

Europeans and their Languages



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Summary

This survey was requested by Directorate General for Education and Culture and coordinated by Directorate General Press and Communication

This document does not represent the point of view of the European Commission.
The interpretations and opinions contained in it are solely those of the authors.

INTRODUCTION

Today **the European Union is home to 450 million people from diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds**. The linguistic patterns of European countries are complex - shaped by history, geographical factors and the mobility of people. At present, the European Union recognises 20 official languages¹ and about 60 other indigenous and non-indigenous languages are spoken over the geographical area.

The term multilingualism refers both to a situation in which several languages are spoken within a certain geographical area and to the ability of a person to master multiple languages. As such, multilingualism is a key feature of Europe in both its senses.

The benefits of knowing foreign languages are unquestionable. Language is the path to understanding other ways of living which in turn opens up the space for intercultural tolerance. Furthermore, language skills facilitate working, studying and travelling across Europe and allow intercultural communication.

The European Union is a truly multilingual institution that fosters the ideal of a single Community with a diversity of cultures and languages. To guarantee this the European Commission adopted in November 2005² the first Commission Communication that explores the area of multilingualism.

The three core aims of the Commission's multilingualism policy are to encourage language learning, to promote a healthy multilingual economy and to give all EU citizens access to the Union's legislation, procedures and information in their own language.

Between 5 November and 7 December, 28 694 citizens³ in the 25 EU countries as well as in Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Turkey were asked about their experiences and perceptions of multilingualism as part of the wave 64.3 of the Eurobarometer.

In this summary, the analysis focuses on three themes as determining factors in a multilingual society:

- The long-term objective for all EU citizens to speak two languages in addition to their mother tongue⁴
- Lifelong language learning starting from a very early age⁵
- The importance of education

¹ The official languages of the European Union are Czech, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Slovak, Slovene, Spanish and Swedish. Irish will become the 21st official language on 1 January 2007. After the accession of Bulgaria and Romania the Union will operate in 23 official languages.

² COM(2005)596: *A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism*
<http://europa.eu.int/languages/en/document/74>

³ In each country, the survey covers the population with a minimum age of 15 and having citizenship of one of the Member States. In the acceding and candidate countries, the survey covers nationals of those countries as well as citizens of the EU Member States resident in those countries who have a sufficient command of one of the respective national language(s) to answer the questionnaire.

⁴ COM(2003)449: *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: an Action Plan 2004-2006*
http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/doc/official/keydoc/actlang/act_lang_en.pdf

⁵ Conclusions of *the Barcelona European Council* in March 2002:
http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/71025.pdf

THE STARTING POINT

Today, the European Union is multilingual in a dual sense: numerous native languages are spoken within the geographical area and a reasonable share of citizens has skills in several languages. Nevertheless, language skills are not equally spread over Europe and its citizens appear to need encouragement to learn foreign languages.

D48a What is your mother tongue?

MOTHER TONGUE - % MENTIONS (SPONTANEOUS-MULTIPLE ANSWERS POSSIBLE) ⁶			
	State Language(s), official languages that have an official status in the EU ⁷	Other official EU languages ⁸	Other Languages ⁹
BE	Dutch 56%, French 38%, German 0.4 %	5%	3%
CZ	98%	2%	0.7%
DK	97%	2%	2%
DE	90%	3%	8%
EE	82%	1%	18%
EL	99%	0.2%	0.7%
ES	Spanish 89%, Catalan ¹⁰ 9%, Galician ¹¹ 5%, Basque ¹² 1%	1%	2%
FR	93%	6%	3%
IE	English 94%, Irish 11%	2%	0.2%
IT	95%	5%	1%
CY	98%	2%	1%
LV	73%	1%	27%
LT	88%	5%	7%
LU	Luxembourgish 77%, French 6%, German 4%	14%	0.8%
HU	100%	0.8%	0.6%
MT	97% Maltese, 2% English	0.6%	-
NL	96%	3%	3%
AT	96%	3%	2%
PL	98%	1%	1%
PT	100%	0.6%	0.1%
SI	95%	1%	5%
SK	88%	12%	2%
FI	Finnish 94%, Swedish 5%	0.8%	0.4%
SE	95%	5%	2%
UK	92%	3%	5%
BG	90%	0.4%	11%
HR	98%	1%	0.8%
RO	95%	6%	0.7%
TR	93%	0.5%	7%

⁶ The question allows for multiple answers i.e. the respondents may name several languages as their mother tongue. Also the "don't know" option is possible. Thus, the percentages of languages spoken in a country may add up to more or less than 100%. Answers are given spontaneously and coded in a ready-made list.

