PISA

# How 15-Year-Olds Learn English

## CASE STUDIES FROM FINLAND, GREECE, ISRAEL, THE NETHERLANDS AND PORTUGAL

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**Please cite this publication as:**
OECD (2024), *How 15-Year-Olds Learn English: Case Studies from Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/a3fcacd5-en.

ISBN 978-92-64-48735-2 (print)
ISBN 978-92-64-59150-9 (pdf)
ISBN 978-92-64-69997-7 (HTML)
ISBN 978-92-64-68817-9 (epub)

PISA
ISSN 1990-8539 (print)
ISSN 1996-3777 (online)

**Photo credits:** Cover - © Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock.

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# Foreword

In today's interconnected world, English is a key that unlocks global conversations. It opens doors to cross-border collaboration and countless cultural, educational and professional opportunities. It is no wonder then that many young people and their parents see mastering English as an essential step towards a successful future, nor that education systems across the world are investing heavily in teaching English.

But gone are the days when learners of English only encountered the language via teachers and textbooks for a couple of hours a week in a classroom. Today's teens are surrounded by English while navigating a digital landscape that reaches far into their lives both in and outside school. For many, English also has a greater presence offline as the preferred language of communication in increasingly diverse communities. Yet despite such important developments, relatively little is known internationally about the nuances of how young people today learn English.

This report explores the ways in which 15-year-olds learn English, building on case studies that examine their experiences in Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal. It was co-financed by the European Commission and has been prepared as part of ongoing collaboration between the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the European Commission in the development of a PISA Foreign Language Assessment. In its first cycle (2025), this assessment will provide international data on 15-year-olds' English language skills in more than 20 countries and economies as well as insights into the factors related to proficiency.

The development of this report was led by Tue Halgreen and Catalina Covacevich and coordinated by Christa Rawkins. Christa Rawkins wrote Chapters 1-4 and Chapter 8, Tue Halgreen wrote Chapter 5 and Inés Sanguino Martínez wrote Chapters 6 and 7. Kelly Makowiecki contributed to the drafting of Chapters 3-7 and Catalina Covacevich contributed to Chapter 8.

The authors express their gratitude to colleagues from the OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills for their valuable input and advice. Juliana González Rodríguez provided support throughout the preparation of the report. Ricardo Sanchez Torres and Dongwook Choi provided administrative support during the data collection; Ricardo Sanchez Torres also supported the production of the report. Francois Staring prepared the initial research design. Solène Burtz, Young Chang, Jonathan James, Jason McGrath and Christopher Olivares supported the development of the data collection tools. Duncan Crawford, Sophie Vayssettes and Michael Ward, provided feedback on the draft report. Charlotte Baer and Della Shin, under the guidance of Sasha Ramirez Hughes, provided support for production and communication. The team would also like to thank Andreas Schleicher (Director of Education and Skills) and Yuri Belfali (Head of Division, Early Childhood and Schools) for their overall guidance and feedback on the report. Yuri Belfali also supported the data collection and analysis for Chapter 6.

The authors are also grateful to several external collaborators. Talia Isaacs (University College London) provided early guidance on the research design and data collection tools; Lisa Maria Müller (Chartered College of Teaching) offered expert guidance throughout the project and prepared a background paper, with Cat Schutt (Chartered College of Teaching), to inform the preparation of Chapter 2. Rima Belfali, Maxime Charbonnier and Iris Jamet supported the development of the data collection tools by participating

in pilot interviews. Officials from the Schools and Multilingualism Unit within the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, including Anna Sole Mena, Miguel Álvarez Espinosa, Oana Felecan and Eldrid Gaukstad, provided feedback on the draft report. Kristina Cunningham supported the initial concept development for the case studies. Jennifer Allain copy edited the report.

The country case studies benefit from extensive collaboration with national experts and PISA national teams as follows: in Finland, Petteri Laihonen, Karoliina Inha, Ari Huhta and Tarja Nikula-Jäntti from the University of Jyväskylä and Tommi Karjalainen from the Ministry of Education and Culture; in Greece, Ioannis Ventouris and Pinelopi Papastratou from the Institute of Education Policy and Chryssa Sofianopoulou from the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports; in Israel, Tziona Levi and Gal Alon from the Ministry of Education and Micaela Ziv, an independent consultant; in the Netherlands, Marjolijn Verspoor, Marije Michel and colleagues from the University of Groningen and Wendoline Timmerman and Marjan Zandbergen from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; and in Portugal, Anabela Serrao from the Institute for Evaluation of Education.

Finally, the team is extremely grateful to the students, English teachers and school leaders that made the school visits possible, and to other interviewees that contributed to each case study.

# Executive summary

English is the most highly sought after foreign language in the world. It enters the lives of many young people today from an increasingly early age, not only through school but also television, computers and mobile phones. However, despite its growing importance in education policy worldwide, relatively little is known about how English is learnt and taught across the globe.

In 2025, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment will include an optional Foreign Language Assessment generating international comparable data on students' English language proficiency. To support the analysis, and with co-financing from the European Commission, the OECD has conducted case studies exploring how 15-year-olds learn English in five countries: Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal.

**Learning English transcends classroom walls. While this is generally seen as supporting language proficiency, not all students benefit equally.**

- Across participating countries, **15-year-olds are regularly exposed to English outside school**. Digital technologies undoubtedly increase these encounters, but many students use English offline too, even with people who share their first language.
- Students and educators perceive this greater engagement with English as having **both a direct and indirect positive impact on language proficiency**. It is seen as expanding vocabulary, supporting comprehension, and increasing motivation. However, teachers warn that it may also lead some students to overestimate their English language proficiency and underestimate their need to study.
- **Students' engagement with English outside school is unequal.** Geographical, cultural and socio-economic differences mediate the type and frequency of such encounters.

**Despite different approaches to organising English instruction in school, teachers and students share common beliefs about the difficulties of learning the language.**

- **The way governments and schools structure English language teaching and learning varies across countries** with different starting ages, intensities and expected proficiencies. There are also differences in the level of autonomy and curricular freedom granted to teachers and schools.
- In each case study country, **productive skills – speaking and writing – are typically seen as the most difficult to teach and learn**. Reasons for this include the time required to practice and assess them, challenges related to pronunciation, vocabulary and confidence, and fewer opportunities to use them outside school.
- **Students, English language teachers and school leaders across countries want young people to have more authentic opportunities to speak English.** Although they require a lot of resources, some schools commit to providing international exchanges, often with support from

national or regional initiatives. Some also use digital technologies to promote exchange; wider research highlights technology's capacity to facilitate collaborative, interactive language learning.

**Teachers across countries see the broad range of English language proficiencies among 15-year-olds as a key challenge.**

- **Schools and teachers typically have multiple strategies in place to support the needs of different students in English, particularly underperforming ones**. However, they agree that more could be done to support them and to better challenge high performing students.
- Wider research indicates that **artificial intelligence (AI) could facilitate teachers' capacity to respond to the individual needs of language learners.** In some case study schools, there was an emerging interest in using AI to support teaching and learning but this was not widespread.
- **Many English teachers see grouping classes by language proficiency or reducing class size as a solution.** However, some research emphasises that for this to have a positive impact it must be accompanied by teaching methods that take advantage of these organisational changes. The case studies indicate that greater pedagogical freedom can facilitate differentiation.

**Teachers and students highlight that digital technologies can make English lessons more engaging and facilitate classroom management. But they also have added pedagogical value.**

- **Teachers and students use digital technologies when teaching and learning English to different extents within and across the case study countries.** They typically see these technologies as helping to make lessons more engaging and relevant to students' lives.
- However, **research indicates that digital technologies can also strengthen the teaching and learning of foreign languages** through, for example, increasing the scope for independent engagement with the language and facilitating collaboration or interaction.
- Nevertheless, research shows that **technology is not currently having a transformative impact on foreign language teaching and learning**. Beyond ensuring that schools have access to quality digital resources, teachers need greater support to see the added pedagogical value of using digital technologies in their teaching, along with training on how to implement them.

**The case studies reveal certain national specificities in the teaching and learning of English.**

- **Finland has developed strong knowledge of English language teaching and learning nationally,** through national evaluations of students' language proficiency, stakeholder surveys and other commissioned research exploring teaching approaches and attitudes.
- **In Greece, many students study English in private, non-formal education from a young age** in addition to learning it throughout their schooling. Language certification, which is seen as crucial for life beyond school, is a significant driver of this.
- **In Israel, schools can offer ambitious students an elective *Diplomacy and International Communication in English* course.** Taught in English, it combines language learning with consensus building, conflict resolution and global communication.
- **In the Netherlands, bilingual programmes (Dutch-English) help students reach a higher level of proficiency.** The schools offering these programmes are supported by a national organisation that fosters internationalisation in education.
- **In Portugal, schools appear to actively seek opportunities for students to practice English outside lessons** through extracurricular activities in school, local trips and visits and, when possible, international exchanges.

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# 1 Overview

In many countries, school students have more lesson hours for English language than ever before. At the same time, English's position as a global *lingua franca* means young people across the world encounter English in the digital and physical world on an almost daily basis. In this context, how do today's 15-year-olds learn English? To explore this question and as part of the introduction of the Programme for International Student Assessment's (PISA) Foreign Language Assessment in 2025, the OECD analysed the situation in five countries: Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal. This chapter provides an overview of this research, including rationale, key objectives and methodology. It also summarises key findings for each country and comparative insights.

## Snapshot of this report

- **In 2025, the first PISA Foreign Language Assessment will generate comparable data on students' English language proficiency** and related factors in over 20 countries and economies. It will assess proficiency in three skills: reading, listening and spoken production.
- **As part of this work, in 2023, the OECD conducted case study research in five countries** to explore 15-year-old students' experiences of English outside school, their learning of English in school and schools' resources to support their learning. The research also investigates ways in which digital technologies are used to support English learning as well as how students with different needs and profiles learn English.
- **The OECD visited schools in Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal,** interviewing 15-year-olds, English teachers and school leaders, and observing English lessons. This report presents the key findings from those visits and wider research for each country.

Mastering a foreign language is hugely rewarding. Apart from the obvious communication benefits, it can lead to better job opportunities and higher salaries, facilitate international mobility and improve intercultural understanding. Learning additional languages even enhances first-language literacy, creativity and complex problem solving (OECD, 2021[1]; 2020[2]). At the same time, globalisation, technological innovation and human migration flows have made interactions with people from different countries and cultures almost inevitable. For today's 15-year-olds, some level of foreign language proficiency is now a necessity.

Universally accepted as the language of international commerce, English is among the most highly sought after languages in the world. Governments are investing considerable resources in ensuring young people leave school with at least the basic language skills required to communicate successfully in their personal lives and careers. In addition to learning it at school, English now enters the lives of many young people through television, computers and mobile phones from an early age.

However, despite the growing importance of English on education policy agendas worldwide, relatively little is known about how it is learnt and taught in different parts of the globe. As part of ongoing work by the OECD to address this knowledge gap, this report, co-financed by the European Commission, presents case studies exploring how 15-year-olds learn English in five countries: Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal.

## Background to this report

The OECD's PISA assesses the extent to which 15-year-old students have acquired the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in modern societies as they near the end of their compulsory education. The assessment, now in its ninth cycle, focuses on three core domains: reading, mathematics and science. PISA also includes optional assessments of additional competences including financial literacy (since 2012). Since PISA 2012, each cycle also includes an optional innovative domain (e.g. global competence, creative thinking).

The PISA 2025 cycle will include, for the first time, an optional Foreign Language Assessment generating comparable data on students' foreign language proficiency and on the factors related to it (Box 1.1). The assessment will be complemented by background questionnaires allowing policy makers to gain insights into the best practices and policies for teaching and learning a foreign language. In its first cycle, the Foreign Language Assessment will focus on English language proficiency.

To complement and support the analysis of the data that will be generated by the Foreign Language Assessment, the OECD has conducted case study research into the teaching and learning of English in five countries. The case studies seek to provide in-depth descriptions of the ways in which 15-year-olds in different countries experience, learn and use English in and out of school. They offer a snapshot of the various practices that exist within and across education systems. This report presents findings from this research as follows:

- **Chapter 1** provides an overview of the case study methodology and key findings
- **Chapter 2** explores the ways in which today's digital technologies can be used to enhance foreign language teaching
- **Chapters 3-7** present the separate case studies for each of the participating countries: Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal
- **Chapter 8** explores the key similarities and differences in the case study findings across countries.

### Box 1.1. The PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment

In 2025, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) will include an optional computer-based test that will assess 15-year-old students' foreign language proficiency. Following input from countries and economies participating in PISA, the first cycle will assess English language proficiency in three skills: reading, listening and spoken production. Each skill area will be reported on a separate scale aligned with the reference levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, originally developed by the Council of Europe.

In addition to the assessment, the PISA Foreign Language Assessment will include sets of questions to be added to the PISA teacher, student, school and parent questionnaires as well as a system-level questionnaire asking for information on foreign language teaching and learning from policy officials. These background questionnaires will cover four policy domains: 1) government and school policies; 2) students and learning; 3) teachers' training and profile; and 4) teaching practices. They also cover two transversal topics: 1) information and communication technologies (ICT); and 2) use of the target language for instruction in other subjects.

Information from the assessment and the questionnaires will be analysed together to provide a comprehensive picture of the factors that influence foreign language learning inside and outside school.

From 2025, the Foreign Language Assessment will be offered every two PISA cycles (i.e. every eight years) with scope to expand the assessment to determine proficiency in other foreign languages and/or other skill areas in the future. As of 2023, 21 countries and economies have signed up to participate in the PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment. They are, in alphabetical order: the Flemish Community (Belgium), Bulgaria, Colombia, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, the Dominican Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Peru, Portugal Qatar, Romania, Spain, Sweden and Chinese Taipei.

For more information about the Foreign Language Assessment, see OECD (2021[1]).

## Case study methodology

### *Research design*

The case studies presented in this report are based on data collected in 2023. Figure 1.1 presents an overview of the methodology. The case studies address three key research questions which align closely with the framework prepared for the PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment background questionnaires to ensure the complementarity of the data collected (OECD, 2021[1]).

1. **What are 15-year-old students' experiences of English outside school?** Regular exposure to and use of a foreign language in daily, real-life settings is an important way of developing foreign language proficiency. This research question refers to students' exposure to and uses of English outside the formal learning context of school. It includes the different activities in which students engage with English in both digital and physical environments and the perceived impact this has on language proficiency. It also considers attitudes towards learning English among students, their peers and their families and how this influences their learning.
2. **What are students' experiences of English inside schools and classrooms?** The ways in which school systems organise the teaching and learning of English differs both at country and school levels. This research question considers the different opportunities for English language learning provided within schools. It also explores the teaching practices employed in language classrooms and the content and skills covered. This includes perceptions about key strengths and challenges for English language teachers and learners in formal learning environments.
3. **What resources do schools have to support English language teaching and learning?** As the number of hours and years for which students learn English at school increases, education systems must ensure that schools and teachers have adequate resources to do their jobs well. This research question explores some characteristics of the English-language teaching workforce and their experiences. It also considers the different material resources typically used in English-language classrooms to support students' learning.

In addition, two cross-cutting themes run throughout the case-study research. First, there is a focus on **the role of digital technologies in learning English**. Various technological resources with the potential to support foreign language teaching and learning have been developed in the past decades and policy makers across education systems have been working to promote their use. At the same time, as students increasingly engage with digital technologies in their lives outside school, their experiences of English language change – and multiply. The case studies explore the opportunities and challenges posed by digital technologies with regards to English language learning, both in and out of school, and the current state-of-play.

Second, the research considers **how students with different needs and profiles experience English language learning**. Students come to learn English with very different experiences of and attitudes towards it. As well as exploring these differences, the research considers how teachers and schools adapt the organisation, structure and content of English lessons to meet the needs of students with different proficiency levels or backgrounds.

**Figure 1.1. Overview of the research design for case studies of how 15-year-olds learn English**

To respond to these questions, the OECD conducted primary and secondary research. **Primary research data** were collected through country visits to each case-study country[1]. Each country visit included three school visits during which the team carried out the following activities:

- Semi-structured interviews with:
  - *school leader or a member of the school leadership team*: individual interviews of around 45 minutes conducted in the school's language of instruction with live consecutive interpretation in English
  - *English language teachers*: small group interviews with two to three English teachers for around an hour, conducted in English with interpretation available as required
  - *students*: small group interviews with around six 15-year-old students for around an hour, conducted in the school's language of instruction with live consecutive interpretation in English.
- Classroom observations of 30-60 minutes of an English language lesson for students in the modal grade for 15-year-olds.
- Short questionnaires administered to the interviewees and completed at the beginning or end of the interviews. These provided key background information about participants (e.g., first language, additional languages, use of English outside school, etc.).

- Student activity logs administered to participating students prior to the school visit and completed on an optional basis. Students used these logs to record their exposure to and use of English on a chosen day in the week prior to the school visit.

In some countries, where relevant, additional background interviews were held with key system-level actors, such as policy makers or teacher associations.

**Secondary research data** were collected for each case study country and on the broader international context through the following methods:

- country background reports prepared by national experts for each case study country providing contextual background and system-level characteristics of English language teaching and learning in the country
- desk-based research providing wider insights into English language learning in the case study countries to complement key findings from the school visits
- background paper on the use of digital technologies in foreign language teaching and learning.

### *Country, school and participant selection*

All countries and economies participating in the PISA Foreign Language Assessment were invited to take part in the case studies. From those that expressed interest, five countries were selected to participate with the aim of having a diverse range of linguistic and educational contexts within practical constraints such as school calendars. The five countries are Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the case study visits conducted in each country.

The respective national governments were responsible for identifying and recruiting schools, with guidance from the OECD. Governments were asked to identify schools that could help illustrate the diversity of English language learning experiences in the country. This included, for example, schools with different types of governance arrangements, schools of different sizes or in different types of locations, schools with different student cohort characteristics, and schools with different training profiles (e.g. vocational schools or schools with other specialisms).

