

## Multilingualism and lifelong language learning

Rooted in the Treaties, multilingualism reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of the European Union's Member States. Language learning is critical to the construction of the European Union and imparts essential basic and transversal skills. Language acquisition starts at home, and early childhood education can further enhance self-expression. Yet it does not stop with schooling, adults too acquire language skills, even outside the formal educational system.

### Teaching the language of instruction

Students come to school with a wide array of language skills, but very often their mastery of the language of instruction will be key to their ability to succeed at school. Failing to do so can mark them as poorly skilled individuals whose employability is diminished and whose opportunities for fulfilment are relatively limited. Additional support for the acquisition of the language of instruction and [policies](#) to tackle early departures from education and training are closely linked. The absence of basic skills is not just an issue for individuals, however, as it also [hampers](#) the economy.

Language teaching is an exclusive competence of the Member States but the European Union supports the development of policies that assist young children and students who do not speak the language of instruction at home. While exchanges between Member States discuss [various approaches](#) ranging from full emersion to separate classes for limited periods, it is acknowledged that the earlier the intervention, the greater its effectiveness. Early childhood education is therefore seen to play an important role in the linguistic development of all young children. However, a Commission [study](#) recommends shifting away from language policies that are limited to compensating for perceived deficiencies and instead developing and using students' wider repertoire of language skills for their own benefit and that of the school community.

### Teaching of foreign languages

The development of such an approach could contribute towards the achievement of a second priority in the EU's language policy, which aims to encourage foreign language learning. The target expressed in the Barcelona Council [conclusions](#) of 2002 is for EU citizens to be able to speak two foreign languages besides their own mother tongue. The ability to use several languages is not only important for the job market; it [facilitates](#) exchanges and mobility between Member States. Languages are useful tools for individuals living in multilingual and multicultural societies.

Foreign language learning is on the increase. In 2014, 98.6 % of pupils at [lower secondary](#) level and 84 % of pupils at [primary level](#) were studying at least one foreign language, whereas 59.9 % of lower secondary students were studying two languages or more. However, language learning is not evenly accessible across the educational system as students following a general education are more likely to study languages than students in a vocational track.

Some languages are more popular than others. English is by far the most popular foreign language (97 %) followed by French (34 %) and German (23 %). A [study](#) prepared for the European Parliament indicates, however, that while EU policy is not limited to promoting the big languages and puts resources into smaller languages as well, it should consider widening its horizons to the other languages of the EU besides the official ones, including regional languages and other national languages.

A [2015 report](#) claims that young people are more likely to speak foreign languages than adults and that there is a positive correlation between level of education and number of languages learned. Individuals in employment are also likely to speak more foreign languages than unemployed or inactive ones, though this could also be related to the level of education.