⁷ State languages have an official status throughout a country. Official languages have an official status within a certain region in a country or over the whole state. Regional languages that have an official status in the EU are Catalan, Galician and Basque.

⁸ The category "Other official EU languages" includes the official EU languages that are spoken in a country where they are not state languages.

⁹ The category "Other languages" includes non-indigenous languages and regional/minority languages that do not have EU official status.

¹⁰ Catalan is protected by the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia (4/1979), which states that Catalan and Castilian are the official languages in Catalonia. The Law 7/1983 on Language Standardization in Catalonia was replaced by the Act on Linguistic Policy (Act No 1, 7 January 1998).

¹¹ Galician is protected by the Galician Autonomy Statute (1982), which specifies that both Galician and Castilian are the official languages. The Galician Linguistic Standardization Act (1983) promotes Galician in all domains of society.

¹² Basque is protected by The Statute of Autonomy of Basque Country (1979), which states that that both Basque and Castilian (Spanish) are official languages in the Basque Country.

Not surprisingly, the mother tongue of the majority of Europeans is **one of the state languages** of their country. 100% of Hungarians and the Portuguese name their respective state languages as their native language.

Notwithstanding, a minority speaking either **an official EU language** other than the state language or **a non-European language** as their mother tongue is recorded in every country polled.

14% of respondents in Luxembourg state that they speak another EU language than one of the three state languages. This can be attributed to a substantial Portuguese minority residing in the country (mother tongue of 9%) and the presence of international institutions there. In the case of Slovakia, 10% of respondents speak Hungarian as their mother tongue¹³.

When it comes to non-EU languages, in Latvia and Estonia a significant share of citizens speak Russian as their mother tongue (26% and 17% respectively), which is understandable for historical and geographical reasons. This effect is also detected in the candidate country Bulgaria, where 8% of respondents name Turkish as their mother tongue.

Finally, for some EU citizens their mother tongue is **the language of their country of origin outside the EU**. This is observed in countries with traditionally large immigrant populations such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom.

56% of citizens in the EU Member States are able to hold a conversation in one language apart from their mother tongue. This is 9 points more than was perceived in 2001 among the 15 Member States at the time¹⁴. 99% of Luxembourgish, 97% of Slovaks and 95% of Latvians indicate that they know at least one foreign language.



With respect to the goal for every EU citizen to have knowledge of two languages in addition to their mother tongue, **28% of the respondents state that they speak two foreign languages well enough to have a conversation.** This is especially the case in Luxembourg (92%), the Netherlands (75%) and Slovenia (71%). 11% of the respondents indicate that they master at least three languages apart from their mother tongue.

¹³ The Law on Minority Languages was adopted in Slovakia on July 10, 1999. It allows the use of minority languages in public administration at a local level, where at least 20% of the community belong to a minority group.

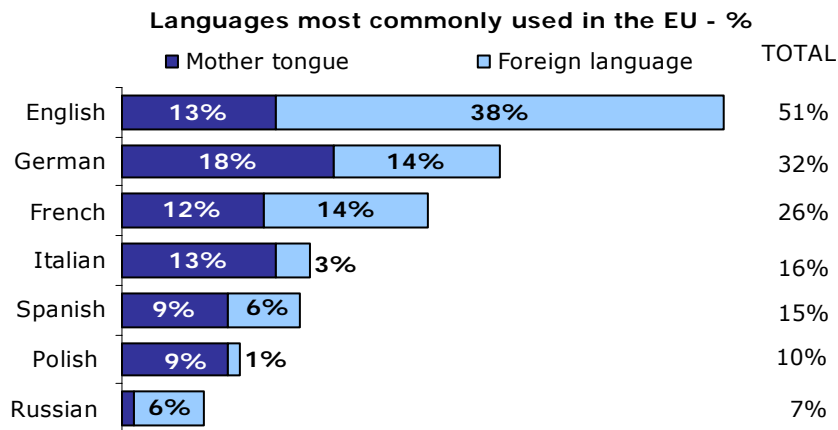
¹⁴ *Standard EB 55.1* in http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb55/eb55_en.pdf

Still, almost half of the respondents, 44%, admit not knowing any other language than their mother tongue. In six Member States, the majority of citizens belong to this group, the countries being Ireland (66%), the United Kingdom (62%), Italy (59%), Hungary (58%), Portugal (58%) and Spain (56%).

English remains the most widely spoken foreign language throughout Europe. 38% of EU citizens state that they have sufficient skills in English to have a conversation. In 19 out of 29 countries polled, English is the most widely known language apart from the mother tongue, this being particularly the case in Sweden (89%), Malta (88%) and the Netherlands (87%).

