



Department  
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# Research Brief

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## European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC): Initial Findings

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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 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.

The survey assessed pupils' ability to understand spoken or written texts and express themselves in writing.

A second national report, later in 2012, will analyse the influences on England's performance in more detail.

### 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. In the first taught language, England had significantly more pupils at the lower proficiency levels and significantly fewer at the highest levels.

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 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).

## 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 has been relatively short. This first national report contains headline findings on performance. A second, towards the end of 2012, will draw 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 countries<sup>1</sup> took part. The minimum sample was 1,500 pupils per jurisdiction per language. Pupils were mostly in the final year of compulsory education.

Jurisdictions taking part were: Belgium (Flemish), Belgium (French), Belgium (German), Bulgaria, Croatia, England, Estonia, France, Greece, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain 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 1444 pupils participated in the French assessment. This represented 72 per cent of the sampled schools and 92 per cent of the sampled pupils.

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<sup>1</sup> The Flemish, French and German communities in Belgium tested separately.

Fifty-five schools and 1428 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).

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.

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, in general, pupils in England did not perform significantly differently from those in Greece and Portugal.

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.

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.

The Netherlands was the highest performer with over 50% of pupils achieving the level of Independent User (B1 and B2).

England was outperformed on the highest CEFR level (B2) by all adjudicated entities with the exception of Poland.

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.

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.

Three jurisdictions outperformed England at all levels for German writing.

## Additional Information

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

[www.nfer.ac.uk/ESLC](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/ESLC)

*Copies of the full report are available on a print-on-demand basis by writing to: Publications Unit, NFER, The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berks., SL1 2DQ. Email: [book.sales@nfer.ac.uk](mailto:book.sales@nfer.ac.uk) Tel: 01753 637002. There is an administration charge of £20 plus postage and packing for a single copy, with a 10% discount for bulk orders of 10 copies or more.*

*Copies of this Research Brief (DFE-RB222) are available to download free of charge at: [www.education.gov.uk/research/](http://www.education.gov.uk/research/)*

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