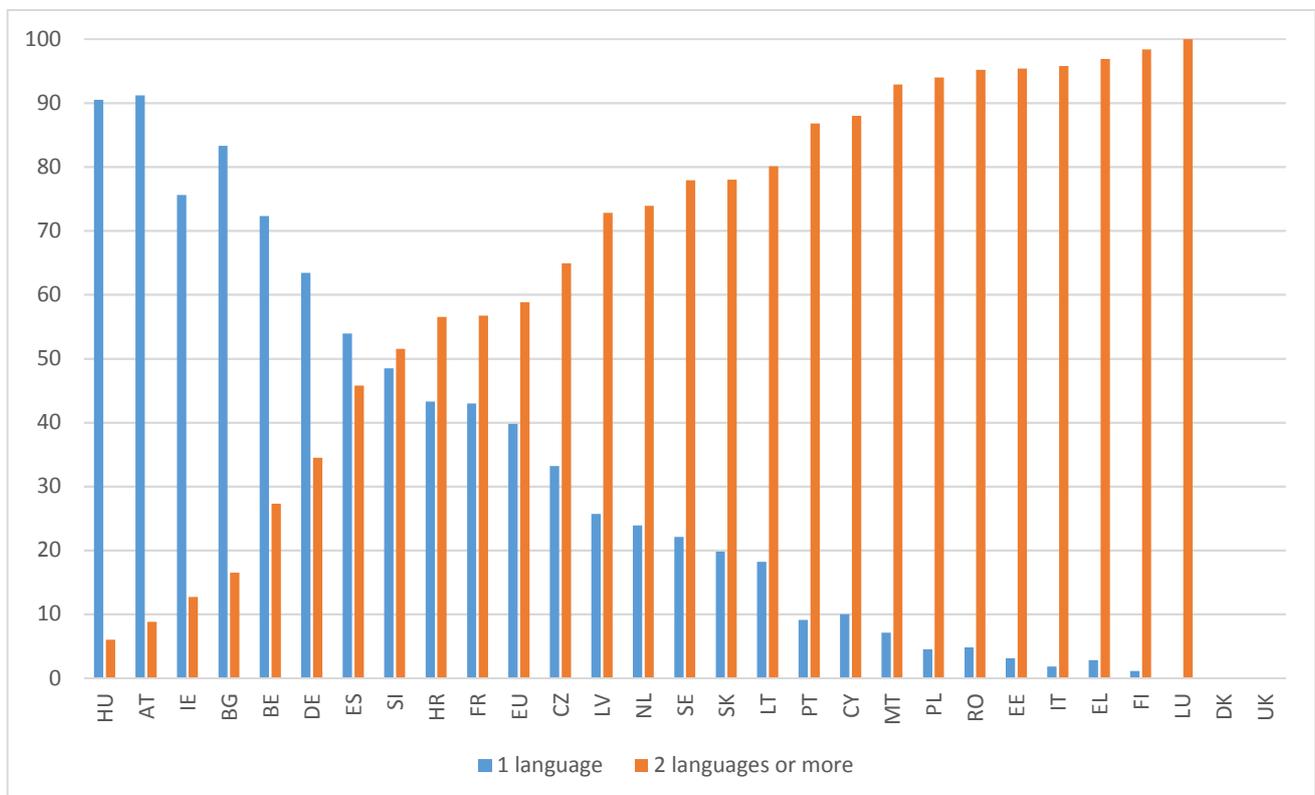
The European Commission also promotes use of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages ([CEFR](#)) to facilitate recognition of language skills acquired and to monitor the effectiveness of language teaching. This framework was designed by the Council of Europe and classifies language skills at six levels of proficiency. At least 23 Member States have linked their foreign language curricula to date. The framework also makes it possible for individuals who acquire languages through [non-formal](#) and informal learning to certify their level of proficiency.

**Contribution of EU programmes**

Several programmes contribute towards multilingualism and lifelong language learning. [Erasmus+](#) has an online linguistic support [platform](#) that offers assessment and training in the host language for mobility beneficiaries. One of the main justifications for mobility itself is to strengthen knowledge of a foreign language. Another Erasmus+ action, known as [Key Action 3](#), supports language learning policy development through the collection and exchange of evidence. [Horizon 2020](#) and the [European Social Fund](#) finance projects on multilingualism and language learning and teaching, while the [European Regional Development Fund](#) finances language projects that facilitate economic and social cohesion. On a different level, the [Creative Europe](#) programme supports literary translation and the Commission's [directorate](#) in charge of translation cooperates with higher education institutions for the training of translators.

In 2009 the European Parliament adopted a resolution on [multilingualism](#) in which it called on the Commission to prepared measures to promote linguistic diversity in recognition of its importance. In its resolution of 2013, it focused on [endangered European languages](#) and asked the Commission and Member States to support them. In 2016 the European Parliament adopted a resolution on [sign languages](#) in which it stressed that deaf, deaf-blind and hard-of-hearing citizens should have the same access to communication and information as other citizens.

**Percentage of lower secondary school pupils learning one or more foreign languages (2015)**



Source: [Eurostat](#) (no figures available for Denmark or the United Kingdom).