14% of Europeans indicate that they know either French or German along with their mother tongue. French is the most spoken foreign language in the United Kingdom (23%) and Ireland (20%) whereas citizens of the Czech Republic (28%) and Hungary (25%) are the most likely to be proficient in **German. Spanish and Russian complete the group of the five most widely known languages** apart from the mother tongue, with a 6% share of European citizens knowing each of them.

In conclusion, the state languages of the most populous Member States are, unsurprisingly, the widest spread native languages within the EU, German being the most widely spoken mother tongue (18%). When these results are combined with the skills in foreign languages, it can be perceived that **English is clearly the most commonly used language in the EU with over a half of the respondents (51%) speaking it either as their mother tongue or as a foreign language.**



At the same time, it is worth pointing out that **language skills are unevenly distributed both over the geographical area of Europe and over socio-demographic groups.**

Reasonably good language competences are perceived in relatively small Member States with several state languages, lesser used native languages or "language exchange" with neighbouring countries. This is the case for example in Luxembourg where 92% speak at least two languages. Those who live in Southern European countries or countries where one of the major European languages is a state language appear to have moderate language skills. Only 5% of Turkish, 13% of Irish and 16% Italians master at least two languages apart from their mother tongue.

A "multilingual" European is likely to be young, well-educated or still studying, born in a country other than the country of residence, who uses foreign languages for

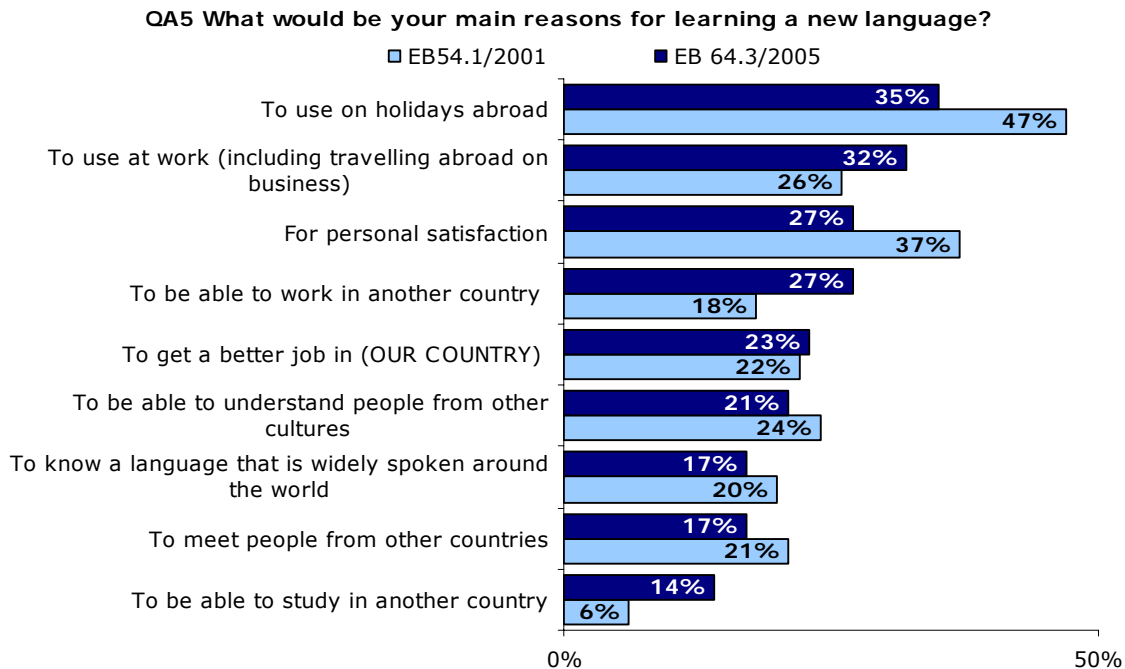
professional reasons and is motivated to learn. Consequently, it seems that a large part of European society is not enjoying the advantages of multilingualism.

Finally, **the level of motivation of EU citizens to learn languages is moderate.** During the last two years, 18% of EU citizens report learning or improving their foreign language skills and 21% indicate that they have the intention to do so over the coming year. Based on these results, **approximately 1 in 5 Europeans can be described as an active language learner¹⁵ who** has recently improved his/her language skills or intends to do so over the following 12 months.

Only 12% of the respondents have improved their language skills in the past and also intend to do so in the coming year, thereby earning the status of very active language learner.

The three factors mentioned the most often for discouraging language learning are: lack of time (34%), motivation (30%), and expense of language classes (22%). The perceived incentives that would improve language skills reflect these findings: free language courses receive a 26% score, followed by flexible lessons suiting one's schedule with an 18% share.

