational systems)

Tested language	Pre-A1	A1	A2	B1	B2
First foreign language	14	28	16	19	23
Second foreign language	20	38	17	14	11

Table 3 provides a summary of results per skill. It confirms that for all tested skills results are better for the first foreign language: the level of independent user (B1+B2) for Reading, Listening and Writing averaged across educational systems (the unweighted average) are respectively 41%, 45% and 40% for the first foreign language compared to 27%, 27% and 22% for the second one.

Table 3: Percentage of pupils achieving each CEFR level in first and second foreign language, by skill (average across educational systems)

Level	First foreign language			Second foreign language		
	Reading	Listening	Writing	Reading	Listening	Writing
B2 - Advanced independent user	27	30	13	15	14	5
B1 - Independent user	14	15	27	12	13	17
A2 - Advanced basic user	12	13	24	13	16	21
A1 - Basic user	33	25	25	41	37	36
Pre-A1 - Beginner	14	17	11	19	20	21

Higher achievement in the first foreign language is not unexpected, given the generally earlier onset and greater amount of study. In the majority of participating countries or language communities the first foreign language is compulsory, but not the second one. In addition, in most educational systems, the first foreign language is English and the exposure to this language through internet and other traditional and new media is higher. A key finding of the ESLC is that these factors contribute to relatively better results in English than other languages. Actually, even in educational systems where English is the second foreign language, the performance in English tends to be higher than in the other language tested. Further evidence of the particular status of English comes from the pupils' questionnaire responses, their reported perception of its usefulness, and their degree of exposure to it and use of it through traditional and new media.

Performance by educational system

There is a wide range of ability across countries in Europe

The proportion of pupils reaching each level varies greatly among educational systems, for all languages (both first and second foreign language) and skills.

The Survey shows that for the first foreign language, the proportion of students reaching the level of independent user varies from 82% in Malta and Sweden (English) to only 14% in France (English) and 9% in England (French).

For the second foreign language (not English), the level of independent user is reached by 4% in Sweden (Spanish) and 6% in Poland (German) compared to 48% in the Netherlands (German).

The final report contains detailed results by educational system, first and second foreign language, and skill.

Many educational systems show high levels of achievement. However, for the first foreign language there are six educational systems in which at least 20% of pupils do not achieve the level of basic user (A1) in one or more skills. For the second foreign language the same is true of nine educational systems, although it is important to note that much shorter duration of study may be a factor here.

The wide range of achievement is not observed solely at educational system level – for example, Sweden performs very well in the first foreign language (English) but much less so in the second foreign language (Spanish). Differences should be evaluated carefully, taking into account the range of factors which make simple comparison of performance difficult: the grade pupils are in, their average age, the number of years the language has been studied - all can vary across the educational systems.

Tables 4 and 5 show for first and second foreign language the results by educational system, grouped by broad basic (A) and independent (B) user levels.

Table 4: First foreign language - percentage of pupils achieving broad levels by skill and educational system

Educational system	Language	Reading			Listening			Writing		
		Pre -A1	A	B	Pre -A1	A	B	Pre -A1	A	B
Bulgaria	English	23	43	34	23	37	40	15	52	32
Croatia	English	16	44	40	12	32	56	5	49	45
Estonia	English	7	33	60	10	27	63	3	37	60
Flemish Community of Belgium	French	12	63	24	17	62	20	19	59	22
France	English	28	59	13	41	46	14	24	61	16
French Community of Belgium	English	10	59	31	18	55	27	6	65	29
German Community of Belgium	French	10	52	38	11	49	40	8	51	41
Greece	English	15	40	45	19	35	46	7	41	53
Malta	English	4	17	79	3	11	86	0	17	83
Netherlands	English	4	36	60	3	21	77	0	39	60
Poland	English	27	49	24	27	45	28	19	59	23
Portugal	English	20	53	26	23	39	38	18	55	27
Slovenia	English	12	42	47	5	28	67	1	51	48
Spain	English	18	53	29	32	44	24	15	58	27
Sweden	English	1	18	81	1	9	91	0	24	75
UK England	French	22	68	10	30	62	8	36	54	10