



ANALYTICAL HIGHLIGHT

FOCUS ON Foreign languages

- Globalisation is likely to increase the demand for foreign language skills in European labour markets in the short- to medium-term.
- English is regarded as an important basic skill demanded by recruiters throughout Europe, but additional languages increasingly make the difference to business.
- Only 42% of teenage pupils are competent in their first foreign language and just 20% in their second foreign language.

The growing importance of foreign language skills to employers

Foreign language skills are increasingly important in helping individuals succeed in the jobs market and businesses to grow their markets internationally. Over half of Europeans (53%) use foreign languages at work and a similar proportion (45%) believe that they gained a better job in their own country as a result of their foreign language skills¹.

Demand from employers for foreign language skills is closely related to their international outlook. It remains a priority area for only a minority of employers:

- 33% of employers report that foreign-language skills among graduates are 'very important' compared to 58%-67% for other skill requirements, such as team-working, communication skills, computer

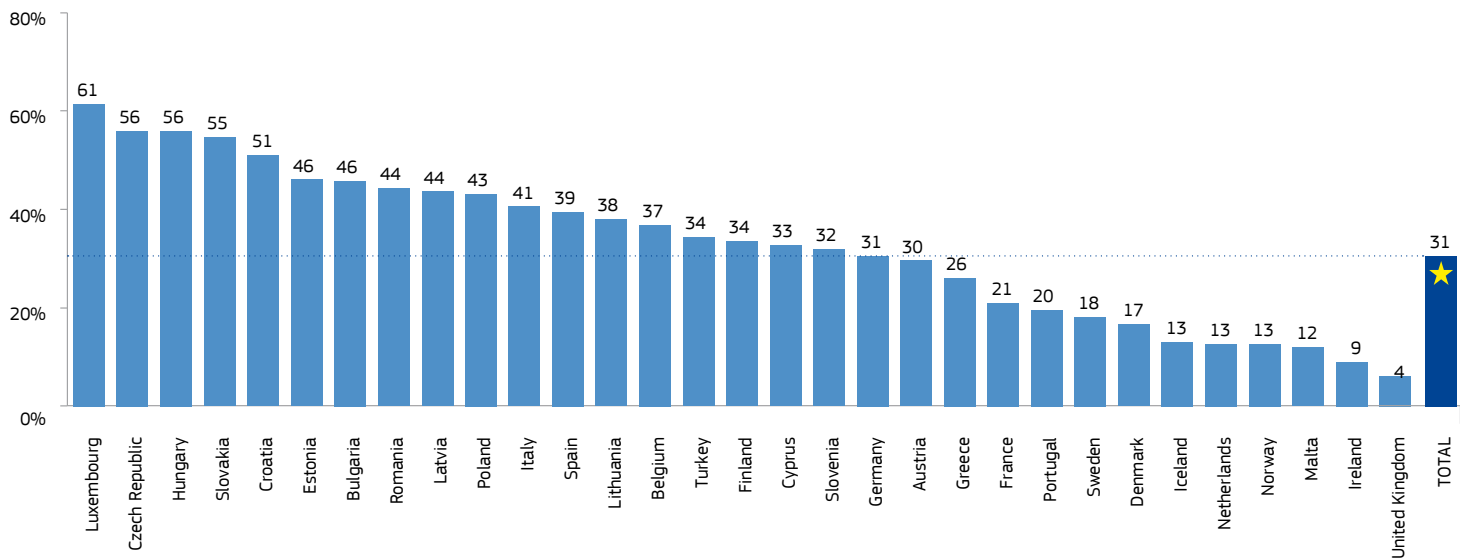
literacy, being able to adapt to new situations, and analytical and problem-solving skills.

- However, 58% of employers with international contacts indicate that foreign language skills are very important, compared to 17% of employers with no international contacts².

The changing demand for foreign language skills links directly to business globalisation. The accession of Eastern European countries to the European Union and the expansion of the single market mean that language skills are increasingly important for businesses hoping to take advantage of the free movement of goods and services.