At a more general level, **the reasons for learning languages are becoming more and more tied to practical benefits** such as opportunities to use the skills at work (32%) or to work abroad (27%) compared to the results four years before. Nonetheless, "softer" motives such as using foreign languages on holidays (35%) or for personal satisfaction (27%) still remain very much in evidence.



¹⁵ Very active language learner = has both learned/improved language skills over the last two years **and** intends to do so over the next 12 months, Active language learner = has either learned/improved language skills over the last two years **or** intends to do so over the next 12 months, Non-active language learner = has neither learned/improved language skills over the last two years **nor** intends to do so over the next 12 months.

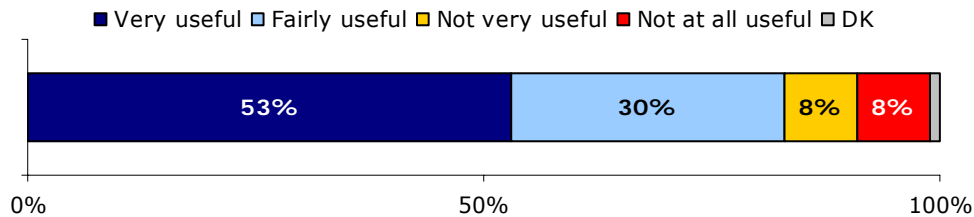
THE CHALLENGES

The current situation poses considerable challenges for the future in relation to the targets set for a European multilingual society. Among these are the challenges of responding to citizens willingness to learn languages, meeting the aims at the policy level and reaching the target of "mother tongue + two".

First, a notable consensus among Europeans prevails about the benefits of knowing several languages. 83% of citizens of the Member States consider that knowing foreign languages is or could be useful for them personally, over half (53%) appreciating language skills as very useful. Only 16% of respondents do not recognise the benefits of multilingualism.

Practically everyone in Sweden (99%), Cyprus (98%) and Luxembourg (97%) acknowledges the advantages, and even in the countries with the lowest support, in Portugal and Greece, 3 in 4 citizens consider language skills to be useful.

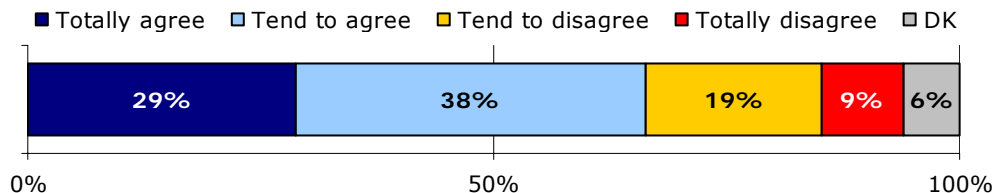
QA1 Do you think knowing other languages than your mother tongue is, or could be, very useful, fairly useful, not very useful or not at all useful for you personally? - % EU25



This support extends to the policy level since 67% of the respondents agree with the view that language teaching should be a political priority, 29% being entirely in agreement with this view.

In 26 out of 29 countries polled, the largest proportion of citizens shares this view. This appears to be especially the case in Southern European countries where competence in languages is also perceived to be moderate. 87% of Cypriots and 82% of Greeks would treat language teaching as a political priority whereas in the candidate country Croatia (55% disagree) and in Finland (53%) the majority of citizens stands against this view.