Each school was responsible for identifying and recruiting case study participants, with guidance from the OECD. Schools were asked to identify the school principal or a member of the school leadership team with responsibility for the teaching and learning of English. They were asked to involve English teachers with diverse levels of experience, training backgrounds and qualifications and who teach different types of students or programmes, where possible. They were encouraged to invite 15-year-olds with different characteristics and English language proficiencies and/or those studying different programmes. Nevertheless, most of the students taking part in the case study rated themselves as having average or above average proficiency in English in comparison to their classmates.

The case studies aim to illustrate the diversity of 15-year-olds' experiences of learning English today. The research has been designed to enable an in-depth exploration of English-language learning for some students within a country and to identify similarities and differences in those experiences both within a single country and internationally. The findings do not purport to be nationally representative and should not be interpreted as such.

In reporting the findings of the case studies, participating schools and interviewees have been anonymised to the extent possible. Selected quotations have been included to help illustrate key findings. These quotations are reproduced verbatim, with some minor adjustments made for clarity. When participants' responses were provided in a language other than English, the quotations reflect the interpreter's translation.

## Table 1.1. Overview of the case study visits conducted in each country

| Country | Timing | School visits | | | Background interviews |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Finland** | May 2023 | A | Finnish-medium, lower secondary school with a creative arts specialism located in a socio-economically advantaged, urban area | School principal<br>Two English teachers<br>Six 15-year-old students | Association of Teachers of English in Finland<br><br>Federation of Foreign Language Teachers in Finland |
| | | B | Finnish-medium, primary to lower secondary school with a sports and arts specialism, located in an urban, multicultural area with a high share of socio-economically disadvantaged students | School principal<br>Two English teachers<br>Three 15-year-old students | |
| | | C | Finnish-medium, primary to lower secondary school offering general and vocational education, located in a rural area | School assistant principal<br>Two English teachers<br>Six 15-year-old students | |
| **Greece** | April 2023 | A | Small, upper secondary school with general education programmes, located in a semi-urban, industrial area | School deputy principal<br>One English teacher<br>Five 15-year-old students | Panhellenic Association of State School Teachers of English |
| | | B | Large upper secondary Model[1] school with general education programmes in a socio-economically advantaged urban area | School principal<br>Three English teachers<br>Five 15-year-old students | |
| | | C | Upper secondary school with vocational education programmes located in an urban area serving a high share of socio-economically disadvantaged students and students with special needs | School principal<br>Two English teachers<br>Six 15-year-old students | |
| **Israel** | June 2023 | A | Arabic-medium, upper secondary school located in a semi-urban area serving a diverse student cohort with a high share of socio-economic disadvantage | School principal<br>Two English teachers<br>Six 15-year-old students | |
| | | B | Hebrew-medium, high-performing small upper secondary school for boys in the state-religious stream located in an urban area | School principal<br>Three English teachers<br>Four 15-year-old students | |
| | | C | Hebrew-medium, lower to upper secondary school located in a socio-economically advantaged, urban area | School principal<br>Three English teachers<br>Four 15-year-old students | |
| **Netherlands** | June 2023 | A | Lower to upper secondary school with a bilingual stream, located in a small town serving students from the wider rural area | School principal<br>Four English teachers<br>Nine 15-year-old students | Nuffic (the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education) |
| | | B | Lower to upper secondary Dalton[2] school located in a socio-economically advantaged urban area | School principal<br>Three English teachers<br>Six 15-year-old students | |
| | | C | Lower to upper secondary school located in an urban area serving a diverse student cohort with a high share of socio-economically disadvantaged students | School principal<br>Two English teachers<br>Four 15-year-old students | |
| **Portugal** | April 2023 | A | Lower to upper secondary school offering general and vocational education programmes in a cluster of four schools located in a central urban area | Head of English<br>Two English teachers<br>Five 15-year-old students | Portuguese Association of English Teachers<br><br>Directorate-General of Education in the Ministry of Education |
| | | B | Lower to upper secondary school offering general and vocational education programmes in a cluster of six schools located in an industrial, socio-economically disadvantaged, urban area | School principal<br>Three English teachers<br>Five 15-year-old students | |
| | | C | Large, high-performing upper secondary school offering general and vocational programmes, located in the central town of a rural municipality | School principal<br>Three English teachers<br>Six 15-year-old students | |

1. In Greece, Model schools are intended to operate as centres of excellence and innovation; they are academically selective.
2. Dalton schools follow an education philosophy that aims to enable students to work at their own pace and receive individualised support.
Source: Based on information reported to the case study team by schools.

## Key findings of the report

Following this overview chapter, the remainder of the report presents insights from the case study research.

**Chapter 2** finds that **digital technologies** have the potential to play a major role in foreign language teaching and learning. They offer easy access to a greater range of foreign language material, can enhance the reading, listening, speaking or writing experience, and facilitate collaborative and interactive learning beyond the classroom. Emerging developments in artificial intelligence-powered technologies mean foreign language teaching can also more easily and rapidly respond to individual needs. However, despite their potential, digital technologies are not having a transformative impact in foreign language classrooms. Teachers need greater support to see the added pedagogical value of using digital technologies in their teaching and quality training in how to implement them.

**Chapter 3** reports that in **Finland,** students, educators and parents strongly value learning English. This helps motivate 15-year-olds to do well in English, more so than for other additional languages they may study. Speaking is considered by many students and English teachers to be the most challenging of the four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) and they would like learners to have more authentic opportunities to use English through exchanges or other real-life interactions. Schools are generally well-equipped with digital technologies and most teachers seem comfortable using them to facilitate aspects of instruction. However, it appears that digital technologies are not always used in ways that can specifically enhance foreign language learning. Finland has built up a strong knowledge base of English language teaching and learning nationally which can help inform future policy efforts.

In **Chapter 4**, students in **Greece** have a very clear idea of why they learn English and how it will be useful to them in the future. This results in a desire to do well which, along with a perceived need to certify language proficiency, leads to the vast majority of 15-year-olds in Greece attending private language education outside school from a young age. This is despite English now being a compulsory subject throughout school education. English teachers in Greece are attracted to the profession by the wide variety of job opportunities available and typically find working in public schools favourable to teaching English in other contexts. Nevertheless, they feel that large classes, lack of curricular time and resource challenges – including for digital technologies – inhibit their capacity to fully meet students' needs.

**Chapter 5** reveals that students in **Israel** feel highly motivated to learn English and perceive it as a prerequisite for pursuing future careers or academic studies, whether at home or abroad. Nevertheless, opportunities to use English outside school vary; some 15-year-olds have few occasions to practice their productive skills, while others speak or write English outside school daily. Israel has some structures in place to help schools meet the needs of students with different proficiencies: in upper secondary education students work towards different proficiency levels and schools can offer an elective course for advanced students adopting a content and language integrated learning approach. Although there is variation across schools, some teachers are using digital technologies in their lessons, particularly to increase students' engagement.

**Chapter 6** finds that, in **the Netherlands** schools and teachers have a lot of curricular and pedagogical freedom and they take advantage of this to differentiate and innovate in the English classroom, and to promote individualised approaches to learning English. Nevertheless, all students must take a national standardised examination at the end of upper secondary education. This means the final years of English instruction are somewhat oriented to preparing the examination, including a focus on reading skills often at the expense of speaking, in particular. Perhaps partly a result of this, and despite the fact that English inhabits the daily lives of many 15-year-olds in the Netherlands, students would like their schools to provide more opportunities for them to develop their speaking skills. School leaders and teachers agree, wishing to provide students with more international exchanges, in particular, for both their linguistic and cultural benefits.

**Chapter 7** indicates that students in **Portugal** are often enthusiastic about their English lessons, which they describe as engaging compared to other subjects. They also enjoy using English outside school, although the frequency of these experiences varies between students and typically requires reading and listening to English as opposed to speaking and writing. The participating English teachers in Portugal were highly motivated and proactive, often developing extracurricular initiatives or out-of-class supports to strengthen their students' learning. Many of them use digital technologies to vary their teaching and increase engagement. However, they feel their work is sometimes inhibited by teacher shortages, which are currently affecting many subjects in Portugal.

Finally, **Chapter 8** presents **comparative findings** from the five case studies. It finds that students across countries are regularly exposed to English outside school. They and their teachers recognise several advantages of this exposure but some teachers also identify challenges including tensions between the learning that happens inside and outside school, concerns about the quality of English encountered outside school and the fact that increased exposure can give students an inflated sense of English language proficiency. In school, across countries, the productive skills (speaking and writing) are typically those which students spend the least time practicing and which they find most challenging. Reasons identified include the additional time required to carry out and assess spoken and written English, socio-emotional barriers to students' use of English in the classroom and, except in Israel, the washback effect of high-stakes examinations that do not assess speaking and/or writing skills. Adequately supporting all students to progress in mixed-proficiency settings is seen as a key challenge in all five countries, albeit to different extents. While the use of digital technologies in English language teaching varies both within and across countries the focus tends to be on employing these tools to increase engagement or facilitate classroom management as opposed to taking advantage of the specific added value technology offers foreign language pedagogy.

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OECD (2020), *How lanugage learning opens doors*, OECD Publications, https://www.oecd.org/pisa/foreign-language/opens-doors.pdf (accessed on 17 September 2023). [2]

## Notes

[1] Data collection instruments are available on request; please send any enquiries to edu.pisa@oecd.org.

# 2 The use of digital technologies to enhance foreign language learning

Digital technologies have a crucial role to play in the teaching of foreign languages. However, to fully realise their potential and have a positive impact on foreign language learning, they need to bring an added pedagogical value to classroom practice. This chapter presents ways in which today's digital technologies, including emerging artificial intelligence (AI) tools, can be used in formal learning environments to nurture foreign language proficiency. It considers the development of linguistic knowledge, as well as students' reading, listening, speaking and writing skills. Finally, the chapter outlines some ongoing challenges to the application of digital technologies in foreign language teaching and learning and ways in which teachers can be supported to take advantage of these tools.

## Snapshot of technology use in foreign language learning today

- **Digital technologies offer teachers and learners easier access to a greater range of foreign language material than ever before.** This increases the scope for learners to engage independently and extensively with the language they are studying.
- **Various digital tools are available to enhance the reading, listening, speaking or writing experience for foreign language learners.** This includes online dictionaries, glossaries, subtitles and play speed controls as well as various production tools that allow learners to publish and share their work, helping them to develop an identity as foreign language users.
- **Digital technologies allow for collaborative and interactive learning spaces to exist beyond the foreign language classroom.** This can allow teachers to create more time for learners to interact and communicate with each other away from the constraints of timetabled lessons.
- **Developments in AI-powered technologies mean learning activities can more easily and rapidly respond to individual needs.** Various AI tools can provide personalised support to improve the quality of students' writing in a foreign language and teachers can use generative AI to quickly produce written and audio texts at different proficiency levels or for different purposes.
- **However, despite their potential, digital technologies are not having a transformative impact on foreign language teaching and learning.** Teachers need greater support to see the added pedagogical value of using digital technologies in their teaching and quality training in how to implement them.

To have a positive impact on foreign language learning, digital technologies, such as devices, software and applications, the Internet and AI, need to be used in ways that have added pedagogical value. This chapter provides insights into how today's digital technologies can be used to support the development of linguistic knowledge, as well as students' reading, listening, speaking and writing skills. The examples refer to the use of technology in formal or structured learning activities; for insights into how digital technologies can support foreign language learning through informal activities beyond the classroom, see Chapter 8.

## How can today's digital technologies support foreign language learning?

### *Many different digital technologies can help students develop linguistic knowledge*

Developing linguistic competence, which includes knowledge and skills related to grammar and vocabulary, is required for reading, listening, speaking and writing in a foreign language and is a crucial foundation of foreign language teaching and learning. It can be developed directly through teaching linguistic forms or indirectly through communication-focused tasks which develop linguistic knowledge as a by-product.

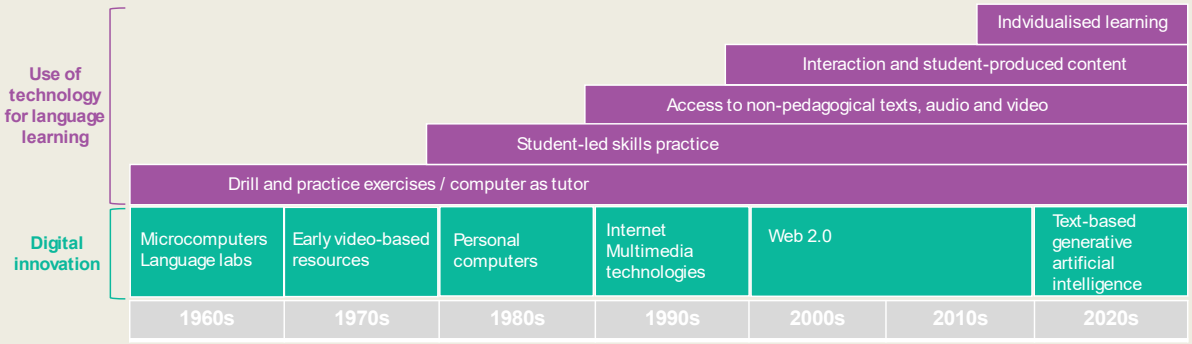
For direct approaches, research from cognitive science and applied linguistics indicates that encouraging students to retrieve knowledge from memory is more impactful than repetition. Therefore, low-stakes vocabulary quizzes are more effective than drilling or re-reading lists of words (Pashler et al., 2007[1]; Perry et al., 2021[2]). In addition, interleaving different types of problems appears more effective than grouping similar ones while feedback can also enhance progress (van den Broek et al., 2018[3]; Nakata and Suzuki, 2019[4]).

In this regard, the use of technology in foreign language learning has come a long way since its initial focus on drill and repeat approaches (Box 2.1). Today, game-based platforms and applications can help teachers and learners implement good practices like interleaving and feedback. Teachers can either choose from ready-made quizzes or create their own. Increasingly, as these platforms adopt AI-powered technologies, quizzes can adapt to students' different foreign language proficiency levels, and provide personalised feedback, targeted practice and reinforcement based on individual students' needs. This means that as well as being an in-class tool they can also support independent learning outside the classroom (Bahari and Gholami, 2022[5]). Game-based approaches have been found to be beneficial for the development of linguistic knowledge in the short and long terms. They can positively impact comprehension, lower anxiety, increase motivation and foster interaction between learners regardless of age or native language (Bahari and Gholami, 2022[5]; Chen, 2016[6]; Chiu, Kao and Reynolds, 2012[7]). Popular tools that adopt such approaches include Kahoot, Quizlet and Quizizz as well as language learning apps such as Duolingo and Busuu.

### Box 2.1. How has the use of technology in foreign language teaching developed over time?

The first language laboratories appeared in the 1960s, providing dedicated physical spaces in which students could use audio technology to engage in independent study. In line with prevailing and emerging pedagogies, these approaches emphasised teacher-centred instruction and habit formation through repetition. In both regards, technology offered an advantage by providing endless exercises testing the same knowledge multiple times without the learner getting bored (Tafzoli, Huertas Abril and Gómez Parra, 2019[8]).

### Figure 2.1. The use of technology in foreign language learning has responded to digital innovation




Source: Adapted from Davies, Otto and Ruschoff (2012[9]).

From the 1980s, as the communicative language teaching approach took hold, technology struggled to remain relevant until technological breakthroughs in the 1990s. The spread of multimedia technologies, the Internet and personal computers with word processing tools facilitated listening practice and increased the availability of non-pedagogical texts in the target language. Into the 2000s, the arrival of more interactive and collaborative Web 2.0 technologies such as discussion forums, blogs, wikis and, later, cloud-based tools accelerated this further. In addition, output oriented media channels such as YouTube allowed students to become creators rather than just consumers of foreign languages (Davies, Otto and Ruschoff, 2012[9]). Today, the emergence of AI-powered technologies offers scope for a new step in this direction, one that is more focused on individualised learning.

Source: Davies, Otto and Ruschoff (2012[9]); Tafzoli, Huertas Abril and Gómez Parra (2019[8]).

The use of resource technologies such as online dictionaries, translators or grammar checkers may also support the development of linguistic knowledge. Online dictionaries can facilitate vocabulary acquisition and more successful language use due to the wealth of contextual information they provide including first language translation, target language synonyms and audio files modelling pronunciation (Jin and Deifell, 2013[10]). In addition, through technologies that help analyse texts, students can look for specific words and patterns or pull vocabulary lists that indicate how words are used in different contexts (Bahari and Gholami, 2022[5]; Bikowski, 2018[11]). For many foreign language learners today, such tools are considered to be an essential part of language learning (Perdana and Farida, 2019[12]; Jin and Deifell, 2013[10]).

Text-based generative AI can take resource technologies a step further by providing a one-stop shop for learners. For example, ChatGPT can give students contextualised vocabulary definitions and allow them to ask follow-up questions, including in their first language. It can also generate sample sentences and additional meanings, identify parts of speech, and produce vocabulary notes and explanations of words and phrases to accompany generated text (Kohnke, Moorhouse and Zou, 2023[13]). In this way, AI tools can support teachers to ensure their lesson planning caters to a wide range of learning goals and students' foreign language proficiency (Koraishi, 2023[14]).

### *Technology increases the range of available reading texts and facilitates comprehension*

Learning how to read in a foreign language is arguably the cornerstone of autonomous, lifelong language learning. As foreign language learners become more proficient in reading, they can move from predominantly careful or close reading at word or sentence level to constructing whole-text meaning for a much wider range of texts (OECD, 2021[15]).

The various uses of digital technologies to support the development of linguistic knowledge can also foster foreign language reading proficiency. In many ways, reading in a foreign language is similar to reading in the learners' first language, with the teaching of similar reading strategies, such as activating prior knowledge and making inferences, accelerating students' progress in both (Woore et al., 2018[16]). However, particularly for beginner learners of a foreign language, developing linguistic knowledge is key to making progress in reading and research suggests that first-language cognitive abilities cannot be transferred until a certain proficiency threshold is reached in the foreign language (OECD, 2021[15]).

