



First European Survey on Language Competences:

Executive Summary

Background to the Survey

This Executive Summary presents a brief overview of the European Survey on Language Competences 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’ⁱ. The ESLC is also intended to enable the establishment of a language competence indicator to measure progress towards the 2002 Barcelona European Council conclusions, 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’ⁱⁱ. 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 SurveyLang, 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 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 which collected information about the foreign language proficiency of European students in the last year of lower secondary education (ISCED2) or the second year of upper secondary education (ISCED3)¹. The level chosen reflected the organisation of language learning in different countries, e.g. the age at which students begin to learn a second foreign language. Belgium’s three linguistic communities participated separately to give a total of 16 “adjudicated entities”. The survey for England was conducted at a later date and is reported in an appendix to the main ESLC report.

This first administration of the ESLC tested a representative sample of about 53,000 students (1500 in each adjudicated entity). Each adjudicated entity tested the two languages most widely taught in that entity (so-called first and second target languages) from the five tested languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. Each sampled student 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 student was assessed in two of these three skills. Each student received a test at an appropriate level on the basis of a routing test. This targeted approach favoured the collection of more valid responses.

An innovative feature of the ESLC was its administration in both paper and computer-based formats.

¹ The term secondary education is used here to refer to ISCED levels 2 and 3. In some adjudicated entities these levels are considered to be primary education.

Much effort was devoted to making the language tests comparable 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 students were asked to self-assess their language skills on 16 Common European Framework can-do statements.

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

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)ⁱⁱⁱ. 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.

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

Findings: language proficiency

Overall Performance

Table 1 provides a summary of results in Reading, Listening and Writing averaged across adjudicated entities. It shows for example that in first target language Reading 28% of students achieve B2, 14% achieve B1, 12% achieve A2 and 32% achieve A1.

Table 1 Percentage of students achieving each CEFR level in first and second target language, by skill (average across adjudicated entities)

Level	First target language			Second target language		
	Reading	Listening	Writing	Reading	Listening	Writing
B2	28	32	14	16	15	6
B1	14	16	29	12	14	17
A2	12	13	24	14	16	22
A1	32	23	24	40	35	35
Pre-A1	14	16	9	18	20	20

Performance is generally lower for the second target language.

Higher achievement in the first target language is not unexpected, given the generally earlier onset and greater amount of study. In most adjudicated entities, the first target language is English, and even in adjudicated entities where it is the second target language performance in English tends to be higher than in other languages. Further evidence of the particular status of

English comes from the students' 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 adjudicated entity

The proportion of students reaching each CEFR level varies greatly among adjudicated entities, for all languages (both first and second target language) and skills.). For example, the proportion of students reaching broad CEFR level B for Listening in the first target language runs from 14% to 91% across adjudicated entities. The final report contains detailed results by adjudicated entity, first and second target language, and skill.

Table 2 and Table 3 show for first and second target language the results by adjudicated entity, grouped by broad CEFR levels (A and B).

Table 2 Percentage of students achieving broad CEFR levels by skill and adjudicated entity (First target language)

Adjudicated entity	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

Table 3 Percentage of students achieving broad CEFR levels by skill and adjudicated entity (Second target language)

Adjudicated entity	Language	Reading			Listening			Writing		
		Pre-A1	A	B	Pre-A1	A	B	Pre-A1	A	B
Bulgaria	German	24	51	25	25	52	22	24	60	16
Croatia	German	29	57	13	23	61	16	20	69	11
Estonia	German	17	56	27	15	60	24	10	68	22
Flemish Community of Belgium	English	2	18	80	1	12	87	0	27	72
France	Spanish	18	68	14	19	71	10	24	68	8
French Community of Belgium	German	14	62	24	13	59	28	4	66	29
German Community of Belgium	English	3	44	53	4	32	64	0	43	57
Greece	French	35	54	10	37	52	11	49	35	16
Malta	Italian	16	50	34	17	37	46	31	46	23
Netherlands	German	3	43	54	1	39	60	1	68	31
Poland	German	41	53	6	45	50	5	45	48	7
Portugal	French	20	66	14	25	64	11	32	60	8
Slovenia	German	21	57	23	12	60	28	9	72	19
Spain	French	5	54	41	20	61	19	7	67	26
Sweden	Spanish	24	69	7	37	60	3	45	52	2

The wide range of achievement is not observed solely at adjudicated entity level – for example, Sweden performs highly in the first language (English) but much less so in the second language (Spanish). Differences should be evaluated carefully, taking into account the range of factors which make simple comparison of performance difficult.