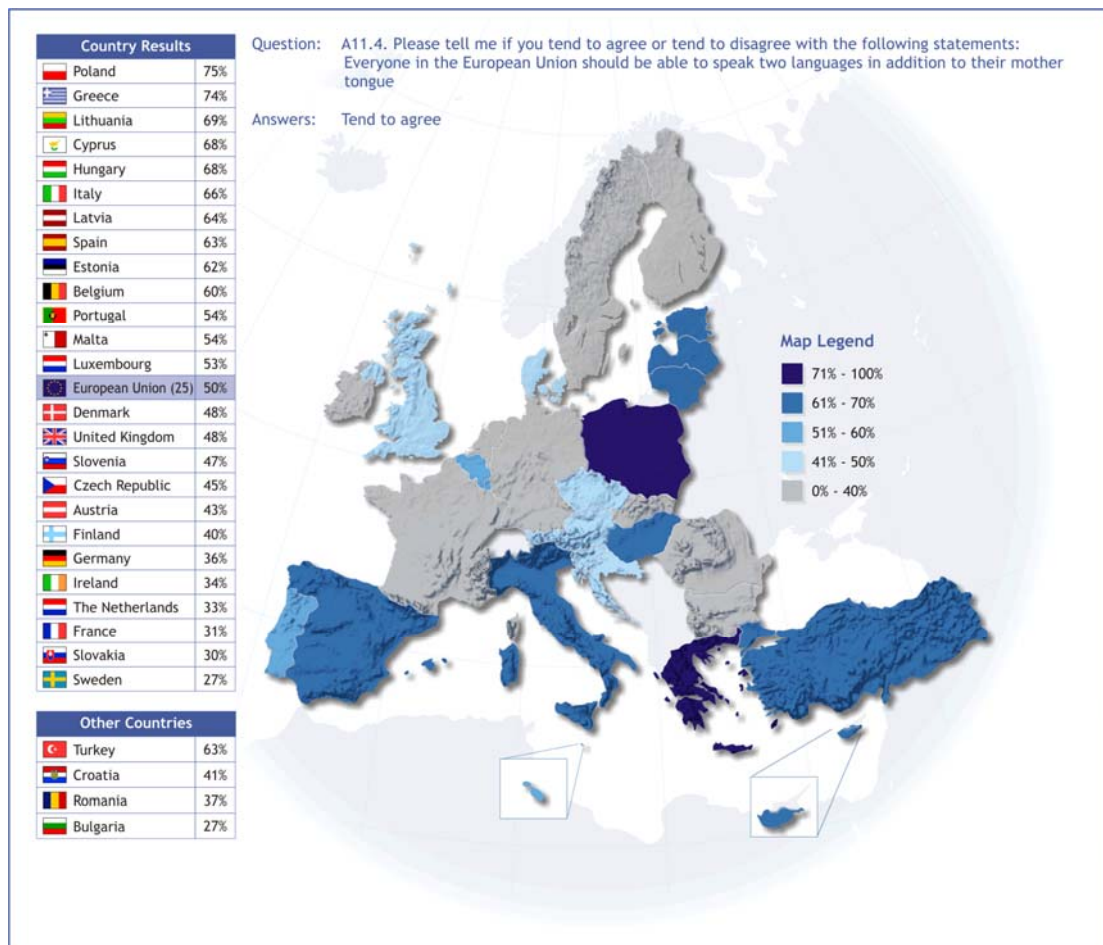
QA12.1 Please tell me to which extent you agree or disagree with each of the following: Languages' teaching should be a political priority - % EU



Finally, the target of "mother tongue + two" receives cautious support from Europeans, since 50% of Europeans agree with the view that everyone in the EU should be able to speak two languages in addition to their mother tongue. 44% of respondents are against this option. At present, 28% of Europeans indicate that they are able to hold a conversation in two foreign languages.

At the country level, notable variation occurs. It appears that countries in Southern and Eastern Europe are more likely to support the statement. This is in particular the case in Poland (75%), Greece (74%) and Lithuania (69%). Sweden (27%) and the acceding country Bulgaria (27%) have the lowest proportions of citizens accepting the idea of everybody speaking at least two languages along with their mother tongue.

This aim was first brought to the fore in Barcelona in March 2002 by the Heads of State or Government¹⁶ who called for at least two foreign languages to be taught from a very early age. **This objective is built on a long-term basis, thus, the work that has begun has to continue.** Ground for support exists, since 84% of Europeans agree that everyone in the European Union should speak one language in addition to their mother tongue.