In addition, the Internet provides learners with easy access to near-endless reading material in foreign languages at all levels. Some studies have found that the sheer range of material available motivates foreign language learners to read more extensively and can push them to access higher level texts than they would typically engage with in a classroom (Behjat, Bageri and Yamini, 2012[17]). In addition, some students perceive reading on digital or mobile devices to be more engaging, more convenient and more accessible than reading paper-based texts (Ishikawa et al., 2014[18]).

At the same time, research indicates that certain features specific to digital texts make reading them more beneficial for foreign language students than paper-based texts. For example, the availability of hyperlinks to additional information and online glossaries or dictionaries can support the development of reading comprehension (Behjat, Bageri and Yamini, 2012[17]). In particular, the ease of access to these tools in comparison to paper-based versions can increase students' motivation to employ them, ultimately improving reading skills (Taylor, 2014[19]). Furthermore, the use of multimedia texts that combine image, audio and text – an approach which digital technologies facilitate – has been shown to be particularly effective (Blake, 2016[20]; Behjat, Bageri and Yamini, 2012[17]).

Collaborative and interactive digital tools mean that reading in a foreign language no longer needs to be a solitary activity. The interactive reading that often takes place on social media platforms, blog sites, wikis or in chat rooms can allow learners to share the cognitive load of interpreting foreign language texts (Blake, 2016[20]). Several studies have shown such tools to have a positive impact on learners' reading comprehension (Behjat, Bageri and Yamini, 2012[17]). Furthermore, by building communities of learners,

technology can make learning more social and more fun, enhancing goal orientation, motivation and persistence and fostering more effective learning strategies (OECD, 2023[21]). Nevertheless, students' perceptions of these approaches appear to be mediated by their foreign language proficiency, with advanced students reporting more positive attitudes (Tian and Wang, 2010[22]). In contrast, beginners may benefit from more structured approaches, particularly with regards to feedback (Bahari and Gholami, 2022[5]).

Developments in AI-powered technologies are bringing new opportunities for the development of reading and other communicative skills within foreign language learning (Figure 2.2). Text-based generative AI can support teachers to produce a range of text types for students that can then be adapted to students' different foreign language proficiencies (Kohnke, Moorhouse and Zou, 2023[13]; Koraishi, 2023[14]). This provides opportunities to expose students to a much wider variety of suitable reading material than is usually available within textbooks. In addition, AI can also easily generate comprehension and expansion questions, whether open-ended or multiple choice (Kohnke, Moorhouse and Zou, 2023[13]; Koraishi, 2023[14]).

### Figure 2.2. Possible uses of artificial intelligence-powered technologies for developing the four communicative skills in foreign language learning

| Reading | Listening | Speaking | Writing |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Text-based generative artificial intelligence (AI)** can help teachers more easily differentiate reading material and associated comprehension activities. | **AI voice generators** and other technologies can support teachers to more easily create their own listening resources for a particular purpose, student need or proficiency level. | **AI chatbots** provide students with low-stakes conversation partners to enhance spoken interaction.<br><br>**Automated speech recognition tools** can support students' pronunciation, giving personalised feedback and modelling how different sounds are formed. | **Automated evaluation** and **corrective feedback and editing tools** provide extensive support to improve the quality of students' writing.<br><br>**Text-based generative AI** can support students to practise their written interaction skills. It can also allow teachers and students to generate endless model texts to inform learners' own writing.<br><br>**Machine translation** can support students to work at word and sentence level to put together a text and enhance their linguistic understanding. |

Note: The examples presented in the figure are not exhaustive; they summarise the examples included in this chapter.

### *Digital tools can support both focused and global listening activities*

Both exposure to rich foreign language audio input and explicit teaching of listening strategies are essential for developing listening skills in a foreign language. However, it has been suggested that too often the teaching of listening skills is confounded with the testing of those skills. Moreover, such tests typically focus on students' ability to extract basic information, understand trivial opinions and comprehend contrived texts that combine different tenses and vocabulary as opposed to mirroring authentic conversation (Graham, 2016[23]; Graham, Santos and Francis-Brophy, 2014[24]). Rather, combining focused listening exercises that drill down into the specifics of an audio text with more global activities that consider the wider context can be more effective (Graham, 2016[23]; Graham, Santos and Francis-Brophy, 2014[24]).

Technology's principal value when it comes to listening skills is in facilitating access to pedagogical and non-pedagogical listening material on a range of topics relevant to students' lived experiences. In particular, the Internet has marked an explosion in the availability of such content and the multimedia

materials typically found online can foster deeper processing (Blake, 2016[20]; Hubbard, 2017[25]). This increased accessibility extends beyond the classroom so that students can practice their listening skills outside the classroom, helping to increase autonomy (Hubbard, 2017[25]; Rost and Wilson, 2013[26]).

Beyond widening access to audio material, certain digital tools support focused listening practice and the development of key listening skills. For example, readily available tools that facilitate simultaneous listening and reading, such as subtitles, transcripts, captions and glossaries can all enhance students' listening experience and improve comprehension (Mohsen, 2015[27]; Blake, 2016[20]). These tools may also help students to notice particular linguistic features or provide an explanation of the appropriate meanings of phrases within a specific context (Mohsen, 2015[27]; Gruba and Suvorov, 2019[28]). In addition, play speed controls allow teachers and learners to adapt the demands of the listening exercise to their needs and are particularly advantageous when learners control the speed themselves (Hubbard, 2017[25]).

Finally, digital technology facilitates teachers' capacity to create, edit, and publish their own listening resources for a particular purpose or student need. This could include, for example, audio texts designed for more focused listening exercises or for developing comprehension of different accents and multi-speaker dialogue (Gruba and Suvorov, 2019[28]). It could also include multiple listening texts on similar content at different foreign language proficiency levels to support differentiation. Emerging AI voice generators allow teachers to rapidly turn text into speech in different accents and languages, facilitating this process even further. Digital tools also enable teachers to annotate video content with questions, comments, and comprehension checks to create more exciting and interactive listening activities (Blake, 2016[20]). Teachers are thus less reliant on foreign language listening exercises developed by textbook publishers and more able to design activities that go beyond traditional test-style approaches.

### *Digital technology can provide authentic opportunities to speak a foreign language*

In communicative language teaching, learners are not just given opportunities to speak a foreign language but are supported to develop language proficiency through spoken communication. Speaking competence covers skills in both spoken production and spoken interaction as well as fluency, intelligibility and self-correction (OECD, 2021[15]).

Video conferencing can facilitate different types of interactions that support students to develop their spoken language. The most obvious is encouraging learners to speak to each other via video technology which gives them more time to practise their spoken language skills than in face-to-face lessons (Hanafiah et al., 2022[29]; Tian and Wang, 2010[22]). This is important as limited class time is a commonly reported challenge among foreign language teachers in general, and with regards to developing speaking skills specifically (Copland, Garton and Burns, 2013[30]). Encouraging interaction of this nature has been seen to improve spoken fluency and reinforce course content learning. Furthermore, establishing a learner community through video conferencing helps overcome some of the socio-emotional barriers to speaking a foreign language such as anxiousness and embarrassment (Ilic, 2022[31]; Romaña Correa, 2015[32]).

Video conferencing can also facilitate virtual language exchanges to provide geographically and culturally diverse learners with authentic and purposeful interactions in the target language. Research emphasises the positive impact virtual exchanges can have on functional, sociolinguistic, grammatical, and strategic communicative competences as well as intercultural ones (Dooly and Vinagre, 2021[33]). Virtual approaches provide a suitable alternative to physical mobility for students with physical or financial and other resource restrictions. They have received a lot of political support in the last decade with considerable financial investment from certain national and international authorities (Dooly and Vinagre, 2021[33]).

Video conferencing tools also enable learners to use instant voice messaging or share audio files. This type of asynchronous interaction affords foreign language learners more time to reflect on their responses and the opportunity to revise an intervention. This has been seen to positively impact students' speaking and vocabulary skills, increase their motivation and decrease any related anxiety (Yang, Gamble and Tang,

2012[34]; Hanafiah et al., 2022[29]). These advantages are particularly noteworthy given that foreign language teachers state that encouraging students to have the confidence to speak in lessons is a major challenge (Copland, Garton and Burns, 2013[30]). Digital technologies can also be used in other ways to support students to practice their speaking outside lesson time (Box 2.1).

AI tools can support students by providing them with low-stakes conversation partners. A study of teenage English-learners found that talking to a chatbot provides a positive learning environment, helps students to talk more in English and encourages them to develop meaningful negotiation skills to successfully complete speaking tasks. Students reported feeling more comfortable chatting in English with the bot than with their teacher or classmates (Yang et al., 2022[35]).

Meanwhile, as technologies for automated speech recognition and computer-aided acoustic analysis improve, digital tools can increasingly support pronunciation teaching. This is important as teachers can perceive pronunciation as a particularly complex aspect of foreign language teaching. Virtual assistants can help students understand how different sounds are formed so they can imitate the shape of their mouths and the position of their teeth and tongue. They can also provide endless contextualised examples and personalised feedback. Research indicates that automatic speech recognition tools can facilitate improvements in pronunciation more than teachers can (Golonka et al., 2012[36]). In addition, computer-aided acoustic analysis can be more accurate and sensitive in capturing learning gains than teacher assessment in spontaneous speaking tasks (Saito and Plonsky, 2019[37]). Today, tools such as MyET (and its Japanese and Chinese versions, MyJT and MyCT) allow speaking practice with automatic individualised feedback, including on pronunciation.

Finally, digital tools can facilitate spoken production activities as students can easily develop their own audio and/or visual material in a foreign language and share it as widely as they like. For example, student podcasting has a positive effect on performance in speaking and listening assessments, and on learner engagement as students see it as an authentic and fun learning experience (Fitria, Vianty and Petrus, 2015[38]).

### *Emerging AI tools could transform the way writing in a foreign language is taught*

Learning how to write accurately in a foreign language is a complex skill. Foreign language learners must develop skills in written interaction and written production, progressing from translating and producing short factual texts with personal details to more extended writing and subtle uses of style, register and tone (OECD, 2021[15]).

As for reading and listening, the Internet facilitates access to a range of written language models, allowing students to compare their own writing to sample texts and absorb typical linguistic and textual features that they can replicate. In addition, the Internet supports online research, allowing students to cross-check different sources and synthesise them in their own writing (Strobl, 2014[39]). This can be particularly helpful when teaching learners explicit writing strategies such as goal setting, task analysis, planning and editing, all of which are crucial for developing writing proficiency (De Silva, 2014[40]; De Silva and Graham, 2015[41]).

Digital technology can also facilitate collaborative writing in a foreign language which has been shown to improve written accuracy, content selection and textual organisation (Luquin and García Mayo, 2021[42]; Strobl, 2014[39]). Tools such as web-based word processors (e.g. Google Docs), wikis and social media platforms allow students to comment on and amend each other's work, prompting discussion and reflection on the technical components of writing, boosting learner motivation and facilitating the writing process (Zhang and Zou, 2021[43]). Some research indicates that students produce fewer errors in digital collaborative writing environments and that social digital tools help scaffold progressively demanding tasks (Blake, 2016[20]). Furthermore, there is strong evidence that the use of chat functions increases learners' written production in both quantity and complexity (Zhang and Zou, 2021[43]). However, digital collaborative writing can be ineffective when students do not take ownership of a task or spend insufficient time planning

and reflecting; students sometimes see collaborative approaches as inefficient (Zhang and Zou, 2021[43]; Strobl, 2014[39]).

Foreign language learners can also be supported to produce written texts through video or audio production tools, and publication or user-generated content platforms. Some studies have found that enabling students to publish their work for their classmates or a wider audience can help give these tasks more meaning and value in the eyes of students and help students develop an identity as a writer in a foreign language (Blake, 2016[20]).

Finally, there are a range of current and emerging AI-powered writing assistance technologies which could transform the way writing in a foreign language is taught. First, automated writing evaluation tools (e.g. spelling and grammar checkers) and corrective feedback and editing tools (e.g. Grammarly or ProWriting Aid) provide extensive support to improve the quality of students' writing. Recent developments mean these technologies can now give feedback on the organisational and structural aspects of writing too although support at the whole-text level remains limited (Hong, 2023[44]). Providing constructive, corrective feedback on students' work is widely recognised as a highly impactful teaching practice (Hattie, 2008[45]). However, it is resource intensive and puts a high demand on teachers: in TALIS 2018, 41% of lower secondary teachers reported that having too much marking causes them quite a bit or a lot of stress (OECD, 2020[46]). These tools, therefore, offer a clear advantage: they can correct students' writing and provide feedback at greater speed and with more consistency than teachers. Some research indicates they may also support students to develop self-regulation and self-correction skills when writing (Alharbi, 2023[47]). Online grammar checkers have been found to be particularly useful for low-proficiency learners, although an overreliance can impede progress among more advanced learners (Jin and Deifell, 2013[10]; Mohsen, 2015[27]).

As well as increasing the accuracy of writing, AI-powered machine translation can now also help learners (and teachers) produce text in a foreign language. Although there is concern that these tools encourage learners to copy and paste text from their first language to a foreign language with little thought, learner surveys find that it is much more typical for students to look up individual words or phrases rather than translating whole texts. In this way, machine translation supports students to identify the connections between the various languages they know, thus enhancing their linguistic understanding (Alharbi, 2023[47]). Furthermore, generative text-based AI tools allow students to practise their written interaction skills by asking or reformulating questions; they can also see how the technology summarises and presents information (Hong, 2023[44]). In addition, these tools can produce a wide range of text types, providing opportunities for teachers and students to compare their own writing with that of a model text produced by the AI. They can also provide endless writing prompts (Hong, 2023[44]). Box 2.2 illustrates how this can be incorporated into a writing activity through classwork and homework.

### Box 2.2. Using ChatGPT to help develop students' writing skills in a foreign language

In an online focus group of foreign language teachers,* one participant described using ChatGPT to support the teaching of writing. The teacher explained that typically, when teaching writing, lesson time would be dedicated to researching content, exploring model texts, identifying useful vocabulary and sentence structures and planning. Students would then use homework or independent learning time to complete the written task. ChatGPT has enabled the teacher to implement a "flipped" approach. Students use ChatGPT at home to undertake preparation for the written task which they then complete in the classroom with the teacher on hand to support the writing itself as opposed to the preparation for writing.

> *We give them the topic in advance and [for homework] they brainstorm about it, they get some ideas and then when they come in they have to write purely in their own language. In that sense, [by interacting with ChatGPT] they are learning the language patterns that they will probably need in the task, and at the same time they have to use their own [words] to put the different pieces together [...] so [in class] we are still assessing their [independent] language [production].*

* The focus group, held online in June 2023, brought together 14 foreign language teachers from Hong Kong (China), Egypt, Hungary, Singapore, Spain and the United Kingdom. All teach in secondary education or in teacher training.

## What are the key obstacles to using technology in foreign language learning?

Historically, the mere existence of technologies to support language learning has not translated into classroom-level adoption at scale. Technology use in foreign language classrooms first emerged in the 1960s but by the early 21st century, researchers were lamenting that while technology had revolutionised human interaction in general, the impact on foreign language teaching was minimal (Salaberry, 2001[48]).

For decades, accessibility and affordability have been among the biggest obstacles to the use of technology to enhance foreign language teaching and learning. In its earliest incarnations, the financial costs and impracticalities of the necessary equipment impeded implementation outside a few higher education institutions in a handful of countries (Davies, Otto and Ruschoff, 2012[9]; Tafzoli, Huertas Abril and Gómez Parra, 2019[8]). The arrival of microcomputers in the 1980s improved the accessibility of technologies, at least in theory. However, as technologies continued to develop, the demand for new or updated equipment and digital infrastructure has been ongoing and education systems and settings have struggled to keep up.

More recently, as digital technologies have become both more affordable and pervasive across societies, access in schools and other learning environments has improved considerably and is near-comprehensive in many countries. In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022, the school principals of fewer than one in ten students reported that shortages of digital resources hinder instruction in their school to some extent or a lot. Nevertheless, across all OECD countries, the share of students in schools experiencing a shortage of digital resources rose to nearly one in four (OECD, 2023[49]).

While PISA 2022 results indicate that higher performing education systems ensure that every student has access to a digital device, access alone is not enough to promote transformative practice and the impact of technology use in classrooms on student performance continues to be mixed (Evans, 2009[50]; Escueta et al., 2017[51]; OECD, 2023[49]). Students who reported using computers moderately at school tended to have somewhat better learning outcomes in mathematics than students who used computers rarely, but those using them very frequently did a lot worse, even after accounting for social background and student demographics. This echoes findings from the previous PISA cycle which found the same was also true for

digital literacy and science (OECD, 2023[21]; OECD, 2023[49]). Meanwhile, much of the evidence regarding the impact of technology on teaching and learning outcomes in foreign languages appears to be largely inconclusive suggesting modest benefits at best (Golonka et al., 2012[52]).

Beyond access then, the impactful use of technology in foreign language classrooms requires that teachers know how to implement it in a way that adds pedagogical value. This may be the case more so now than ever before as many of the latest technologies such as AI and smart technologies are best understood as socio-technical systems in which technology and humans need to work together (OECD, 2023[21]). For example, research indicates that the quality and quantity of the teacher's instructional support are the most significant mediating factors in AI's capacity to enhance students' writing skills in a foreign language (Alharbi, 2023[47]; Blake, 2016[20]). Moreover, it should not be assumed that students instinctively know the best ways to use digital tools to enhance foreign language skills. Teachers need to guide them to ensure different technologies foster foreign language proficiency. Indeed, teachers themselves recognise that, although technologies may change the way they teach, their teaching remains essential (Box 2.3).