Many adjudicated entities show high levels of achievement. However, for the first target language there are six adjudicated entities in which at least 20% of students do not achieve A1 in one or more skills. For the second target language the same is true of nine adjudicated entities, although it is important to note that much shorter duration of study may be a factor here.

Performance by language

In terms of levels of achievement per language, B1 in any skill is achieved in English by about 50% of tested students; in Italian by about 40%; in German and French by something over 20%, and in Spanish by about 10%. It should be borne in mind that the languages were tested in different groups of adjudicated entities, some of them small (one entity for Italian, two for Spanish).

Creating a European indicator for languages

An important purpose of the ESLC is to inform the creation of a European indicator (or indicators) for languages. The European Commission has stressed that to be practically useful, indicators must be simple, and for this reason proposes a “composite” indicator derived by averaging across language skills. Thus for example the ESLC results can be combined by taking the average of the proportion of students achieving each CEFR level in Reading, Listening and Writing. Table 4 and Table 5 below illustrate this indicator used to compare the performance of adjudicated entities in the ESLC, in global terms, in first and second target language.

Table 4 Percentage of students at each CEFR level by adjudicated entity using composite index (First target language)

Adjudicated entity	Pre-A1	A1	A2	B1	B2
France (EN)	31	40	15	9	5
Flemish community of Belgium (FR)	16	41	20	15	7
Poland (EN)	24	34	17	15	10
Spain (EN)	22	35	17	14	13
Portugal (EN)	20	33	16	16	15
French Community of Belgium (EN)	11	36	24	19	10
Bulgaria (EN)	20	28	16	16	19
German Community of Belgium (FR)	9	29	21	21	19
Greece (EN)	13	22	16	22	26
Croatia (EN)	11	23	18	24	23
Slovenia (EN)	6	22	19	25	29
Estonia (EN)	7	20	12	20	41
Netherlands (EN)	2	14	18	30	36
Malta (EN)	2	7	9	22	60
Sweden (EN)	1	6	11	25	57

Table 5 Percentage of students at each CEFR level by adjudicated entity using composite index (Second target language)

	Pre-A1	A1	A2	B1	B2
Sweden (ES)	36	50	10	3	1
Poland (DE)	44	42	9	4	2
Greece (FR)	40	36	11	7	5
Portugal (FR)	25	49	14	8	3
France (ES)	21	51	17	8	3
Croatia (DE)	24	47	16	8	5
Bulgaria (DE)	24	39	15	12	9
Slovenia (DE)	14	44	19	12	12
Estonia (DE)	14	40	21	15	10
French Community of Belgium (DE)	10	39	23	16	11
Spain (FR)	11	39	22	18	11
Malta (IT)	22	29	15	15	20
Netherlands (DE)	2	23	27	28	20
German Community of Belgium (EN)	2	15	25	34	24
Flemish community of Belgium (EN)	1	7	12	29	51

The adjudicated entities are shown approximately ordered from lower to higher, on the principle that a higher ranking indicates a larger proportion of students achieving levels B1 or B2, and a smaller proportion achieving A1 or pre-A1. Different ordering principles would reflect different choices of priority, and produce somewhat different results.

Table 4 and Table 5 illustrate the use of the composite indicator. They are *not* intended as an adequate summary of the ESLC results. The ESLC was designed to report on three skills, and we should stress that this is the level which most accurately conveys the performance of countries.

The European Commission has indicated that after a second round of the survey, including speaking skills, it will also be possible to propose a more elaborate benchmark referring to levels in the four skills.

Findings: the contextual questionnaires

The contextual information collected through the questionnaires seeks to ‘facilitate a more productive comparison of language policies, and language teaching methods between Member States, with a view to identifying and sharing good practice’^{iv}. Thus it focuses on those contextual factors which can be modified through targeted educational policies, such as the age at which foreign language education starts, or the training of teachers. The ESLC maps out differences within and between adjudicated entities regarding three broad policy areas, and evaluates which of these relate to differences in language proficiency. Other factors which are largely beyond the control of policy such as general demographic, social, economic and linguistic contexts are not explicitly discussed in the final report, although data on socio-economic status are collected and are available for analysis by adjudicated entities.