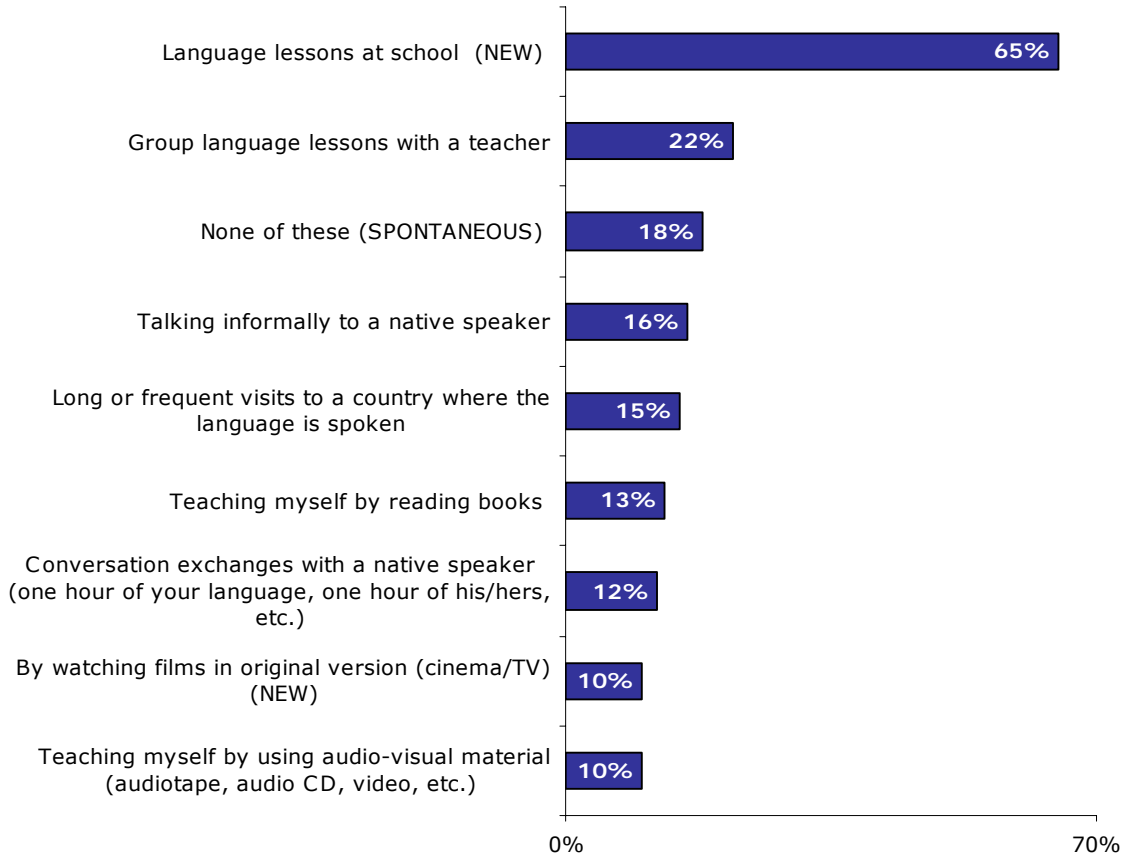


¹⁶ Conclusions of the Barcelona European Council in March 2002:
http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/71025.pdf

EDUCATION IS THE KEY

The education systems in each country and future generations seem to be crucial in meeting the challenges of multilingualism. As the Commissioner Ján Figel' (responsible for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism) believes, **"today's young generation will fully contribute to enriching Europe's multilingual society"**¹⁷.

QA7a I am going to read out several ways of learning a foreign language.
Please tell me which of these ways you have ever used - % EU



Europeans learn languages at school and at secondary school in particular. A large majority, 65%, name language lessons at school as a way they have used to learn foreign languages. When asked where they have improved their language skills, 59% of respondents refer to secondary school and 24% to primary school. In fact, **for many Europeans, school appears to be the only place where they ever learn foreign languages.**

A wide consensus prevails among Europeans on the importance of young people learning foreign languages. 73% of EU citizens indicate better job opportunities as the main reason for the young to gain knowledge of other languages apart from their mother tongue, followed by 38% of respondents stating the global status of the language as a motive for young people to study languages. **Practically no one (0,4%) considers that it is not important for young people to acquire language skills.**

¹⁷ Press release on the European Day of Languages 26 September 2005
<http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/05/1179&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=fr>

The majority of Europeans think that the best age to start to teach both the first and the second foreign language to children is from the age of six onwards (55% and 64% respectively), in other words, at primary school.

Referring to the challenge of an early start to learn two foreign languages, **39% of EU citizens would accept that children begin to learn the first language in addition to their mother tongue before the age of 6.** However, only 17% of respondents share this view when it comes to the second foreign language.

77% of the EU citizens consider that children should learn English as their first foreign language. English is number one in all countries polled, except the United Kingdom, Ireland and Luxembourg. French follows next with a 33% share and German receives support from 28% of the respondents.

QA2b And which two languages, apart from your mother tongue do you think children should learn?¹⁸

	English	French	German	Spanish	Russian	Italian	Swedish
EU25	77%	33%	28%	19%	3%	2%	0%
BE	88%	50%	7%	9%	0%	1%	-
CZ	89%	9%	66%	4%	9%	0%	-
DK	94%	13%	62%	13%	0%	0%	0%
DE	89%	45%	3%	16%	6%	2%	-
EE	94%	6%	22%	1%	47%	0%	1%
EL	96%	34%	50%	3%	0%	6%	-
ES	85%	44%	14%	4%	0%	1%	-
FR	91%	2%	24%	45%	0%	6%	-
IE	3%	64%	42%	35%	1%	4%	0%
IT	84%	34%	17%	17%	0%	0%	-
CY	98%	49%	19%	2%	4%	4%	0%
LV	94%	6%	28%	1%	42%	0%	0%
LT	93%	6%	34%	2%	43%	0%	0%
LU	59%	83%	43%	2%	0%	1%	-
HU	85%	4%	73%	3%	2%	2%	-
MT	90%	24%	13%	2%	-	61%	-
NL	90%	22%	40%	21%	0%	0%	-
AT	84%	29%	2%	10%	4%	11%	-
PL	90%	7%	69%	1%	10%	1%	-
PT	90%	60%	8%	7%	-	0%	-
SI	96%	6%	69%	3%	0%	12%	0%
SK	87%	7%	75%	3%	6%	1%	0%
FI	85%	10%	24%	3%	10%	0%	38%
SE	99%	17%	35%	31%	1%	0%	1%
UK	5%	71%	34%	39%	1%	3%	-
BG	87%	13%	49%	5%	14%	1%	-
HR	82%	5%	69%	2%	0%	14%	-
RO	64%	34%	17%	7%	2%	8%	-
TR	72%	12%	52%	1%	2%	1%	-