On a global level, major shifts in international markets are expected to take place over the next twenty years. China has already overtaken the United States and Germany as the world's largest exporter and Brazil, India and Russia are expected to join Japan, China and the United States

Figure 1 – Percentage of employers by country ranking foreign language skills in the top three most important skills and competencies for higher education graduates over the next 5-10 years



Source: Eurobarometer (2010)

as the six largest world economies. Arabic is also becoming an important language in the international market place³.

Employers in general report that foreign language skills will become much more important in the future. When asked about the skills that graduate should have over the next 5 to 10 years, foreign languages were the only skills that employers ranked higher for future graduates compared to current demand⁴. The variation by country in anticipated future demand is considerable when measured according to the top three most important skills and competencies in the future, as shown in Figure 1.

The language needs of business

English is well-established as an important skill demanded by recruiters throughout Europe. It remains the most widely-spoken foreign language in 19 out of the 25 Member States for which it is not an official language⁵. In particular, senior managers and executives working in multinational firms often need to be highly proficient⁶.

Beyond English language skills, recruiters are only gradually adjusting their hiring procedures to reflect the multilingual business environment in which their companies operate. As a result, language requirements tend to vary depending on the organisation and position. For roles in sales and marketing, fluent multilingualism allowing for negotiation and persuasion is regarded as a valuable skill. However, it is common for jobs within production, logistics and finance not to stipulate any language requirement other than knowledge of English⁷.

Moves towards increased foreign language requirements are prompted by the internationalisation of small- and medium-sized businesses. Firms are increasingly aware of the language barriers hindering their progress and have a growing understanding of the skills needed to surmount them.

In the United Kingdom, which tends to score low on multilingualism, it has been noted that exports outstrip imports to many English-speaking countries, but that the reverse is true for countries where the customer language is not English. The message is that poor communication leads to loss of business⁸. In the United Kingdom and other major countries, employer language deficits can be offset through migration and international recruitment⁹.

Alongside the importance of English as a business language, it is other languages that provide the competitive edge. This partly reflects the importance of cultural understanding in international business transactions, but it is also the result of trying to engage with markets where there is very little English spoken. China, France, Germany and Russia are reported as especially challenging markets for businesses which cannot communicate in local languages.