However, since the earliest days of technology-use in foreign language teaching, getting buy-in from the teaching profession has not been straightforward. An early survey of foreign-language educators in 1978 identified several common challenges across learning environments including teachers' scepticism about the ability of a machine to teach languages, a lack of incentives or accountability structures for teachers to integrate technologies into their teaching and a lack of relevant training (Davies, Otto and Ruschoff, 2012[9]). Although there was some considerable financial investment in hardware and software during the late 20th century substantially fewer resources were attributed to training teachers to use the technology and for providing continuous training to support them to keep up with innovation (Davies, 2002[53]). More recently, an international survey of foreign language teachers confirmed that the most common reason for not using instructional methods that integrate digital technologies was the need for training (Fominykh et al., 2021[54]).

### Box 2.3. Teachers' views on how emerging technologies will change their role – or not

In an online focus group* of foreign language teachers, participants were asked how they felt about the emergence of artificial intelligence-powered technologies and their potentially transformative role in foreign language teaching:

> *"I think there's definitely going to be [a] potential shift in terms of we're not so much teaching content, we are facilitators of accessing content. We are explaining this is how you learn a language, the steps you need to develop your proficiency from word level to sentence level to full speech level and I think our role will shift more and more towards that."*
>
> *"As teachers we have the professional judgement. We know what the new things are, we know the most popular topic, we know students' interests and we can pitch these to students' levels so they find them engaging. It's the relationship building – we understand more about our students, what motivates them. If they lose interest in talking to ChatGPT they need a different way to learn. [For example,] currently ChatGPT and other AIs are text-based and not all students love reading."*
>
> *"[Students in lower secondary] are not going to be using a computer to teach themselves a language even if we facilitate it by explaining how to learn. We still need to have a big input as teachers. It's a question of making them fall in love with their learning to fully generate them to be very motivated in their learning. It's all dependent on the age and the social and cultural aspect that you can't have with a computer."*

* The focus group, held online in June 2023, brought together 14 foreign language teachers from Hong Kong (China), Egypt, Hungary, Singapore, Spain and the United Kingdom. All teach in secondary education or in teacher training.

Recent data indicate that there may have been some progress in this regard. According to school leader reports in PISA 2022, on average across OECD countries, 88% of 15-year-olds attend schools whose teachers have the necessary technical and pedagogical skills to integrate digital devices into instruction. Moreover, 76% are in schools which make effective professional resources available to teachers to learn how to use digital devices. This marks a considerable increase since 2018 when the share was 64% for both (OECD, 2023[49]).

Alongside high-quality training, teachers need to be convinced of the added pedagogical value of digital technologies for foreign language teaching. Too often, there has been an overly narrow view of technology use in language learning among developers and educational administrators that see it as a way of automating instruction or increasing efficiency as opposed to enhancing the quality of learning (Davies, 2002[53]). Furthermore, international research indicates that while a large share of today's foreign language teachers believe that digital technologies are beneficial for the language classroom, a much smaller share believes that they can have a positive impact on students' foreign language proficiency (Fominykh et al., 2021[54]).

At the same time, common narratives extolling the virtues of digital technologies (i.e. that they can save teachers' time and make their work more efficient) may be misleading and can thus contribute to potential mistrust among the profession towards certain technologies. Technology may introduce some efficiencies, but it also creates new demands on foreign language teachers' time. For example, the sheer vastness of the target-language audio and textual material now available puts a heavy burden on teachers who must effectively navigate and curate the material and monitor the appropriateness, relevance and instructional quality of the content. Without such efforts, the availability of material risks overwhelming learners (Blake, 2016[20]). Furthermore, inconsistency in the quality and accuracy of available tools developed by a largely unregulated education technology market means teachers need to spend time accurately assessing claims made by different resources (OECD, 2021[55]). Rather, helping teachers understand the added pedagogical value technologies can offer their teaching and empowering them to find ways to achieve that added value in practice could help instil greater critical reflection on the most appropriate ways to use technology – and, indeed, when not to use it – in the foreign language classroom.

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# 3 How 15-year-olds learn English in Finland

The OECD visited Finland in May 2023 to explore the question: *how do 15-year-olds learn English*? This chapter presents findings from this case study visit and wider research. It provides key contextual information about learning languages in Finland in formal education and beyond. It also describes the main findings from interviews and short surveys with students, English teachers and school leaders, as well as observations of English lessons. These findings include perspectives on the ways in which 15-year-olds in Finland encounter and use English outside school, insights into the perceived strengths and challenges of English language teaching and learning in schools, and examples of the ways in which digital technologies and other resources support the teaching of English in Finland.

# A snapshot of learning English as a 15-year-old in Finland

- **Students, educators and parents in Finland strongly value learning English**. This helps motivate 15-year-olds to do well, more so than for other additional languages[1]. According to some teachers though, regularly encountering English outside school may be leading some students to develop a false sense of mastery.
- **Finland has built up a solid knowledge base of the country's linguistic landscape.** With regards to English, this includes system evaluations which provide insight into language proficiency, and stakeholder surveys and other commissioned research that explores teaching and learning approaches and attitudes towards different additional languages.
- **Many students and English teachers in Finland consider speaking to be the most challenging of the four communicative skills.** According to national evaluations, speaking proficiency is not notably lower than other skill areas; rather, socio-emotional and cultural factors may inform these perceptions. Many students and educators would like to have more authentic opportunities to use English through exchanges or other real-life interactions.
- **Schools in Finland are generally well-equipped with digital technologies and most teachers seem comfortable using them to support English instruction in the classroom.** Digital technologies are seen as facilitating English language teaching and making learning more engaging; however, some teachers and students feel more could be done to realise the full potential of digital technologies in English classrooms.

## Learning languages in Finland

### *Finland is increasingly diverse both linguistically and culturally*

Finland has two official national languages – Finnish and Swedish. As of 2022, 86% of around 6 million inhabitants had Finnish as their first language and 5% had Swedish. Neither language is widely spoken internationally. In the Sami homeland, in the northernmost part of Finland, the Sami languages have co-official status; they are spoken by less than 1% of the total population (Statistics Finland, 2023[1]).

In 2021, 8% of Finland's population was foreign-born up from 5% a decade earlier (OECD, 2022[2]). Immigration reached a record high in 2022 and by the end of that year, 9% of the population had a foreign language as a mother tongue, most often Russian but also commonly Estonian, Arabic, English or Somali (Statistics Finland, 2023[1]; Statistics Finland, 2023[3]). In 2018, 15% of Finland's teachers reported working in schools where more than 10% of students were non-native speakers; this share is likely to have grown (OECD, 2019[4]). Non-Finnish speakers tend to be geographically concentrated in the south and south-west regions of the country.

Beyond the linguistic diversity of the population, many people in Finland encounter other languages through tourism. Prior to COVID-19, the tourism industry was growing quickly. In 2019, Finland received 3.3 million international overnight visitors, the equivalent to just over half the total population (OECD, 2022[5]). The leading countries of provenance were Germany, the Russian Federation and Sweden, with important numbers from Estonia, France and the United Kingdom too (Statistics Finland, 2023[6]). At the same time, many people in Finland travel internationally: in 2019, inhabitants made 10.4 million international departures from Finland; Sweden, Estonia and Spain were the most popular destinations (OECD, 2022[5]).

Higher education and employment also expose people in Finland to different languages. In 2017, English was used in over 80% of Finnish companies as a working language; other high-demand languages included Chinese, Estonian, German, Italian and Russian (Confederation of Finnish Industries, 2017[7]). Meanwhile, in 2021, 17% of tertiary students in Finland had an exchange period abroad and foreign students accounted for 8% of the total tertiary enrolment domestically (OECD, 2023[8]; EDUFI, n.d.[9]).

Popular culture is also a key source of exposure. English language television and film are typically subtitled in Finland, a measure seen as supporting language development and literacy. Only 0.3% of known websites produce content in Finnish and 0.5% in Swedish, compared to 53% in English, meaning people in Finland are likely to often encounter English language material online (Web Technology Surveys, 2023[10]).

### *Students in Finland must study both national languages and a foreign language*

The education system in Finland has two autonomous strands according to the language of administration and instruction. About 90% of schools in primary and lower secondary education (i.e. basic education in Finland) have Finnish as the language of instruction; 10% have Swedish (EDUFI, 2022[11]). Students living in the Sami homeland who are proficient in the Sami languages are taught primarily in Sami. Some 18% of schools provide some form of bilingual education, mostly Swedish-Finnish but some offer English.

Compulsory education in Finland begins at age 6 and ends at 18. Typically, 15-year-olds are in the final year of basic education, after which they progress to either general or vocational upper secondary institutions. In Finland, over 95% of schools are run by the municipality. Central government steers decision making but schooling decisions are principally the responsibility of local authorities and schools (OECD, 2020[12]). In principle, children attend the nearest comprehensive school. However, municipalities can establish selective classes with a special emphasis (e.g. music, sports, arts or languages) accessed via an aptitude test. This is increasingly typical in larger cities; research suggests this contributes to growing segregation of students by socio-economic status (Berisha and Seppänen, 2016[13]),

In addition to studying their first national language as language of instruction, students in Finland must study two additional languages: the second national language and a foreign language (Figure 3.1). They can study two further languages although it is increasingly uncommon for schools and municipalities to offer these or for students to choose them. Learning English is not compulsory in Finland but since the 1990s, most students choose to study it.

In 2020, it became compulsory for students to begin learning their first additional language in Grade 1, as opposed to Grade 3. Since 2016, students must begin learning their second additional language in Grade 6, at the latest. In Finnish-medium schools, English is almost universally studied as the first additional language from Grade 1, with Swedish typically from Grade 6. Conversely, in Swedish-medium schools, nearly all students learn Finnish from Grade 1 and take English as the second additional language from Grade 4. In 2021, only one in four students in the final year of compulsory education studied a language other than English or their second national language (Statistics Finland, n.d.[14]).

In Finland, it is the teacher's responsibility to assess students' language proficiency based on learning targets described in the national core curriculum. In basic education, there is no national standardised assessment for any additional language. At the end of upper secondary, students can take the matriculation examination which facilitates entry to tertiary education. Students sit examinations in five subjects including the language of instruction and at least one additional language. After mathematics, English is the most commonly selected subject and around 95% of candidates taking it sit the more advanced examination, which is at B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Matriculation Examination Board, 2023[15]). The computer-based examination tests students' reading, writing and listening skills.

## Figure 3.1. Typical distribution of lesson hours for languages in Finland in 2023

1. In upper secondary education, hours indicated in brackets apply as additional hours if the student selects the subject as part of their elective studies.
2. A1 language teaching begins in the spring term of Grade 1 at the latest for at least 0.5 hours per week.
3. The A2 language may replace the B1 language.
Notes: Modal grade and education level for 15-year-olds are outlined in black. Compulsory subjects and hours are presented in shaded boxes. For boxes that cover multiple grade levels, the time allocation must reach the number indicated in total across the relevant years. Students may also choose to begin an optional B3 language in upper secondary education.
Source: European Commission (2023[16]); national information reported to the OECD.

Finland has conducted several system-level evaluations of English language proficiency, offering insight into performance in reading, writing, speaking and listening at the end of basic education (i.e. Grade 9 when students are typically 15 years old). In 2021, 53% of students attained the equivalent of B1 or higher on the CEFR for reading, 38% for speaking, 34% for listening, and 29% for writing. However, an important share of students only attained a basic level (A1 on the CEFR): these shares were 9% for reading, 26% for listening, 27% for speaking and 33% for writing (Härmälä and Marjanen, 2022[17]). Nevertheless, the validity of the 2021 results, which show a drop in performance since 2013, has been questioned.[2]

### *The case study visit to Finland*

In May 2023, staff from the OECD Secretariat and a Finnish national expert visited three schools in Finland. The schools were chosen for their diverse characteristics which include offering different specialised tracks, being located in urban or rural areas, and having a large share of students from socio-economically disadvantaged or immigrant backgrounds or a more advantaged or homogenous student cohort (Table 3.1). Nevertheless, all three case study schools are Finnish-medium schools in the south of the country; they are not nationally representative. The study must, therefore, be interpreted as illustrating the experiences of some students and educators in Finland as opposed to being generalised nationally.

The findings presented in the rest of this chapter are based on interviews with school leaders, English teachers and 15-year-old students in the case study schools as well as lesson observations, student activity logs and short surveys administered to interviewees. The analysis is also informed by a country background report and interviews with the English Language Teachers' Association of Finland and the Association of Finnish Language Teachers. For further information on the methodology, see Chapter 1.

### Table 3.1. Key characteristics of the case study schools in Finland

| | | School A | School B | School C |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Location** | | Urban | Urban | Rural |
| **Education level** | | Lower secondary | Primary, lower secondary | Primary, lower secondary |
| **School type** | | General education<br>Specialised school (music, dance, design) | General education<br>Specialised school (sports, arts) | General and vocational education |
| **Student cohort** | **In whole school** | 500 | 830 | 660 |
| | **In modal grade for 15-year-olds** | 163 | 93 | 117 |
| | **% of socio-economically disadvantaged** | Non-significant (0-5%) | 20% | Non-significant (0-5%) |
| | **% whose first language is not Finnish** | 4% | 42% | 0.4% |
| **Teacher cohort** | **In whole school** | 52 | 100 | 56 |
| | **Teaching English** | 5 | 6 | 4 |
| **Interviewees** | | School principal<br>Two English teachers<br>Six 15-year-olds | School principal<br>Two English teachers<br>Three 15-year-olds | School assistant principal<br>Two English teachers<br>Six 15-year-olds |

Source: Based on information reported to the case study team by schools.

## How do 15-year-olds in Finland experience English outside school?

### *In Finland, 15-year-olds encounter English daily and see it as essential for their future*

Across the case study schools, all participants agreed that 15-year-olds in Finland today are surrounded by English; all the students reported using English outside school at least sometimes.

> *I think [out-of-school exposure to English] has increased. They play these video games with people all over the world and use English. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *They are raised in an environment where English is always around them. (School leader, School A)*

Beyond formal lessons, participating 15-year-olds reported encountering English in various ways. All use English when engaging with digital technologies, commonly for browsing the Internet, gaming and interacting on social media. Students also mentioned listening to audiobooks and speaking English on videocalls. All students reported watching English language series or films, usually with Finnish subtitles and sometimes with English subtitles or without subtitles. This is consistent with previous research findings that English enters the lives of most people in Finland through media and popular culture, and that the Internet makes using English necessary (Leppänen, Nikula and Kääntä, 2008[18]; Leppänen et al., 2011[19]).

However, English also plays a role in teenagers' lives offline and beyond media consumption. For some, English supports the pursuit of certain hobbies: one teacher reported that students that play basketball and ice hockey often have coaches who speak English. Just over half of the students interviewed reported using English with family and friends and travelling to English-speaking countries; some use English with family members who do not speak Finnish. Teachers in School B, where Finnish is not the first language of many students, emphasised that students commonly use English in multicultural friendship groups or with recently arrived immigrants. A few students mentioned occasionally using English to help tourists.

Among those interviewed, 15-year-olds whose first language is Finnish are also using English with each other and by choice, although not extensively. One teacher observed that although students do not have long English conversations, they may include some English phrases or words in their everyday speech. Some students perceive such language use as playful and fun; others feel it is simply natural. Already in 2007, a large national survey observed that this translanguaging, particularly in speech, was significantly

more common among 15-24 year-olds than older respondents and they tended to view it positively as a creative or emotional outlet (Leppänen et al., 2011[19]).

> *English is something normal used in daily life among young people. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *We mix English words into Finnish discussions during recess. (Student, School C)*

Nevertheless, the students interviewed for this case study are not likely to be representative of all students across the country, particularly as two schools are based in highly urban and relatively touristic areas. Exposure to English has previously been shown to vary significantly across Finland, including by region and urban and rural locations (Leppänen et al., 2011[19]).

As well as being ever-present, English was consistently viewed by the interviewees as being very important or essential for leading a successful life in Finland. This included for personal motives, such as facilitating travel or study exchanges abroad, as well as for professional ones, including pursuing careers in the medical or business sectors. Perhaps as a result, all but one of the students thought that they would continue learning English even after finishing school.

> *English brings more opportunities. (Student, School A)*
>
> *English is needed in Finland; Finnish is not enough for many jobs. (School leader, School B)*

However, while English is a highly desired skill, the idea that English is required to get a job in Finland does not reflect the entire job market. Recent analysis of online job vacancies across Europe indicates that the share of jobs in Finland advertised on line in 2021 that implicitly or explicitly required at least some knowledge of English is relatively low at 20% compared to an OECD average of 33% (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023[20]). The case study participants' universal belief in the importance of English for future employment may reflect the higher demand for English skills in urban centres and in managerial or professional occupations in Finland (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023[20]).

### *High exposure and perceived value may support teaching and learning, up to a point*

Teachers and students alike see high levels of exposure and motivation as having a positive impact on students' English proficiency, both directly by enhancing linguistic knowledge and skills and indirectly by boosting confidence and motivation. For example, students mentioned that watching series and movies, playing video games, and listening to music in English can help them develop vocabulary. Students and teachers noted that in some cases, and particularly with regards to digital technologies, students are more up to date on English terminology than their teachers or their textbooks and may acquire a wider vocabulary thanks to this kind of exposure. One teacher added that frequently listening to English outside school helps students become familiar with what sounds right.

> *The English language skills of all students have been improving during recent years especially the last decade. This is because they listen to or hear English every day. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *Helping tourists on the street in English gives you self-confidence. (Student, School A)*

However, high exposure outside school also causes challenges according to some participants. Activity logs completed by 12 of the participating students indicate that while students may spend a lot of time listening to and reading English outside school, there is less opportunity to practice writing and speaking. Writing tasks were limited to occasional social media messaging or posting, and chat threads during gaming. One teacher identified this as causing a lag in writing proficiency.