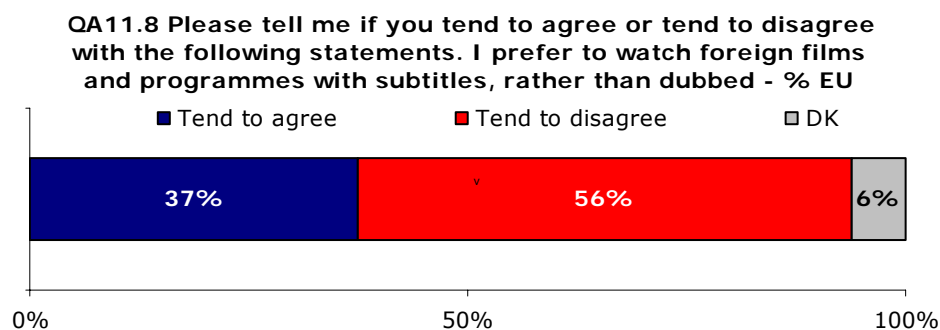
 = First language  = Second language

¹⁸ In the table, only those languages that receive the largest and the second largest share of mentions in a country are presented.

Along with school education, many other ways to learn languages and different learning environments exist. As an example, research shows that using sub-titles can encourage and facilitate language learning.

In those countries where sub-titles are commonly in use, support for watching foreign films and programmes in the original language is significantly high. This is the case for 94% of Swedes and Danes and 93% of Finnish respondents. It can be noted that these countries are among the Member States where citizens tend to be proficient in several languages.

On average 10% of EU citizens state that they have used watching films in their original version as a way to learn languages. However, **the majority of Europeans, 56%, prefers to watch foreign films and programmes dubbed than to hear the original language with subtitles.** This is in particular the case in Hungary (84%) and the Czech Republic (78%).



FINALLY

In the light of the targets set for a multilingual Europe, **the situation can be assessed as promising.** Compared to the results of the Eurobarometer surveys carried out in 2001¹⁹, the developments over four years are positive:

- The number of EU citizens who know at least one foreign language increases linearly from 47% in 2001 to 56% in 2005.
- The self-evaluated level of language skills of Europeans is improving. Compared with the results in 2001, the share of those mastering English and Spanish increases by 4 points and the proportion of those speaking French and German very well rises by 3 and 2 points respectively²⁰.
- Today more Europeans find that knowing foreign languages is useful compared with four years ago (83% in 2005 compared to 72% in 2001).

¹⁹ EB54.1 *Europeans and Languages* in http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_147_summ_en.pdf and *Standard EB 55.1* in http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb55/eb55_en.pdf

²⁰ The level of Russian was not covered in the EB54.1

SPECIAL EUROBAROMETER N° 243

“Europeans and their Languages”

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Between the 5th of November and the 7th of December 2005, TNS Opinion & Social, a consortium created between Taylor Nelson Sofres and EOS Gallup Europe, carried out wave 64.3 of the EUROBAROMETER, on request of the EUROPEAN COMMISSION, Directorate-General Press and Communication, Opinion Polls.

The SPECIAL EUROBAROMETER N°243 is part of wave 64.3 and covers the population of the respective nationalities of the European Union Member States, resident in each of the Member States and aged 15 years and over. The EUROBAROMETER 64.3 has also been conducted in the two acceding countries (Bulgaria and Romania) and in the two candidate countries (Croatia and Turkey). In these countries, the survey covers the national population of citizens of the respective nationalities and the population of citizens of all the European Union Member States that are residents in those countries and have a sufficient command of one of the respective national language(s) to answer the questionnaire. The basic sample design applied in all states is a multi-stage, random (probability) one. In each country, a number of sampling points was drawn with probability proportional to population size (for a total coverage of the country) and to population density.