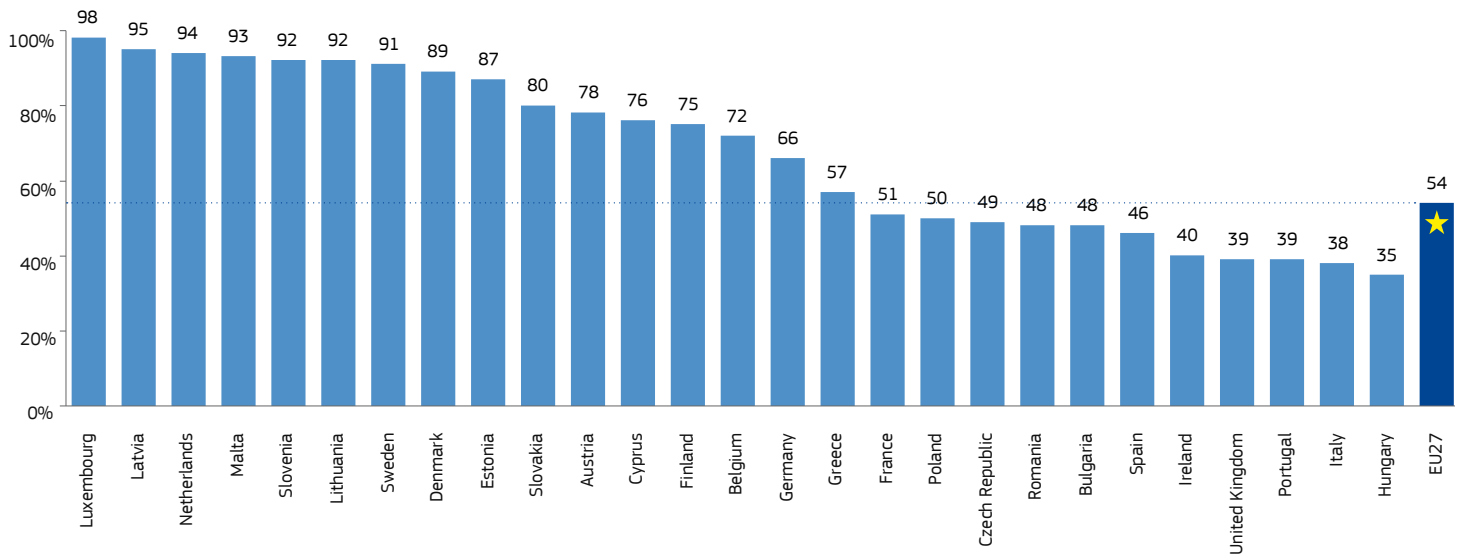
The language gap across Europe

Surveys reveal a widely-held consensus among Europeans on the benefits of learning foreign languages. However, the extent of multilingualism differs significantly among countries. In half of Member States, more than three quarters of the population knows a foreign language.

Those living in Luxembourg (98%) are most likely to say they can speak at least one foreign language, followed by Latvia (95%), the Netherlands (94%), Malta (93%), Slovenia (92%), Lithuania (92%) and Sweden (91%) – see Figure 2. By contrast, the countries in which people are least likely to speak any foreign languages are Hungary (65%), Italy (62%), the United Kingdom (61%), Portugal (61%) and Ireland (60%)¹⁰.

However, the first European Survey on Language Competences in 2012 showed that, when tested, only 42% of teenage pupils were competent in their first foreign language and only 20% in their second foreign lan-

Figure 2 – Percentage of citizens able to speak at least one foreign language well enough to have a conversation



Source: Eurobarometer (2010)

guage. The proportion of students capable of communicating in a second language on a basic level about straightforward, familiar matters without support ranged from 9% in England and 14% in France to 82% in both Malta and Sweden¹¹.

While graduate employers are less likely to highlight the importance of foreign language skills than other skill areas, only 19% of employers are very satisfied with the foreign language skills of graduates. This marks a lower level of satisfaction than for all other skills and competencies. Over half of employers are very satisfied with foreign language skills in only two countries (Hungary and Finland)¹².

A new push for languages in schools

Recognising the central importance of languages to social and economic development, in 2014 the Council of the European Union adopted Conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences. The Council invited Member States to adopt and improve measures aimed at promoting multilingualism and enhancing the quality and efficiency of language learning and teaching. Member States are encouraged to assess language competences at national level in at least one foreign language at the end of compulsory education¹³.

While in some countries pupils are not required to take classes in any foreign language, in others it is a central part of the school syllabus which runs throughout their formal education. English is a mandatory language in many countries and is by far the most-taught foreign language throughout Europe at all educational levels. French is often studied in southern Europe and German in eastern and central Europe¹⁴.

It is becoming commonplace for children to begin learning a new language in primary school between the ages of 6 and 9. In most Member

States it is now compulsory for pupils to study two foreign languages for at least a year. The proportion of pupils not learning a foreign language dropped from 32.8% to 21.8% between the academic years 2004/05 and 2009/10.

The proportion of lower secondary education pupils studying two or more foreign languages rose to 60.8% in the academic year 2009/10, from 46.7% in 2004/05. In Luxembourg, Iceland and Liechtenstein some students are obliged to study up to four languages¹⁵. ■

- 1 Eurobarometer (2012), Europeans and their languages
- 2 Eurobarometer (2010), Employers' perception of graduate employability: Analytical report
- 3 European Commission (2011), Languages for jobs: Providing multilingual communication skills for the labour market
- 4 *ibid.* 2
- 5 *ibid.* 1
- 6 *ibid.* 3
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 CILT (2009), Talking world class: The impact of language skills on the UK economy
- 9 British Council (2012), Language rich Europe: Trends in policies and practices for multilingualism in Europe
- 10 *ibid.* 1
- 11 European Commission (2012), Language competencies for employability, mobility and growth
- 12 *ibid.* 2
- 13 Council of the European Union (2014), Conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences
- 14 Eurydice (2012), Key data on teaching languages at school in Europe
- 15 *ibid.*

Please quote this Analytical Highlight as:
EU Skills Panorama (2014) Foreign languages Analytical Highlight,
 prepared by ICF GHK and Cedefop for the European Commission