The Barcelona European Council of 15 and 16 March 2002 called for further action to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching two foreign languages to all from a very early age^v. Generally students report a rather early start to foreign language learning (before or during primary education) and most commonly they learn two foreign languages. However, considerable differences are still found across adjudicated entities in the exact onset of foreign language learning, the current teaching time and the number of languages offered and learned.

- *The results of the ESLC show that an earlier onset is related to higher proficiency in the foreign language tested, as is learning a larger number of foreign languages and of ancient languages.*

Policy also aspires to create a language-friendly living and learning environment, where different languages are heard and seen, where speakers of all languages feel welcome and language learning is encouraged^{vi}. Clear differences between adjudicated entities are seen in the informal language learning opportunities available to students (such as students perception of their parents’ knowledge of the foreign language tested, individual trips abroad, the use of dubbing or subtitles in the media, and the students’ exposure to the language through traditional and new media).

- *A positive relation is observed between proficiency in the tested language and the students’ perception of their parents’ knowledge of that language, and their exposure to and use of the tested language through traditional and new media*

The school environment displays a less clear picture. Differences are found in schools’ degree of language specialization, the availability of ICT facilities, the number of guest teachers from abroad and provisions for students with an immigrant background. However, exchange visits for students, and participation in school language projects display a relatively low take-up and most aspects concerning classroom practice display relatively less variation across adjudicated entities (such as the use of ICT for foreign language learning and teaching, the relative emphasis teachers place on particular skills or competences, emphasis on similarities between languages, and students’ attitudes to their foreign language study, its usefulness and difficulty). Only the amount of target language spoken in lessons shows clear differences across adjudicated entities.

- *Students who find learning the language useful tend to achieve higher levels of foreign language proficiency and students who find learning the language difficult lower levels of foreign language proficiency. Also a greater use of the foreign language in lessons by*

both teachers and students shows a positive relation with language proficiency. Overall, differences in language specialization, hosting staff from other language communities, and provisions for immigrant students show no clear relationship with foreign language proficiency.

Improving the quality of initial teacher education and ensuring that all practicing teachers take part in continuous professional development has been identified as a key factor in securing the quality of school education^{vii}. Overall, most teachers are well qualified, are educated to a high level, have full certification and are specialised in teaching languages. Also relatively little variation was found between adjudicated entities concerning in-school teaching placements and teaching experience even though differences exist in the number of different languages teachers have taught. Generally, across adjudicated entities only a small proportion of teachers have participated in exchange visits, despite the availability of funding for such visits in a number of adjudicated entities. We did find considerable differences between adjudicated entities in teacher shortages and in the use of and received training in the CEFR, and, to a lesser extent, in a language portfolio; the actual use of a portfolio appears rather low. Concerning continuous professional development, despite clear differences found in the organisation of in-service training (such as financial incentives, when teachers can participate in training, and the mode of training), reported participation in and focus of in-service training display less variation across adjudicated entities.

- *The different indices related to initial and continued teacher education show little relation to language proficiency. For many indices this lack of a relation can be attributed to a lack of differences within adjudicated entities. For others however, such as the use of and received training in the CEFR, considerable policy differences have been found, and yet these differences do not account for differences in language proficiency.*

References

ⁱ Communication from the Commission to the Council of 13 April 2007 entitled 'Framework for the European survey on language competences' [COM (2007) 184 final – Not published in the Official Journal]

ⁱⁱ Commission Communication of 1 August 2005 - The European Indicator of Language Competence [COM(2005) 356 final - Not published in the Official Journal]

ⁱⁱⁱ Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

^{iv}. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: The European Indicator of Language Competence. COM(2005) 356 final. 5. Brussels.

^v. Barcelona European Council 15 and 16 March 2002: Presidency conclusions. Barcelona.

^{vi} Language Teaching: In the spotlight. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/language-teaching/doc24_en.htm

^{vii} Terms of Reference: Tender no. 21 "European Survey on Language Competences", Contracting Authority: European Commission.