In order to do so, the sampling points were drawn systematically from each of the "administrative regional units", after stratification by individual unit and type of area. They thus represent the whole territory of the countries surveyed according to the EUROSTAT NUTS II (or equivalent) and according to the distribution of the resident population of the respective nationalities in terms of metropolitan, urban and rural areas. In each of the selected sampling points, a starting address was drawn, at random. Further addresses (every Nth address) were selected by standard "random route" procedures, from the initial address. In each household, the respondent was drawn, at random (following the "closest birthday rule"). All interviews were conducted face-to-face in people's homes and in the appropriate national language. As far as the data capture is concerned, CAPI (*Computer Assisted Personal Interview*) was used in those countries where this technique was available.

ABBREVIATIONS	COUNTRIES	INSTITUTES	N° INTERVIEWS	FIELDWORK DATES		POPULATION 15+
BE	Belgium	TNS Dimarso	1.000	08/11/2005	06/12/2005	8.598.982
CZ	Czech Rep.	TNS Aisa	1.029	11/11/2005	04/12/2005	8.571.710
DK	Denmark	TNS Gallup DK	1.031	08/11/2005	07/12/2005	4.380.063
DE	Germany	TNS Infratest	1.557	08/11/2005	29/11/2005	64.174.295
EE	Estonia	Emor	1.000	11/11/2005	06/12/2005	887.094
EL	Greece	TNS ICAP	1.000	09/11/2005	04/12/2005	8.674.230
ES	Spain	TNS Demoscopia	1.025	05/11/2005	04/12/2005	35.882.820
FR	France	TNS Sofres	1.012	08/11/2005	05/12/2005	44.010.619
IE	Ireland	TNS MRBI	1.000	09/11/2005	04/12/2005	3.089.775
IT	Italy	TNS Abacus	1.000	07/11/2005	05/12/2005	49.208.000
CY	Rep. of Cyprus	Synovate	502	11/11/2005	05/12/2005	552.213
LV	Latvia	TNS Latvia	1.000	08/11/2005	04/12/2005	1.394.351
LT	Lithuania	TNS Gallup Lithuania	1.011	13/11/2005	04/12/2005	2.803.661
LU	Luxembourg	TNS ILReS	501	07/11/2005	06/12/2005	367.199
HU	Hungary	TNS Hungary	1.015	11/11/2005	28/11/2005	8.503.379
MT	Malta	MISCO	500	08/11/2005	04/12/2005	322.917
NL	Netherlands	TNS NIPO	1.032	12/11/2005	05/12/2005	13.242.328
AT	Austria	Österreichisches Gallup-Institute	1.002	10/11/2005	02/12/2005	6.679.444
PL	Poland	TNS OBOP	1.000	10/11/2005	06/12/2005	31.610.437
PT	Portugal	TNS EUROTESTE	1.000	22/11/2005	06/12/2005	8.080.915
SI	Slovenia	RM PLUS	1.030	11/11/2005	06/12/2005	1.663.869
SK	Slovakia	TNS AISA SK	1.044	11/11/2005	29/11/2005	4.316.438
FI	Finland	TNS Gallup Oy	1.017	08/11/2005	07/12/2005	4.279.286
SE	Sweden	TNS GALLUP	1.054	08/11/2005	29/11/2005	7.376.680
UK	United Kingdom	TNS UK	1.321	05/11/2005	04/12/2005	47.685.578
BG	Bulgaria	TNS BBSS	1.004	07/11/2005	21/11/2005	6.695.512
HR	Croatia	Puls	1.000	08/11/2005	05/12/2005	3.682.826
RO	Romania	TNS CSOP	1.002	12/11/2005	04/12/2005	18.145.036
TR	Turkey	TNS PIAR	1.005	07/11/2005	05/12/2005	47.583.830
TOTAL			28.694	05/11/2005	07/12/2005	442.463.487

For each country a comparison between the sample and the universe was carried out. The Universe description was derived from Eurostat population data or from national statistics offices. For all countries surveyed, a national weighting procedure, using marginal and intercellular weighting, was carried out based on this Universe description. In all countries, gender, age, region and size of locality were introduced in the iteration procedure. For international weighting (i.e. EU averages), TNS Opinion & Social applies the official population figures as provided by EUROSTAT or national statistic offices. The total population figures for input in this post-weighting procedure are listed above.

Readers are reminded that survey results are estimations, the accuracy of which, everything being equal, rests upon the sample size and upon the observed percentage. With samples of about 1,000 interviews, the real percentages vary within the following confidence limits:

Observed percentages	10% or 90%	20% or 80%	30% or 70%	40% or 60%	50%
Confidence limits	± 1.9 points	± 2.5 points	± 2.7 points	± 3.0 points	± 3.1 points