At the same time, some see high exposure as having a potentially demotivating effect on students. A few students remarked that the English learnt outside school is more relevant to their lives than that learnt inside school. Some teachers explained that students feel they already know English well, do not

necessarily attribute this to their schooling and therefore find formal lessons frustrating or boring. This challenge has also been raised in previous research: growing familiarity with English outside formal learning environments may lead to the misconception that making an effort to study it is redundant (Vaarala et al., 2021[21]).

> *It is challenging that kids think they know the English already. They think they know it better than I do because they use it in computer games and it's present in their lives all the time. They think they don't have to listen to me in English classes, I feel that is a challenge. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *The students say, "We don't learn things at school because we heard this already"…[but]…it's still important to teach them academic English in terms of the grammar and correct sentence structures. (Teacher, School B)*

### *The narrowing effect of English on students' language repertoire worries some Finns*

The growing dominance of English as a global lingua franca is raising concerns in Finland for the country's official languages. In 2019, the government published a new National Language Policy to safeguard and reinforce the position of the official languages in the face of the increased presence of English in sectors such as science, research, business and education, and English's strong position, especially in youth, popular and digital cultures (Finnish Government, 2021[22]). The government has recently commissioned two studies on English's (and other foreign languages') impact on domestic science and research and on the official languages, respectively. However, initial findings from the latter do not corroborate the view that English is endangering the national languages (Laitinen et al., 2023[23]).

At the same time, the practical implementation of Swedish as an official language is seen to be increasingly challenging. Among the case study participants, learners are perceived to be often reluctant or demotivated to learn Swedish. This is particularly true in comparison to English, which they typically find more relevant, more enjoyable, and easier to both learn and teach.

> *English is easier than Swedish because you hear it in many places. (Student, School C)*
>
> *Some teachers teach both English and Swedish, they say it is easier to teach English…because the attitudes are much better towards it. [Students] think that the English language is maybe…the most important language for them. (School leader, School B).*

Although it is recommended that the first additional language studied from Grade 1 be the second national language, in Finnish-medium schools in 2021, it was English for over 96% of children (Vipunen, n.d.[24]). This is either due to parental preference or, increasingly, because municipalities only offer English at Grade 1 (Finnish Government, 2021[22]). At the same time, fewer students in Finnish-medium schools choose to take the matriculation examination for Swedish. This leads to a reduction in skills supply, further complicating the practical implementation of Swedish as an official language and the teaching of Swedish.

The wider foreign language repertoire is also seen to be narrowing. Increasingly, children in Finland only study the two compulsory additional languages. In the case study interviews, two school leaders shared that while parents and students sometimes question the need to learn other languages or may request to stop studying one to focus attention elsewhere, there was no example of this happening for English.

Finally, research indicates that access to other foreign languages in Finland is increasingly unequal. As many smaller or more rural municipalities only offer English as the first additional language, and as language availability motivates parents to choose a school beyond the one closest to them, foreign language skills are increasingly modified by socio-economic and educational background and location (Bernelius and Huilla, 2021[25]). School A, located in an affluent urban area, reflects this situation.

> *There is nothing special about language teaching here except that a lot of students, about 60%, study two foreign languages. In addition to English, they take French, German or Spanish. And they all take Swedish. [However] when they choose French or German…it is more the parents' choice…and sometimes they apply to quit them in the Grade 7 or 8. (School leader, School A)*

A linguistic narrowing in education contrasts the growing cultural and linguistic diversity of Finnish society. Half of the students interviewed for the case study regularly spoke a language other than Finnish outside school, keeping in mind that two schools were in an urban centre, one in a particularly multicultural area. Nevertheless, growing multiculturalism has been identified more generally as one of the biggest challenges facing Finland's education system as students with an immigrant background have lower educational and well-being outcomes (Helakorpi, Holm and Liu, 2023[26]). In the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) 2022, even after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic status, performance differences in Finland for students with an immigrant background were among the highest in the OECD. On average, these students scored 69 points lower than their non-immigrant peers in reading and 42 points lower in mathematics (OECD, 2023[27]).

Cultural diversity can enrich educational experiences, particularly in language classrooms. This is recognised in Finland's national core curriculum for basic education, which calls for all teachers to have linguistic awareness and to use students' whole linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning (EDUFI, 2014[28]). Although the Finnish curriculum can be seen as something of a global leader in terms of its language-related values, evidence of implementation indicates that linguistically responsive teaching is not a common feature of Finnish teacher training nor classroom practice (Vorstman, Szõnyi and Siarova, 2020[29]). Such an approach was not evident in the case study schools.

## How do 15-year-olds in Finland experience English in schools and classrooms?

### *Students like English lessons but want authentic opportunities to use the language*

The students interviewed for this case study generally like their English lessons often finding them easier and more enjoyable than other subjects. Some named English among their favourite subjects. They are also satisfied with their learning in English: of the 14 students interviewed, 13 reported being happy with how much English they had learnt at school so far.

> *English classes are perhaps more relaxed than other classes and we use more diverse methods – we listen, we write and do different exercises. (Student, School C)*
>
> *It is gratifying to be an English teacher because kids mostly like English. (Teacher, School C)*

Nevertheless, increasing the opportunity for students to use the language in authentic situations commonly arose as an area for improvement. Despite being exposed to English in many ways outside school, when asked to identify something that would enhance their English learning, several students wished for more opportunities to go on trips to English-speaking countries and to receive international visitors in school. Educators also identified this as an area for improvement, recognising that it would be valuable for students' learning if schools provided more opportunities for them to apply their English.

> *It would be good to have more chances to practice speaking in real-life situations to get more confidence. (Student, School C)*

However, they also acknowledged related challenges. According to school leaders, such activities rely on teachers' willingness to dedicate additional time and effort. One teacher explained that although organising them has a clear added value, time, financial and other structural constraints prevent it. Moreover, some international links were lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, one of the schools appointed a teacher to co-ordinate Erasmus programmes as part of their formal workload. Another provides financial compensation to a teacher co-ordinating an eTwinning project. One teacher acknowledged that schools could also seek solutions in digital technologies noting that, with the right resources, technology could support students to visit English-speaking countries virtually, including through augmented reality (see Chapter 2 for more on how digital technologies can support virtual exchanges).

### *Teachers and students alike perceive spoken English to be particularly challenging*

Several of the 15-year-olds participating in the Finnish case study identified speaking as the hardest of the four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) to learn. They gave reasons related to linguistic aspects, such as pronunciation and vocabulary, as well as socio-emotional aspects, such as the speed of oral communication and finding it intimidating.

> *When you speak you have to react fast and also pronunciation is difficult. (Student, School C)*
>
> *If somebody asks me something, I cannot answer. I understand the question, but I don't have enough English words to answer. (Student, School B)*

Likewise, many of the participating teachers highlighted speaking as a particularly challenging skill to teach and for students to learn. Some cited pedagogical challenges, such as a lack of class time dedicated to speaking in general and to extended speaking tasks specifically, as well as the time involved for providing individual feedback on speaking skills and a lack of assessment opportunities.

> *The [biggest challenge] is increasing the students' speaking time in the lesson…I always have this problem. (Teacher, School B)*

However, teachers more commonly cited socio-emotional obstacles. Several noted that students are shy when speaking English. One felt that teenagers in Finland are particularly concerned about what other people think of them and this seemed to increase during COVID-19. Another found self-consciousness to be strongest from Grade 7. Indeed, a participant who teaches in primary and lower secondary education noted that both the time dedicated to speaking in class and learners' related confidence diminish with age.

> *They never speak in front of the class. (Teacher, School C,)*

Another teacher emphasised that attitudes towards speaking English depend on the individual student or group. In one school, when asked directly, the students denied finding spoken English particularly embarrassing and described their class as supportive although all these students self-assessed their English proficiency in comparison to that of their classmates as either average or above-average.

In the interviews, teachers and students identified potential strategies for overcoming challenges related to speaking, including pair or small-group work, project-based speaking tasks or requiring more assessment of spoken English. Some students wished for more speaking in class as well as explicit pronunciation practice. The desire for more authentic opportunities to speak English, including with native speakers (see above), was also connected to a desire to enhance confidence in speaking.

National data indicate that there is room to enhance students' speaking skills in Finland. In 2021 and 2013, large-scale assessments of English proficiency found that 15-year-olds' receptive skills (reading and listening) are generally stronger than their productive skills (speaking and writing). In speaking, in 2013, around one-third (36%) of students did not achieve target proficiency (i.e. B1 on the CEFR, equivalent to Level 8 in Finland) (Hildén et al., 2013[30]); in 2021, the share was close to two-thirds (62%), although these later results should be interpreted with caution[3] (Härmälä and Marjanen, 2022[17]). Nevertheless, in both instances, the shares were smaller than those underachieving in writing and similar to those for listening.

A wider cultural phenomenon may explain some of the concerns. Finnish people can be particularly self-deprecating or critical of each other when speaking English. The term "Rally English" (*tankeroenglanti* or r*allienglanti*), derived from the strong accent of some Finnish racing drivers when speaking English, is both widely used and a common source of humour. Meanwhile, high-profile individuals that speak English fluently with a British accent are commonly praised and admired (Peterson, 2022[31]).

English language curricula in Finland have placed growing emphasis on oral communication in recent years. For the first time, the national core curriculum for upper secondary (2019) includes a dedicated

section on the evaluation of oral skills. However, teachers are not provided with practical examples or pedagogical guidance on how to implement these changes (Hamm, 2020[32]).

### *Mixed-ability language classrooms create multiple challenges for English teachers*

When asked about the biggest challenges they or their school faces with regards to developing students' English language proficiency, most teachers and school leaders cited adequately responding to students' different needs. The challenge was expressed either in terms of the range of English language proficiencies within a class, which can extend from beginner to native speaker, or a general increase in different needs such as learning difficulties, declining literacy levels, growing mental health challenges, high dropout rates, behavioural challenges and rising numbers of students with an immigrant background.

> *Nowadays there are so many students in different [proficiency] levels of the language. Some are in basic level and need some support, some are really talented in English because they watch the television in English and use English on social media and maybe use English for their hobbies as well. (School leader, School A)*
>
> *[The] biggest challenge is that the learning skills of the students are quite heterogeneous, they vary a lot. We have many students with very high and very low results, less on the average level. (School leader, School B)*

When asked about the supports offered to low-performing students in English, teachers gave different examples of adaptations to their teaching. This included providing differentiated tasks or tailored resources (either prepared by the teacher or provided with the textbook), better scaffolding learning activities by including extra steps, or spending more one-to-one time with target students in class.

> *The teachers have to know how to diversify teaching methods according to each student, the teaching has to be tailor-made to the learning skills of the students. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *I spend more time with them and choose the easier test and easier exercises. (Teacher, School B)*

Participating students recognised that if they or their peers are struggling in English, they might receive more individualised support from the teacher and different or easier activities. In lesson observations, teachers adopted implicit support measures, such as switching to Finnish, providing one-to-one explanations and checking for understanding with certain students. However, but there was no evidence of explicit efforts to adapt the demands or accessibility of tasks for less proficient students.

In terms of school-level supports, teachers and school leaders described following the official model introduced in 2014, which envisages three levels of support across all subjects. In the first instance, the teacher gives extra support to students outside lesson time, such as providing additional tasks or one-to-one and small group support. This might not be included in teachers' official working time. If that does not suffice, students are referred to the special needs teacher(s), who provide(s) more regular support based on an individual learning plan. The third tier relates to long-term supports assigned to students according to diagnosed needs. The case study participants focused on the second tier as a key support for low-performing students in English. In one school, teaching assistants provide extra support in some lessons or for certain students. However, as is also true of special needs teachers, these assistants are not English language specialists and may not have the language skills to adequately support students.

With regards to supporting high-performing students, reported strategies varied more between schools but were generally considered less comprehensive. Teachers explained that these students may be encouraged to read more in English or may receive more advanced tasks such as formal or creative writing pieces. School leaders noted that occasionally there are field trips, conferences or international exchange programmes. One school offers the chance to participate in advanced courses for two extra lessons a week, but English is not commonly selected or included in this offer.

Some interviewees referred to a growing though somewhat hidden trend of creating "fast-track" groups for English in primary education despite the fact that ability grouping is not allowed in Finnish schools. Among

the teachers and school leaders interviewed, there were differing opinions regarding ability grouping, with some suggesting that it would help solve the challenge of heterogeneity and others feeling it would be politically or ethically unacceptable.

Several interviewees felt that the supports provided for students with different needs in English are not sufficient citing various obstacles. With regards to low-performing students, teachers find it difficult to encourage students to attend extra support sessions and some report not having sufficient time to provide them. Special education teachers are a finite resource typically in high demand: in one case study school there was one per grade (around 170 students); in another, around a quarter of all students received their support. In addition, to adequately support English language learning, the special education teacher often needs to collaborate with the English teacher but time for this is not included in work schedules.

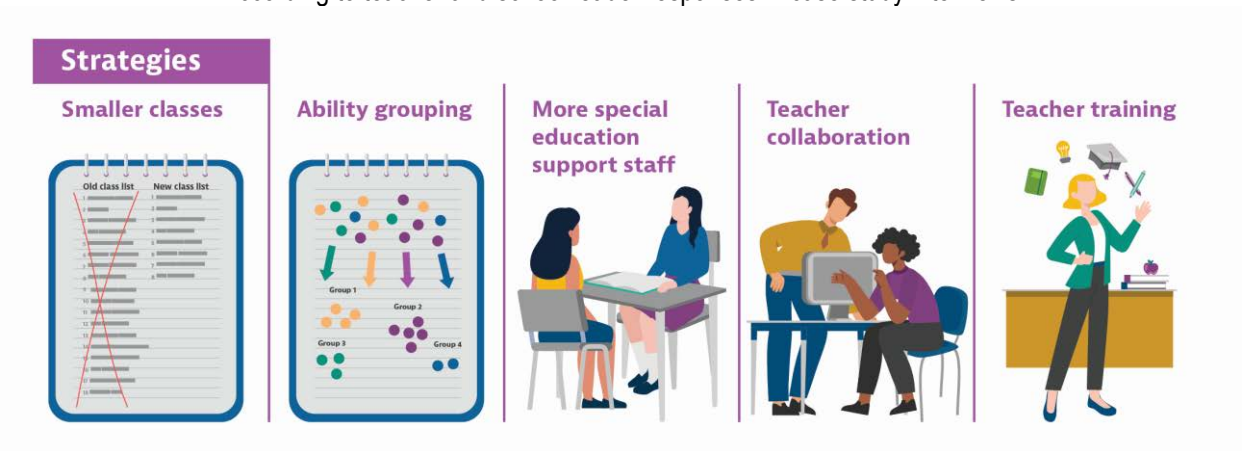
Supporting high-performing students was seen as even more challenging. Supports are seen as time intensive as extended assignments require further explanation, evaluation and feedback. In addition, these students may not see the need to extend their English, particularly in comparison to other subjects. One teacher explained that the lack of consistency in approaches across teachers adds to the challenge. Finally, a few teachers also raised cultural barriers: the Finnish education system is built on a philosophy of equality and providing extra supports to these students may be perceived as unfair.

> *[Supporting high-performing students] is much more difficult because if you give them assignments, they also require more debriefing. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *Part of the students might be annoyed by not getting to improve their English to a more advanced level. (Student, School C)*

A national survey of language teachers and school leaders in basic education revealed similar issues. Insufficient resources, whether financial or time-related, were by far the biggest obstacles to providing adequate support to students, impacting class sizes and shortages of qualified personnel. Meanwhile, student motivation and the heterogeneity and number of needs were seen to further exacerbate resource issues. Language teachers also felt that the allocation of resources for such supports favours other subjects over languages and diminishes with age, just as class sizes grow (Hilden et al., 2019[33]). Case study participants had some clear ideas as to how they could be supported to better meet students' different needs in relation to English learning (Figure 3.2).

### Figure 3.2. Strategies to better support English language learners with different needs in Finland

According to teacher and school leader responses in case study interviews




Note: The strategies included in the figure are not exhaustive; they refer only to those observed or reported during the case study visit.
Source: Based on case study research conducted in three schools in Finland.

## What resources support English teaching and learning in schools in Finland?

### *English teachers in Finland are multilingual and generally enjoy their work*

Of the six teachers interviewed, five had Finnish as their first language. All reported using English outside school at least sometimes, with half reporting using it very often and two using English at home alongside other languages. All reported sometimes travelling to English-speaking countries and four had spent time working in one. In addition, all the teachers reported speaking other additional languages, typically Swedish, but also German, Spanish and Turkish; five taught one of these languages in school.

The participating teachers joined the profession for various reasons, including being good at English, liking the language and having a family member who taught English.

> *After high school I was good at English and liked it so it felt a natural and easier choice than law school. So I did two years of English and then decided to do teaching. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *One of the English teachers gave me a 10 and it really motivated me. Since then, I've been really interested in languages. (Teacher, School B)*

The teachers were generally satisfied with their work. Most feel that their initial training prepared them well. One teacher described being very engaged in professional development, visiting other schools and classrooms and undertaking research as part of their doctoral studies. Another felt that initial teacher training had not adequately prepared them for the challenges of the classroom, although these challenges were not specific to being an English teacher. In Finland, all teachers in municipal schools are entitled to three days of planning and training annually. In recent years, English teachers have received more in-service training due to major reforms, such as the change in the age of introduction of the first additional language.

The school leaders participating in the case study generally felt that there is a good supply of well-qualified English language teachers in Finland. Nevertheless, one school leader working in an affluent urban area noted a diminishing pool of applicants to English language teaching roles and one of the teachers felt the profession was increasingly less attractive both economically and socially, as the perceived social value and respect for the profession seem to be falling.

> *There are quite a lot of qualified English teachers on the market. There's no problem with recruitment in our school or other schools either as far as I know. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *All our English teachers are qualified teachers with permanent contracts…regarding English language teaching, we're in a good situation. (School leader, School C)*

### *Teachers use digital technologies, mainly to facilitate traditional language pedagogies*

Classrooms in all three schools were well-equipped with digital tools, typically having a laptop or desktop for the teacher, an interactive whiteboard and/or standard whiteboard and projector, and audio equipment. In one school, all students had a laptop for use in lessons and at home, provided by the municipality; another school was preparing to provide all students with one. One classroom had a phone park for students to hand in their phones at the beginning of the lesson, although this was not strictly enforced.

