

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **EC STUDY HIGHLIGHTS WEAK FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS IN UK – BUT ASPIRATION TO GET BETTER**

Nine per cent of 14-15 year-old school pupils in England can use their first foreign language (French for those surveyed) independently, according to a new European Commission survey. The average for the 14 European countries covered is 42%. Meanwhile, 39% of adults in the UK are able to have a conversation in a second language, compared to an EU average of 54%.

#### **Language achievement of 14-15 year-olds**

The first European Survey on Language Competences shows that 9% of 14-15 year old pupils studying French in England reach the level of being "an independent language user who can deal with straightforward, familiar matters" in line with the Council of Europe's definition.

The corresponding figure across the 14 countries surveyed – usually for pupils learning English - is 42%. Sweden and Malta reach 82% and the Netherlands 66%. France is on 14%.

30% of pupils in English schools do not reach the level of "a basic user who can use very simple language, with support". Here France scores marginally worse, with 31%.

6% of English 14-15 year-olds studying German achieve the level of independent users. This compares to 25% across the countries surveyed who are independent in the second language taught in the national education system.

#### **Adults and their language skills**

A linked Eurobarometer opinion poll on EU citizens' attitudes towards multilingualism and foreign language learning. survey highlights a gap – in many other countries as well as the UK - between aspirations and reality when it comes to foreign languages.

Seventy-two per cent of people in the UK and 84% EU-wide think everyone in the EU should be able to speak at least one other language as well as their mother tongue. 66% in the UK and 72% overall support the EU's policy that people should master two other languages.

However, only 39% in the UK - a quarter of whom are native speakers of other languages who can converse in English - can in practice have a conversation in a foreign language, according to those polled. This compares to an EU average of 54%.

Fourteen per cent in the UK can speak two other languages than their own, compared to 25% across the EU.

In Luxembourg, 98% speak at least one language in addition to their mother tongue, in Latvia it is 95% and the Netherlands 94%. In Germany 66% can converse in another language and in France 51%.

The UK remains near the bottom of the EU table, despite a one percentage point improvement since the last similar survey in 2005. Only Hungary (35% able to speak another language) and Italy (38%) are below. Portugal at 39% is equal with the UK and Ireland marginally above (40%).

Androulla Vassiliou, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, said: *"This Eurobarometer shows that multilingualism and language learning matter a great deal to people and that is something we should rejoice in. But we must also do more to improve the teaching and learning of languages. Being able to communicate in a foreign language broadens your horizons and opens doors; it makes you more employable and, in the case of businesses, it can open up more opportunities in the Single Market."*

Nevertheless, more people in UK (29%) regularly use another language than their mother tongue at work than the EU average (27%), though these figures may be distorted by the inclusion of non-anglophones using English at work.

Despite the above, only 27% of UK residents think learning another language helps you get a better job (EU average 45%), UK residents believe the main advantage is use on holiday (57% cite this as a motivation).

The UK figure for those who believe all EU languages should be treated equally is higher than EU average (83% v 81%)

Fewer UK people than the EU average believe the EU should communicate in only one language (46% v 53%)

French remains the most popular foreign language spoken and which people think is most useful for them and their children.

## Next steps

The European Commission wants to step up support for language learning through the new 'Erasmus for All' programme ([IP/11/1398](#)). Language learning is one of its six specific objectives and the Commission plans to boost funding for language courses for people wishing to study, train or volunteer abroad. The Commission will propose a European benchmark on language competences by the end of 2012 which will measure Member States' progress in improving language teaching and learning.

The results of the Eurobarometer on 'Europeans and their Languages' and the European Survey on Language Competences will be discussed at an international conference in Limassol (Cyprus) which will coincide with the next European Day of Languages (26 September).

## Background

The Barcelona EU summit of 2002 called for actions “to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age” and for “the establishment of a linguistic competence indicator”.

The **Special Eurobarometer (386)** survey on Europeans and their Languages was carried out in spring 2012. Almost 27,000 people were interviewed face-to-face in their mother tongue. All 27 Member States were covered and those taking part represented different social and demographic groups.

The most widely spoken mother tongue in the EU is German (16%), followed by Italian and English (13% each), French (12%), then Spanish and Polish (8% each).

The five most widely spoken foreign languages remain English (38%), French (12%), German (11%), Spanish (7%) and Russian (5%).

At a national level English is the most widely spoken foreign language in 19 of the 25 Member States where it is not an official language (i.e. excluding the UK and Ireland).

The **European Survey on Language Competences** was carried out in spring 2011 and the findings are published today following a detailed analysis. It tested almost 54 000 pupils across 14 countries and 16 educational systems (the three language communities of Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, England, Estonia, France, Greece, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden). The assessment provides comparable data on the level of foreign language competences of pupils aged 14-15. In each country the tests measured reading, listening and writing abilities in two out of the five most widely taught official languages of the EU: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. In addition,

on the basis of questionnaires filled in by the pupils, as well as nearly 5000 language teachers and 2,250 school principals, the assessment identifies that language learning abilities are closely related to a sense of motivation which is in turn linked to the situation in families, education and society at large.

For more information:

[Special Eurobarometer 386 'Europeans and their languages'](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_special_en.htm)  
[http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb\\_special\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_special_en.htm)

[European Survey on Language Competences](http://ec.europa.ec/languages/eslc/docs/en)  
<http://ec.europa.ec/languages/eslc/docs/en>

[Data from the European Survey on Language Competences and the Special Eurobarometer 386](#)

European Commission: [Education and training](#)  
[Androulla Vassiliou's website](#)  
Follow Androulla Vassiliou on Twitter [@VassiliouEU](#)

**For more information, please contact the London press office on 020 7973 1971.**  
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