Interviewees gave various examples of the digital technologies used in English lessons. This includes game-based platforms and applications accessed via mobile phones and used for vocabulary or grammar practice (e.g. Kahoot!, Quizlet, Wordwall); tools for classroom management (e.g. Google Classroom, One Drive); digital textbooks and their additional online resources; and online media such as images, video and audio material to stimulate discussions. During the lesson observations, teachers and, to a much lesser extent, students used digital technologies in varying ways (Box 3.1). However, students were not generally active users and the activities that integrated technology tended to replicate traditional pedagogical

approaches rather than taking advantage of the added pedagogical value some technologies may offer (see Chapter 2). These observations align with a wider analysis of the use of digital technologies in lower secondary schools in Finland (Oinas et al., 2023[34]).

### Box 3.1. The use of digital technologies in case study lessons in Finland

Digital technologies were integrated into all three lessons observed for this case study.

**Lesson 1:** All students used their own device throughout the lesson. They worked through the teacher's presentation independently and completed written tasks and other exercises on the device. At the end of the lesson, the teacher set a homework task via the virtual learning environment; this would be submitted by students electronically and then evaluated by the teacher digitally. Students navigated the different tools with ease and generally remained on task.

**Lesson 2:** Digital technologies were used to support classroom management. As students increasingly disengaged from the first task – a pair discussion based on written prompts – the teacher transitioned to an active viewing exercise of a video from an English language news channel. Students were visibly more engaged during the video and more willing to participate in the subsequent class discussion.

**Lesson 3:** Having given students time to complete grammar exercises in their textbooks, the teacher projected the digital version onto the whiteboard to review as a class. Students self-assessed their answers. At the end of the lesson, which had covered aspects of Canadian culture, the teacher played some music by Canadian artists and encouraged students to share their opinions.

During the interviews, many participants identified advantages of using digital technologies in language classrooms. This includes making the teaching more engaging, better aligning with students' interests and digital habits, taking advantage of game-based tools, and facilitating lesson planning.

> *They are fun because sometimes they are like a game and we get pretty competitive. (Student, School A)*
>
> *Digital materials make it easier to search for information and materials. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *In language teaching … you need something to render the teaching more vivid and interesting. Young people are used to this kind of material and there is a lot of video or audio material available nowadays. Digital technologies enable the teacher to integrate popular youth culture into lessons. (School leader, School B)*

Some participants expressed reservations and identified associated challenges. One student noted that the technology does not always work; a teacher felt that scope to use certain tools is limited as decision-making power is held at municipal level. More commonly, challenges related to the perceived pedagogical value of the tools. Some teachers noted the low educational quality of the digital resources accompanying textbooks, including a lack of challenge. Another had concerns around screen time and felt that digital technologies are not conducive to interaction and communication. A final teacher speculated that digital tools negatively impact learning, particularly writing.

> *I am an old-school teacher. I think the kids spend a lot of time already on their phones…I don't want to add to that…I want them to speak, to listen, to have contact. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *Students don't have their own laptops so they don't use a lot of laptops. The digital materials from the book by the publisher are awful, we cannot use them. (Teacher, School C)*

### *English teachers see textbooks as a key resource but think they could be of better quality*

In each of the observed lessons, all students had paper copies of the textbook. Teachers integrated activities from the book into two of the lessons. In the interviews, many of the educators saw the textbooks as a critical resource for teaching English. One school leader explained that, despite the expense, the school ensures all students have their own copy of the textbook to write in as they feel this improves results.

For all the teachers, the textbook provides a road map of the lesson objectives and teaching content for the year. As one teacher explained, this is at least in part a result of the high level of curricular autonomy in Finland. Although this teacher viewed the freedom negatively, wanting more structure and guidance for learning goals, pedagogies and classroom assessment, other teachers appreciated it and were happy to use the textbooks to fill gaps. Some students also reported liking the structure offered by the textbooks.

> *In languages [the curriculum] is too open-ended. For example, the curriculum says we teach the basic structures of English, but nobody says what they are. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *I find the textbooks very useful, otherwise I would be doing much more work. (Teacher, School B)*

The teachers in one school were very satisfied with their chosen textbook. They appreciated the wide selection of activities on offer, including differentiated assessments, teacher resources and digital materials. Another teacher found the textbook useful in helping integrate aspects of English-speaking culture into lessons.

> *Everything is taken care of for us, everything is there in the book. (Teacher, School C)*

However, teachers in other schools were less convinced: one emphasised the importance of combining activities from the book with their own activities, particularly to meet the different needs of students; another felt that the level of challenge, particularly in the listening exercises, was insufficient. In different schools, teachers described some of the material as outdated. Finally, the interviews revealed wider concerns about the quality of the digital resources which, in their early form at least, simply digitised the paper versions.

One teacher remarked on the use of both English and Finnish in the textbook. This is typical of approaches to teaching grammar in Finland; however, having worked in other education systems, this teacher was surprised to discover the extent to which Finnish is used. In particular, the teacher noted that this causes challenges for students whose first language is not Finnish, particularly those who have recently arrived. In such cases, the teacher described having to prepare three versions of each assessment: one Finnish-English, one English-only and one differentiated assessment for students with low proficiency.

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## Notes

[1] Throughout this report, the phrase “additional language” is used to refer to any language that is not the learner’s first language and/or the language of instruction. This encompasses both foreign languages and official languages or those with special status in countries formally recognising more than one.

[2] In 2021, students performed below their counterparts in 2013 in all four skill areas but the drop was greatest in speaking. This requires further investigation but technical factors such as administration during the COVID-19 pandemic, a reliance on teacher evaluation and use of (unstable) video technology for the speaking tasks, as well as lower motivation among students have been suggested.

[3] See Note 2.

# 4 How 15-year-olds learn English in Greece

In April 2023, the OECD visited three schools in Greece to speak to students, English language teachers and school leaders about how 15-year-olds learn English. This chapter presents the key findings from these visits and broader evidence. First, it gives an overview of the educational and linguistic context of Greece. It then explores the ways in which students in Greece are exposed to English outside school, including their extensive participation in private, non-formal language education. Next, the chapter provides insights from students and their educators into how English is taught and learnt in schools and the resources available to them, including digital technologies and textbooks. The findings include their perspectives on the strengths and challenges of teaching or learning English in schools in Greece, and ideas for improvements.

## A snapshot of learning English as a 15-year-old in Greece

- **Students in Greece have a very clear idea of why they learn English and how it will be useful to them in the future**, including for employment, education, and cultural or social reasons. Teachers believe that this strong sense of relevance helps motivate students to do well in English.
- **English has a prominent role in the Greek national curriculum and students must study it throughout compulsory and upper secondary education**. At the same time, many students typically study English in private, non-formal education from a young age. Language certification examinations, which are seen as crucial for life beyond school in Greece, are a significant driver of this.
- **English teachers in Greece are attracted to the profession by the wide variety of job opportunities.** Those working in public school education recognise several favourable working conditions relative to teaching English in other contexts.
- **English lessons in Greek upper secondary schools typically follow the official textbook but different teachers appear to prioritise different skills and content.** Teachers try to supplement the textbook material where possible, particularly through digital technologies and to better meet students' different needs. However, teachers feel that large mixed-ability classes, a lack of curricular time and (digital) resource challenges create ongoing difficulties.

## Learning languages in Greece

### *People in Greece are increasingly exposed to languages other than Greek*

Greek is the official language of Greece and is used across the entire territory and at all levels of education. The Muslim minority, which is of Turkish, Pomak and Roma origin, resides in the north-east of the country and accounts for approximately 1% of the total population of around 10.5 million. Minority schools operate for these students, with Turkish and Greek as the languages of instruction.

In 2021, 13% of Greece's population was foreign-born. By far the largest share of foreign nationals come from neighbouring Albania although there are also large shares from Georgia and the Russian Federation (OECD, 2022[1]). Since 2015, Greece has experienced a considerable increase in the number of incoming refugees, some applying for asylum and others travelling further north into Europe. In 2022, over 86 600 refugees and asylum-seekers arrived in Greece, double the number in 2021 and mostly from Afghanistan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Ukraine (UNHCR, 2023[2]). In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022, 8% of 15-year-olds reported mainly speaking a language other than Greek at home, compared to the OECD average of 11% (OECD, 2023[3]).

People in Greece are also exposed to speakers of other languages through tourism and tertiary education. Tourism is a key driver of the Greek economy: in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, Greece received 34 million international arrivals, compared to a total population of around 10.5 million. The largest shares came from France, Germany and the United Kingdom. In terms of outbound tourism, inhabitants made 7.8 million international departures from Greece (OECD, 2022[4]). In 2021, 23 000 international or foreign students were studying in tertiary education in Greece, around 3% of the total student cohort. The largest shares came from neighbouring countries or Asia. Meanwhile, around 5% of domestic students chose to study abroad; the most popular destinations were France, Germany and the United States (OECD, 2023[5]).

English language competence is a highly desired skill on the Greek job market. A recent study of online job vacancies in Europe in 2021 revealed that around half (51%) of positions advertised in Greece had either an explicit or implicit demand for English language skills, compared to one-third on average across OECD countries. In some regions, the share exceeded 90% (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023[6]).

English also enters lives through culture. Dubbing is not commonplace in Greece and films or television programmes are typically shown in the original language with Greek subtitles. Meanwhile, estimates indicate that 53% of websites produce content in English, compared to just 0.5% for Greek, meaning that Internet users are likely to regularly encounter English content (Web Technology Surveys, 2023[7]).

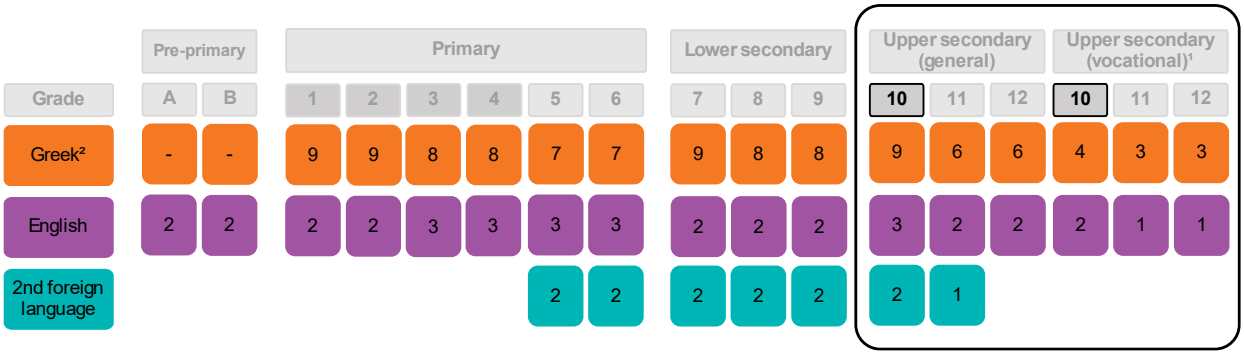
### *All students in Greece study English from an early age and throughout their schooling*

Compulsory education in Greece begins in pre-primary school at age 4 and ends at age 14-15, at which point students complete lower secondary school and, if they choose to continue their education, are tracked into general or vocational pathways. Typically, 15-year-olds in Greece do transition to upper secondary education: in 2021, 87% were enrolled in upper secondary education, 8% in lower secondary and only 5% in neither (OECD, 2023[5]).

At upper secondary level, 95% of schools are public and 5% are private. Around 3% of all upper secondary schools are Experimental or Model schools. These schools aim to serve as centres of excellence and innovation to contribute to spreading higher quality approaches to education across the school network. They can offer either general or vocational education programmes and have been increasing in number in recent years. Model schools are academically selective, typically based on students' performance in Greek language and mathematics.

English is a mandatory subject in Greece. As of 2021, students begin learning English in pre-primary education (age 4) through creative, oral activities, and this continues at the first two grades of primary education. Formal instruction begins in Grade 3 (age 8) with the introduction of the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum for Primary and Lower Secondary Schools (2016) and continues up to the end of upper secondary education (age 18) (Figure 4.1). This means that, among European countries, Greece now has one of the longest durations for learning a foreign language at 14 years (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[8]).

**Figure 4.1. Typical distribution of lesson hours for languages in Greece in 2023**




1. In upper secondary vocational education, the hours shown are those for compulsory (general) English courses; in Grades 11 and 12, students can choose to study programmes that may include additional hours for (vocational) English and for a second foreign language.
2. The hours for Greek include those for Modern Greek language and literature and Ancient Greek language and literature.
Note: The modal grade and education level for 15-year-olds are outlined in black.
Source: European Commission (2023[9]); national information reported to the OECD.

The curriculum is aligned with the competence levels of the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR), with students expected to reach B1/B2 by the end of lower secondary education. A new Common Curriculum for Foreign Languages for general upper secondary schools has recently been introduced (2023), also aligned with the CEFR, and students are expected to reach C1 by the end of general upper secondary education; this will be implemented in 2024/25. Greece, along with Iceland, is thus one of only two countries in Europe that has set expected attainment at advanced or proficient user level (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[8]). There is no official proficiency level set for vocational upper secondary education, although it is generally expected that students reach a lower level than those in general upper secondary education.

In upper secondary general education in Greece students' achievement in English is typically[1] assessed partly through school-level written examinations at the end of the academic year and partly according to their overall progress during the school year. Half of the items in the examinations are drawn from the National Test Item Bank with Graded Difficulty for Secondary Education (hereinafter the "Item Bank") and assess reading skills and vocabulary; the other half are developed by the teacher and assess writing skills and grammar.

At the end of upper secondary education, those students wishing to transition to tertiary education must complete the Panhellenic examination. Depending on their chosen field of study and the requirements of their selected tertiary programme, students take the English language examination, which assesses reading skills, language awareness (lexical, grammatical and discourse competence) and writing skills (OECD, 2023[10]). Greece has also developed a state certificate of language proficiency; however, this is not offered via the formal education system. There are, therefore, no national data on students' English language proficiency.

### *The case study visit to Greece*

In April 2023, the OECD Secretariat and two Greek national experts visited three schools in Greece. These schools were selected for their diverse characteristics which include different school types (general, vocational and Model), locations (urban and semi-urban) and sizes (Table 4.1). Nevertheless, all three schools are in Athens and the surrounding area and are not representative of schools across the country. The case study findings should, therefore, be interpreted as illustrating the experiences of some students and teachers in Greece as opposed to being generalised nationally.

The findings presented in the remainder of this chapter are based on interviews with school leaders, English teachers and 15-year-old students in the three case study schools; lesson observations; student activity logs; and short surveys administered to interviewees. In addition, the analysis is informed by a country background report prepared by a national expert from Greece and a background interview with representatives from the Panhellenic Association of State School Teachers of English. For further information on the methodology, see Chapter 1.

### Table 4.1. Key characteristics of the case study schools in Greece

| | | School A | School B | School C |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Location** | | Semi-urban | Urban | Urban |
| **Education level** | | Upper secondary | Upper secondary | Upper secondary |
| **School type** | | Public, general high school (morning) | Public, general Model[1] school (morning) | Public, vocational high school (morning) |
| **Student cohort** | **In whole school** | 163 | 480 | 287 |
| | **In modal grade for 15-year-olds** | 52 | 162 | 57 |
| | **% of socio-economically disadvantaged** | | 5% | |
| | **% whose first language is not Greek** | 13.5% | 4% | |
| **Teacher cohort** | **In whole school** | 21 | 46 | 51 |
| | **Teaching English** | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| **Interviewees** | | Vice principal<br>One English teacher<br>Five 15-year-olds | Vice principal<br>Three English teachers<br>Five 15-year-olds | School principal<br>Two English teachers<br>Six 15-year-olds |

1. Model schools aim to serve as centres of excellence and innovation to contribute to spreading higher quality approaches to education across the school network. They are academically selective and have somewhat greater autonomy than other schools.
Source: Based on information reported to the case study team by schools.

## How do 15-year-olds in Greece experience English outside school?

### *Students in Greece often use English outside school and teachers believe this increases language proficiency*

The students interviewed in Greece reported frequently using English in various activities outside school. All study or have studied English in non-school settings (see below). They also watch films, series and videos in English, both with and without subtitles. They read books in English; listen to English language podcasts or music; and use English when browsing the Internet, gaming or using social media.

While all the students described being surrounded by English outside school, some explained that they actively choose English language options, either for perceived quality or cultural interest. For example, when browsing the Internet, several students use English because of the greater quantity of information available. One student felt that books, podcasts and videos in English are of better quality and more interesting than those in Greek. Another described being a fan of English football and watching matches with English language commentary. Another student chooses to read English language books in their original form as opposed to the Greek translations, finding this more “realistic”. In contrast, one teacher felt that fewer students listen to English language music because Greek music remains very popular.

> *When I look for something on the Internet, I look for it in English because it’s easier for me and because I find more information in English. [Student, School A]*
>
> *I prefer podcasts and videos in English because I find they are better quality. Greek videos are rubbish. I can learn a lot of things watching English or American videos. [Student, School B]*

The case study students’ interactions with English outside school are not limited to receptive skills (reading and listening) but also include using productive skills (speaking and writing). Several students reported writing messages and emails in English or speaking English with family members or friends who live abroad and do not speak Greek. Those who play video games communicate with other players in English. Students also mentioned using English when interacting with tourists. A school leader explained that there are many opportunities for young people to speak English with foreigners because tourism is so important in Greece. Finally, two students described having attended summer camps in Greece where some activities were in English or where the common language between students was English.

Several of the students reported using English with their Greek friends or family members in text messages, on social media and between lessons at school. For one teacher, this translanguaging was linked to the fact that many English words or phrases have entered the Greek language in recent years; another felt that the students just enjoy this playful use of language.

> *Also, when I text some Greek friends or talk to them on the phone, I often use English. [Student, School A]*
>
> *The interesting thing is that they speak in English with each other or with their English teachers during the breaks…It's more enjoyable for them. They have even started making jokes sometimes. [Teacher, School C]*

Nearly all the teachers interviewed felt that students' exposure to English outside school helps them improve their language skills. For many, the impact is direct: anything students do outside school in English is helpful because it habituates them to the language. However, one teacher and one school leader felt that the relationship is indirect: exposure to English beyond school helps students understand the relevance of English to their lives, therefore motivating them to improve.

> *Whatever helps students come into direct contact with English helps them to learn it better and faster and generally improve their level. [Teacher, School A]*
>
> *Learn English here and then you'll be able to talk online when you play with your friends. So, they have a reason to actually learn because this helps them when, for example, they watch TikTok videos or Instagram stories; they're all in English and they want to participate. [Teacher, School B]*

Nevertheless, one teacher highlighted that there is also a negative impact: in some cases, frequent use of English outside formal education settings can give students a misplaced sense of their own competence.

> *They often claim that they already know something but when I actually teach it or ask them about it, they don't really know it. [Teacher, School A]*

### *Students have a clear understanding of how English will benefit them in their futures*

The students interviewed in Greece consider English language proficiency to be highly important for future success. Many were able to give concrete examples of how they would use English later in life. This included needing English when studying abroad or to access academic material for university studies in Greece. Others explained that they would need English to communicate and interact with the many foreigners travelling to Greece or when travelling abroad. Finally, some had a clear idea of their future career and felt English would be useful. This included working in tourism and other service sectors, or in digital technology and aviation.

> *In the beginning [learning English] was kind of boring, it was like school, but now I find it very important and I want to learn. Now I find it very interesting…and so it's part of my life. [Student, School C]*

One school leader explained that this high regard for English extends to all students so that even those who do not typically perform well in other subjects or enjoy school, are often motivated to do well in English. This sentiment was echoed by a teacher in another school. For the school leader in the vocational school, high regard for English is due to the fact that it is considered essential for finding a job in Greece.

> *Generally, students view English as very important not only for higher education but for other purposes too. There are students who are not good at any other subjects but they are really good at English, they speak it very well. [School leader, School A]*
>
> *If you don't know English you are considered as if you were illiterate. In practice, there is no way anyone can get a job [or] be employed if they don't know English. It's like a basic qualification. [School leader, School C]*

The importance with which students view English is shared more widely across Greek society. According to all interviewees, Greek parents highly value proficiency in English, principally with a view towards higher

education and employment. Several students said their parents encourage them to learn English because they consider it to be indispensable, regardless of whether they speak it themselves or not.

> *[Parents] strongly believe that English is an important asset and qualification for the rest of [students'] lives. [School leader, School A]*
>
> *In my case, my father does not speak English but he believes it is absolutely necessary. It's like schooling, it's mandatory, like you have to go to school and you also have to learn English. [Student, School C]*

### *Private language education is widespread in Greece and is considered essential*

It is common for students of all ages in Greece to attend private, non-formal education, particularly for English (Box 4.1.). All the students interviewed for the case study had studied English outside school, mostly in private language centres. Many started attending these schools in primary education and continued doing so. A school leader explained that students from almost all backgrounds participate in private language education in Greece, not just those with a socio-economically advantaged background.

#### Box 4.1. The role of private, non-formal education in English language learning in Greece

Students in Greece commonly attend afternoon and evening private education centres (*frontistiria*) or receive one-on-one tutoring *(idietera*) for foreign languages, particularly English. This is typically from early primary education onwards and mainly focuses on preparing students for language certification.

The *frontistiria* range from small, neighbourhood-based centres to large regional, national or even international franchised networks. They offer classroom-based education in small groups although low-cost providers may have larger groups. *Frontistiria* are licensed by the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports and inspected on opening. In contrast, the *idietera* are unregulated and, in some cases, operate in the shadow economy. There is no quality control process for either.

Attendance is widespread. In 2016, data from the Hellenic Statistical Authority revealed that around 1 million students in primary and secondary education attended lessons in *frontistiria* or received private tutoring for foreign languages. It was estimated that Greek families spend EUR 600 million every year on related tuition fees and books and another EUR 15 million on examination fees.

Although this type of non-formal education exists less "in the shadows" in Greece than in other countries, there are important implications for quality and equity. Research has found that the widespread existence of private language centres creates a demoralising effect on the public education system. In addition, despite being widespread, participation is not universal: students from the most socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, immigrant and refugee backgrounds and those living in very rural areas are unable to participate at the same rate as many of their peers.

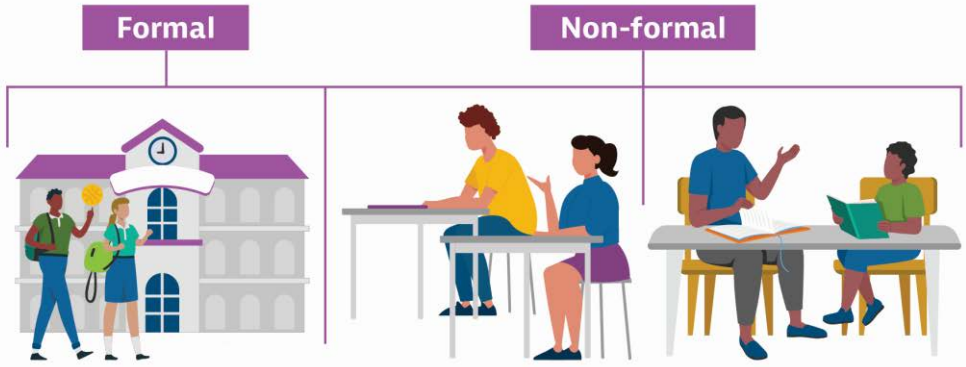
Sources: OECD (2018[11]); Liakos (2016[12]).

There are two types of private, non-formal English language education in Greece: attending lessons in private language centres or receiving private tutoring. Each has specific characteristics which differentiates it from the other and from typical English lessons in formal school education (Figure 4.2). Most of the students interviewed attend or had attended private language centres but a small number receive private tutoring at home either as their level has become more advanced (i.e. preparing for C1 or C2 certification) or because they prefer the personalisation or flexibility of one-on-one tutoring.

> *I realised that [the foreign language centre] was a bit like school, that even this private school was not adapted to my individual needs. So then I decided to get private tutoring and I am preparing my proficiency exam with a private tutor and I find this a much better option because all the time is for me. The teacher is dedicated to*

> *me and I can practice my oral skills for a longer time because the lesson is only for me. The lesson is adapted to my needs. [Student, School B]*

## Figure 4.2. Formal and non-formal learning contexts for studying English in Greece




| | Public school | Private education centre (frontistiria) | Private tutoring (idietera) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cost | None | Low-to-high | Medium-to-high |
| Accessibility | Universal | Dependent on financial resources and location | Dependent on financial resources |
| Goal | Broad education goals and upper secondary completion | Preparation for language certification | Personalised goals |
| Organisation of classes | Large, mixed-ability groups | Smaller, ability groups | One-to-one |
| Hours | 3 hours a week | 4-6 hours a week | Determined by student |
| Regulation | Regulation and quality assurance | Some regulation | No regulation |

Note: The information presented in the figure refers to typical characteristics of studying English in different learning contexts in Greece; certain schools, *frontistiria* and *idietera* will have different characteristics.

The biggest driver of private English language education in Greece is certification. While the public school system does not offer language certification, private language centres or tutors specifically prepare students to take internationally recognised examinations, or the state certificate of language proficiency. Among the interviewees, certification is seen almost as a rite of passage. A school leader explained that parents aim to help their children learn English at the highest level possible and obtain a certificate before they enter upper secondary school, at which point the focus turns to preparing for entry to university.

> *Families think that it's important that when their children get here, they will have "finished" learning English, they will have completed this "obligation". This is what I did with my own kids. [School leader, School B]*

However, such attitudes also come from the students themselves. Most of the interviewed students see the B2-level certificate as an essential entry ticket to tertiary education and employment. For others, a certificate at C1 or even C2 level is seen as necessary.

> *If you are looking for a job and you tell them that you know English, that doesn't mean anything for them, you need to show them your certificate. Otherwise, they might think that you just claim that you know it, that you are lying. Anyone can claim that, so it's like proof. I couldn't claim that I know English if I wasn't able to get the certificate. [Student, School B]*

Among participants, attitudes towards the prevalence of private language education and its impact on schooling were mixed. One teacher explained that the content, aims and approaches of teaching in each context are very distinct; where there is crossover, for example in grammar and vocabulary teaching, school lessons help students revise material learnt outside school. Some students agreed with the latter point, reporting learning most of their English in private education with school helping to consolidate it.

> *For me, the school supplemented the foreign language centre and made me implement what I had learnt there. [Student, School B]*
>
> *Everyone takes for granted that students' learning happens outside of school. Teachers do their best. But the rule is that students learn English outside of school. [Student, School A]*

However, other interviewees found the prominence of private education problematic. First, some teachers identified it as the key driver behind the wide gaps in student abilities in classes, particularly in the case of children whose families lack the financial means to put them in private education. One of the school leaders felt the system is indicative of mistrust between parents and the education system; one teacher questioned the integrity of the certification process.

> *[Parents] do not think that the school can offer their children the best possible education…This situation hurts us. It's really sad. [School leader, School A]*
>
> *We have [many] different B2 certificates [that are taken] in Greece today and some are rubbish… the kids who have them do not know English. Simple as that. They don't! They have a B2 certificate and they cannot communicate. [Teacher, School B]*

Some students wished that the school system was able to offer them everything they need so that they did not have to attend private language education. For example, some want the school to prepare them for language certification. Others want teaching and learning in school to be more like that in private language education whether that be in terms of the variety and quality of learning materials, the higher number of teaching hours, or the greater perceived effort to tailor the teaching to students' needs.

> *Public schools should offer certificates at the end of upper secondary education so that students wouldn't need to follow private education and pay to get their certificates. Schools should prepare students to obtain the certificate. [Student, School A]*

## How do 15-year-olds in Greece experience English in schools and classrooms?

### *English has an increasingly important place in the curriculum but students want more*

Greece has implemented several reforms in recent years which signal the importance of English in the school curriculum, such as lowering the starting age, increasing the number of hours in primary school and becoming compulsory across upper secondary education. Some of the 15-year-olds interviewed for this case study, who started learning English in Grade 3 (age 8), expressed that they wished they had also started in pre-primary school – or even earlier.

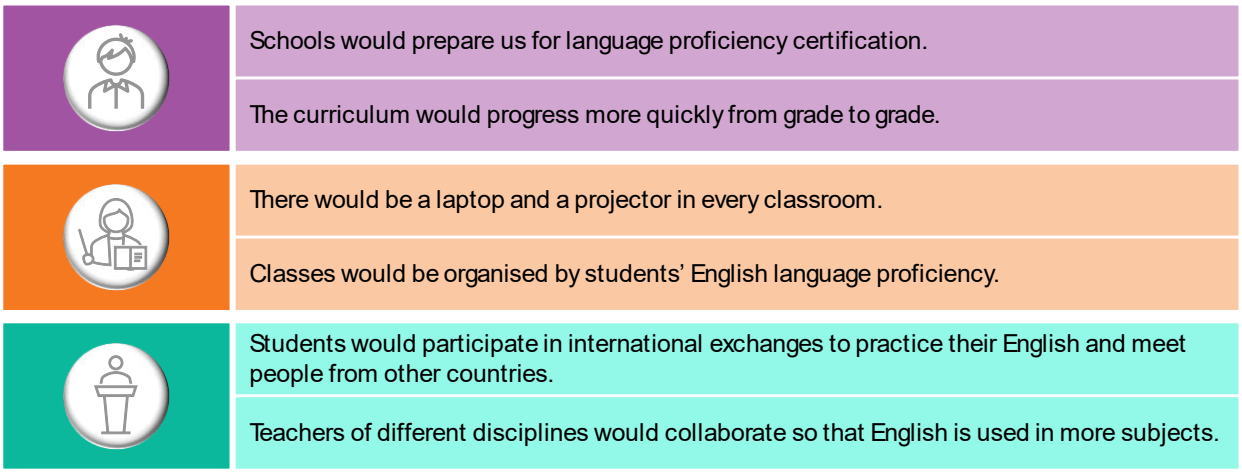
> *If I had started at age 4 it would be much easier to learn later. If we learnt English like we learn Greek, it would be as easy to learn English as it is to learn Greek. [Student, School C]*
>
> *If our parents could teach us English from a very young age, if they could speak to me [in English] when I was a baby, I would become bilingual and it would be extremely easy for me to speak English fluently. [Student, School C]*

Nevertheless, participants' views about the extent to which English is valued in school education in Greece were mixed. School leaders felt the subject is valued by the school community but gave different reasons. One cited the fact that English is now mandatory in upper secondary education and that there is continuity from the earliest age whereas, for other foreign languages, students may be forced to change language when transitioning from one school to another. Another felt that their school's engagement in international exchange programmes meant teachers of all subjects are encouraged to speak English and interact with international visitors. The school leader of the vocational school explained that students in all pathways have dedicated hours for practical English related to their specialisation. This gives English a unique position as it has a direct and explicit connection to other subjects and because the school then offers something that the private language centres do not.

Nevertheless, students and some teachers felt even more could be done to recognise the importance of English. These ideas were part of broader suggestions about how English learning could be improved in Greece (Figure 4.3). Some students felt teachers do not value English as much as other subjects, particularly because they know students get their certificates through private language education. Others saw the fact that so many students study English outside school as symptomatic of it not having a prominent enough place in the curriculum. For several, increasing the curriculum hours for English would help improve the quality of English learning at school and enable schools to "compete" with the *frontistiria*.

> *It is not considered as an important subject, like physics or mathematics, so there is little motivation to achieve more. The teachers know that some students have their certificates, so there is no further motivation. [Student, School A]*
>
> *We have three hours of English in the curriculum, which is not enough to make students like the language and learn the language. [Student, School C]*

### Figure 4.3. Teaching and learning English in Greek schools in a dream world




Note: The figure presents a selection of combined statements in response to the question: "In a dream world where everything is possible, what would you change about the way you teach/learn English at school?".
Source: Based on case study research conducted in three schools in Greece.

In comparison to other countries in Europe, the number of hours dedicated to foreign language instruction in primary education in Greece is high. However, in secondary education, Greece has among the lowest number of hours. This is reflective of the fact that Greek instruction hours for foreign languages follow an inverse pattern to that in other countries where more hours are typically allocated in lower and upper secondary education than in primary education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[8]).

The desire for more hours of English lessons is likely driven by the high value placed on English in Greek society but also because students seem to enjoy their English lessons in comparison to other subjects. Reasons given include finding it easy, important or more relevant; enjoying the opportunities it offers to learn about the world; and seeing English lessons as more fun, interactive or engaging than in other subjects.

> *I love learning English because it's a different way of dealing with new things in my life. When learning a new language, it's easier for me to learn new things, travel the world and communicate with [other people]. I love the language because it's easy. [Student, School A]*
>
> *We learn good things. It's not like the rubbish we learn in other subjects. I know this sounds too harsh, but I mean it. For example, the unit on social media we had the other day which was extremely interesting and the things we learnt might prove very useful in our lives... We can also speak freely during the lesson without any restrictions. [Student, School B]*

### *Teachers and students have mixed opinions regarding the four communicative skills*

Participating teachers had different views about which of the four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) they spend the most time on in lessons. One teacher said reading dominates, as reading and understanding texts is the basis of vocabulary work. The teacher added that although before reading a text there typically are some oral questions or conversation activities, only a few students participate in these. On the other hand, another teacher felt that speaking is the most practiced skill because the upper secondary curriculum focuses on the communicative approach and so texts are intended as a stimulus for conversation and debate. Across schools, students' impressions also differed: a few agreed that listening and speaking dominate to the detriment, in their opinion, of vocabulary and grammar teaching while others felt that lessons would benefit from more interaction.

> *I agree that we don't get a lot of new knowledge, for example new grammar, because there is this widespread idea in Greece that we learn outside school. [In school], we do more listening and speaking practice and the teachers speak English so that we get used to them. So, we have conversations and practice rather than get new knowledge. [Student, School B]*
>
> *It could be more interactive. The teachers could teach us only in English. Not just copy the vocabulary in the textbook. As adults we will need to talk English in our work life. So it should focus more on learning how to speak English, not just learning words. We need to speak in English. Speaking is real. [Student, School A]*

Responses also varied regarding which of the skills they find the most challenging to teach or learn. Two teachers felt that writing was the hardest skill, explaining that students adopt a translation approach (i.e. first thinking in Greek then translating into English), which makes the finished text unnatural, and that they lack motivation to write. A few students also identified writing because, along with speaking, it requires more effort than the receptive skills. One student disagreed, identifying writing as the easiest because it gives you time to think about accuracy and make corrections.

Several students and one of the teachers selected speaking as the most challenging skill. For the students, the effort required for speaking, the immediacy of it and the need to practice a lot to "master" it makes it difficult. A teacher explained that, because of the ways in which they engage with English outside school, students are less used to speaking English than reading or listening. However, this is not the same for everyone. Teachers in one school felt that their students are at ease with speaking and enjoy it. Some students from another school felt the same way.

> *Students are not used to speaking a lot in English. They don't practice it a lot. Perhaps they feel shy to speak, they are afraid they will make mistakes. Maybe they don't feel at ease to speak, maybe they lack confidence. [Teacher, School A]*

### *English teachers and students feel that large, mixed-ability classes pose challenges*

Students cannot be grouped by ability in upper secondary education in Greece. In the case study schools, teachers reported that mixed-ability English language classes can include proficiencies ranging from A1 to C2, although in the Model school, which has a selective admissions process, the range is more like B2 to C2. All participants acknowledged that the prevalence of private non-formal education intensifies this heterogeneity. The challenge may also be particularly intense in upper secondary education, as ability grouping exists in some lower secondary schools in Greece.

Participants identified a range of strategies used to address students' different needs. Two school leaders explained that students who are underperforming in English and other subjects, and whose parents agree, can receive an official diagnosis to determine whether they can receive extra support at school from a specialist teacher or other specific measures. Beyond this, support is the teacher's responsibility.

> *It is up to the English teacher in the classroom to divide the students by ability…and get them working in groups, so he differentiates the tasks according to their abilities, so that the stronger students are not bored and help the others. [School leader, School C]*

In School B, teachers explained that they use the school's virtual learning environment or emails to answer questions and provide more individualised support. Another teacher said that, if the student is motivated, they provide extra work. Teachers across schools described using differentiation approaches in class. This includes giving low-achieving students specific roles in group work, activities pitched at a lower level or more scaffolding for tasks (e.g. word banks or Greek translation). The teachers in one school emphasised the importance of creating a safe environment for these students and building their confidence.

> *We try to differentiate the tasks in a way that they can achieve something or if there's group work, for example, maybe they are the ones who write the cards, since they cannot form questions or something like that. So you give them something to do to make them feel part of the group and you try to motivate them in a way to try and do the best they can and we always try to praise them. [Teacher, School B]*
>
> *Personally, I differentiate my explanations, vary my rhythm of speech and my use of language so that everybody can understand. I use the Greek language although it's something I don't like doing in class but I have to. Otherwise, the child who doesn't know English is going to feel left out and become unmotivated. [Teacher, School C]*

While some students felt that their teachers are very supportive, patient and encouraging, others believe there is not enough time for teachers to respond adequately to all students' needs in a lesson. These students compared school lessons to lessons in private language centres or private tutoring where they feel they get more support and are less stressed.

> *I find grammar very, very difficult so there are a lot of things I don't understand, like "if" sentences. I ask questions but I almost never, most of the time, get the answers. [Student, School B]*
>
> *In a private lesson, the teacher is there just for you and she or he can explain everything you ask for. [Student, School B]*

Teachers also described efforts to support high-performing students in lessons by asking them to take on more responsibility by supporting other students, providing explanations or acting as the leader or spokesperson in group work. However, some teachers explained that they avoid giving them extra work as this can be perceived as being unfair.

> *We find ways to allow them to show that extra thing … but at the same time to learn that they have an obligation, in a way, towards the others. So, yes, you will be the person who speaks but, at the same time, you will help the others during the discussion. [Teacher, School B]*

School leaders and teachers also mentioned extra-curricular opportunities as a way of supporting high-performing students. Activities offered by the case study schools include writing articles in English for the school newspaper, Erasmus programmes, international exchanges and school trips, or opportunities to act as guides for tourists or visiting students. Although these are not exclusively for high-performing students, interviewees recognised that it is generally the most proficient who participate. These activities typically take place on the personal initiative of the teachers who can, in return, receive points for appraisal or career progression (up to a maximum of three) but are rarely remunerated.

Despite these efforts, the teachers interviewed unanimously felt that they would like to do more to support students with different needs but felt powerless to do so. This was either because they perceived the gaps between students to be too wide or because structural factors out of their control prevent them from taking more impactful measures. For example, one teacher felt that lesson time is too short and classes are too big. Some students also identified these as obstacles to receiving more individualised support.

> *I would definitely like to do more, but the available time is very limited. The teaching period is 40 to 45 minutes which is not always enough for me to do all the things I want. Especially in a public school. There is always someone who arrives late and it takes time for students to get out the books and be ready to start the lesson. (Teacher, School A)*

Many of the participants – school leaders, teachers and students – described wanting to be able to organise students by ability for English lessons. They saw this as a competitive advantage the private system has over public formal education. One of the students believed that ability grouping is the reason students learn more in private language centres. Two teachers explained that teaching in ability levels would also allow schools to prepare students for certification, eradicating the need for private institutions.

> *I want to get into a classroom and know that I am teaching "x" proficiency here. And then, next hour, I'm going somewhere where they don't know the alphabet so I'm bringing pictures… But now we need to cater to everyone. In my dream world I would be teaching levels, not classes. [Teacher, School C]*

## What resources support English teaching and learning in schools in Greece?

### *Good job opportunities and working conditions motivate people to teach English*

All the teachers interviewed in Greece have worked in various teaching contexts during their careers. This includes teaching English in formal (public and private) and non-formal education settings, as well as giving private tutoring. They have also taught students of different ages from kindergarten to adult education. Although the teachers recognised the differences between these contexts, they identified certain consistent elements, such as relationships with students, classroom management, and approaches to teaching vocabulary and grammar. They described the different experiences as enriching.

Participating teachers viewed the wealth of working contexts available to English teachers in Greece as a motivating factor for joining the profession. Nevertheless, all the teachers felt that working in the public education system is preferable, for a variety of reasons. First, working conditions are viewed more positively than in the private non-formal sector, where teachers mentioned not being paid on time, having to work many hours or being under a lot of pressure. In addition, some teachers described the teaching in private language centres as limiting due to the focus on preparing for certification.

> *In private institutions we were not always being paid on time or we didn't get all the benefits. Sometimes you get paid under the table. But you may have advantages like smaller classes. [Teacher, School B]*

> *Here I don't have this pressure. I don't have someone telling me, "You have to do this so that the kid gets the certificate". Here I have more freedom to actually work on the language and actually use it for communication purposes, to know why they use it, why they learn English. [Teacher, School C]*

As required in Greece, all the teachers had completed an English degree and a teaching qualification. Only two have permanent teacher status; the rest are contracted teachers working towards becoming permanent. They and their school leaders agreed that the restricted number of permanent teacher positions creates some instability, as it is common in many schools for positions to remain open at the beginning of the school year. There has been a considerable effort in recent years to appoint new permanent teachers, but the challenge remains (OECD, 2020[13]). In PISA 2022, 54% of principals in Greece reported that their school's capacity to provide instruction is hindered at least to some extent by a lack of teaching staff compared to the OECD average of 47% (OECD, 2023[14]).

### *The use of digital technologies is inhibited by a lack of or inadequate resources*

Digital technologies are used in English language teaching in each of the case study schools to varying degrees. In the Model school, teachers reported frequently using them and sometimes requiring students to use them, either with their mobile phones at school or as part of their homework. In contrast, teachers use digital technologies less frequently in the other two schools, largely because of gaps or poor quality in the schools' digital resources. In these schools, students are not allowed to use their mobile phones during lessons. In Greece, mobile phones are officially prohibited in schools; the teachers in the Model school described seeking exceptional permission to enable students to use their phones in the classroom.

All the teachers gave examples of using English language films, videos or music in their lessons to supplement material from the textbooks or the Item Bank. Teachers at two schools referred to using the online exercises and digital resources provided with the textbook. In the Model school, teachers described using online platforms such as Kahoot and Quizlet to introduce games to support learning or Escape Classrooms and digital comics to stimulate creativity.

Each school has a dedicated information and communications technology (ICT) laboratory which can be used by teachers of any subject although ICT lessons have priority. In addition, School C has a room dedicated to film or video projections which teachers can reserve as required. Similarly, School B has a dedicated space for hosting or participating in webinars, shared across all subjects, and used by English teachers for virtual exchanges. In this school, the English teachers had also pushed to have a dedicated classroom for teaching languages. This room is set up with the necessary technologies (e.g. teacher computer, speakers, projector, interactive whiteboard). Although other classrooms may have this equipment too, the teachers felt that having their own space gives them more ownership over the technology and means it is more reliable.

Several of the teachers also talked about using digital technologies to facilitate work-related tasks. For example, they referred to eClass, the digital learning platform, principally for secondary schools, provided by the ministry and which can be used for uploading content, setting up tasks or activities, and communicating with students. They also described using the Internet to support lesson planning.

All participants generally viewed the use of digital technologies in English language teaching and learning positively. One teacher explained that students seem to respond well to it and find it more engaging, partly because technology already plays such a big role in their lives. The students were also positive. Several said that digital technologies help make English lessons more interesting, dynamic and entertaining; one described it as breaking down the monotony of traditional teaching methods. Others felt that technologies help them better understand texts or learn new vocabulary.

> *When you read a text, it might be complicated or confusing but when you watch a video it is clearer and helps you understand better […] We were raised with this technology, our generation is used to [it], it's more interesting for us to watch a video than read a text, so it's easier for us to understand. [Student, School B]*

However, two teachers and one of the students emphasised the importance of finding a balance between digital and traditional approaches, and passive and active uses. Another student questioned the value of using digital technologies in English lessons.

> *Sometimes it is not very useful. For example, when we use Kahoot, some of the activities are not interesting and I feel we are wasting time. It's rather an opportunity for playing around and noise in the classroom and I don't think we learn anything useful by using it. [Student, School B]*
>
> *I think it is best if it's a combination of more traditional things and more modern things and there is something for everyone […] Students appreciate a teacher who wants to work whether they make extensive use of new technologies or not. [Teacher, School C]*

Greece has made numerous efforts in recent years to expand the use of digital technologies in school education. This includes initiatives related to enhancing the digital infrastructure and resources available in schools, programmes to increase teachers' digital competencies, and curriculum reform to better integrate digital skills transversally. Although progress has been made, efforts are ongoing and at least two of the schools participating in the case study continue to experience important digital resource challenges that constrain teachers' capacity to integrate them into their teaching. This includes an unreliable Internet connection, a lack of devices for students and equipment for teachers (e.g. laptops or tablets, interactive whiteboards, projectors), a lack of related training and, in one school, a lack of classroom space generally, which results in the ICT laboratory being used for regular lessons.

> *I have taken an ICT course for my Master's degree so I know that there are many things you can do. But it's not always easy in a public school to use technology. Often the Internet connection may be down, the computer may not be available and so on…there are practical problems every day. [Teacher, School A]*
>
> *Here I don't have problems in using technology, but I know that in other schools I would struggle to find a laptop because there might be only one which I would share, or there would be no video projectors, no whiteboards in the room. It would be difficult to use technologies. [Teacher, School B]*

### *Textbooks are seen as very important but some students want updates*

Textbooks are a crucial resource for all subjects in schools in Greece, including English. Teachers explained that they follow the set textbook, which in turn follows the national curriculum, and that all students have their own copy to work in. Generally, teachers perceive the textbooks positively, as a foundation to guide their teaching and students' learning and as having interesting material which is connected to students' lives.

Several teachers described the textbooks as providing a sense of security to the students both because they offer something physical for them to follow and because they help them see the longer term picture of their learning. One teacher also described it as a security mechanism for her.

> *Learning has also got to do with security. A student, having a text in front of them, gives them a reference point, it's security for them… It's something, I believe, that [the teachers] have all got used to and there is a reason we have got used to it. [Teacher, School C]*

However, some of the students were more critical and felt that the textbooks are not challenging enough. They drew comparisons with the materials available to them in private language centres and criticised the textbooks in school for not pushing them to reach a higher level or not preparing them for certification. Another small group of students felt that the curriculum or teaching content was repetitive, dull or that it did not advance quickly enough. Only one of the students interviewed reported having above-average English language proficiency in comparison to their classmates, so this is not necessarily a perspective held only by high-performing students.

> *At school they treat us as if we are younger. For example, at age 8 we might learn the alphabet, the colours and the numbers, but we could have learned something more advanced like tenses or other grammar and vocabulary […] They should raise the level of English we do. It goes very slowly at school. [Student, School B]*

Greece is currently working on updating the textbooks for English in upper secondary education to align with the introduction of the new Common Curriculum for Foreign Languages in upper secondary general schools (2023). These will aim to be more clearly based on the CEFR can-do statements and will include more up-to-date topics and materials, both printed and digital; the digital materials will be available on a dedicated digital platform or will be drawn from existing digital repositories of educational material. Greece will also introduce some choice for schools giving formal approval to two or three textbooks to allow teachers to choose a main textbook while also drawing material from the others via a digital platform.

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## Notes

[1] In upper secondary general education, students in Grades 10 and 11 have their English assessed in this way; there are no end-of-year examinations for English in Grade 12. In upper secondary vocational education, only students in Grade 10 have their English assessed in this way. There are no end-of-year examinations for English in Grades 11 and 12.

# 5 How 15-year-olds learn English in Israel

The OECD team visited Israel in June 2023 to explore how 15-year-olds learn English. This chapter presents findings from this case study visit and further research. It provides key information about the linguistic and educational context in Israel. It also describes the main findings from interviews with students, English teachers and school leaders, as well as observations of English lessons. The findings include insights into the interactions 15-year-olds have with English outside school, approaches to the teaching and learning of English in school, and the resources – including digital technologies – available to schools in Israel to support students to improve their English. The case study included schools from the Hebrew and Arabic state-education streams and a school from the state-religious stream.

## A snapshot of learning English as a 15-year-old in Israel

- **English is given strong emphasis in the Israeli school system** as a mandatory subject from Grade 3 onwards and with a significant weight in the final examination from upper secondary school. Students feel motivated to learn the language and perceive it as a prerequisite for pursuing a career, whether in Israel or abroad. This focus on English reflects its growing significance within parts of Israeli society, particularly in academic and business life, and for communicating with tourists and the important immigrant population.
- **Israel has implemented a level system for the instruction of English in upper secondary education** wherein each student strives to attain proficiency corresponding to levels A2, B1 and B2 of the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR). This level system groups students by ability and is seen as the foundation for offering targeted support, fostering student motivation and facilitating peer learning among students.
- **Schools in Israel can offer ambitious upper secondary students an elective three-year course called *Diplomacy and International Communication in English*.** Taught entirely in English, this innovative course builds on the content and language integrated learning approach. It integrates language learning with consensus building, conflict resolution and communication in a global world. English is not only the language of instruction but is also an essential learning component of the course due to its importance in international relations.
- **Some school staff in Israel find the shortage of English teachers a serious challenge to the teaching and learning of English**. In some schools this shortage results in larger class sizes. The shortage can also make it difficult to recruit teachers with the right combination of language proficiency and pedagogical training.
- **Opportunities for Israeli students to practice their English outside the classroom vary greatly.** Most Israelis encounter English in their daily lives through television or social media. But while some have few opportunities to practice their productive skills (speaking and writing) outside school, others have daily opportunities to do so with family or friends.

## Learning languages in Israel

### *The Israeli population speaks many different languages*

Hebrew is the official language of Israel. Since 2018, Arabic has special language status. Hebrew-speaking Jewish Israelis make up most of Israel's 9 million inhabitants. Arabic-speaking Arab Israelis account for around 20% and principally populate three distinct geographical areas: 1) the Galilee area in the north; 2) the "Triangle" in the central region; and 3) the Negev in the south. There are also several Jewish-Arab "mixed cities". Arabic is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world and is the official language of many countries in the Middle East, as well as in northern and eastern Africa. Hebrew is not widely spoken outside Israel.

Israel has a large share of foreign-born inhabitants. In 2019, international migrants accounted for 23% of its total population. Since then, the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine has led to a significant increase in immigration; in 2022, around 58 000 (0.6% of the population) new immigrants arrived from Ukraine and the Russian Federation alone (OECD, 2023[1]). Nevertheless, in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018, only 30% of 15-year-olds in Israel reported having contact

with people from other countries in their neighbourhood, compared to 38% on average across the OECD (OECD, 2020[2]).

Israel has a substantial Russian-speaking community as well as many Georgian and Ukrainian speakers. There are also notable Amharic-speaking and French-speaking communities (Aronin and Yelenevskaya, 2021[3]). In PISA 2022, 12% of 15-year-olds reported mainly speaking a language other than the language of the test (i.e. Hebrew or Arabic) at home, which was similar to the OECD average (OECD, 2023[4]).

English is so widely spoken in Israel that it has been said to have *de facto* official status (Aronin and Yelenevskaya, 2021[3]). It is often considered a high-status language frequently chosen for business and academic life and used in the public-facing content of state-run institutions. English language proficiency has been identified as a key factor in the large labour market gaps between Israeli Arab citizens and Israeli Jewish citizens, the Israeli Arab citizens typically having lower proficiency in English (OECD, 2023[1]).

The Israeli population is also exposed to English and other languages through tourism and tertiary education. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, around 4.9 million tourists visited Israel, with France, the Russian Federation and the United States as the leading countries of provenance. Many Israelis themselves travel internationally: in 2019, inhabitants made 9.2 million international departures from Israel (OECD, 2022[5]). In 2021, international or foreign students made up 5% of Israel's tertiary education enrolment, with important shares coming from France and the United States. In the same year, 6% of domestic tertiary students were enrolled abroad (OECD, 2023[6]).

Many Israelis are exposed to English on a daily basis. Foreign language television or film is typically subtitled rather than dubbed. Despite an increase in recent years, the Hebrew language film and television market is small, although the same is not true for Arabic language film and television (Reshef, 2020[7]). Israelis are also exposed to English through engaging with digital technologies: estimates indicate that 53% of known websites produce content in English, compared to just 0.5% for Hebrew and 0.6% for Arabic (Web Technology Surveys, 2023[8]).

### *All students in Israel are required to study English regardless of stream or school type*

In Israel, compulsory education begins in pre-primary school (typically age 5) and concludes at the end of upper secondary education (typically age 17/18). The modal grade for 15-year-olds is Grade 10, the first year of upper secondary education.

There are four main education streams in Israel. The two state-education streams, one with Hebrew as the language of instruction and the other with Arabic, are managed at the ministry level. The Arabic stream has three sectors (Arab, Bedouin and Druze). There is also a state-religious stream and an ultra-orthodox independent stream, both of which have Hebrew as the language of instruction, and which have their own sub-administration bodies inside the Ministry of Education (OECD, 2016[9]). Around 60% of students attend state-education schools, which teach the core curriculum. Around 20% attend state-religious schools, which follow an adapted core curriculum in which religious studies comprise 40% of the teaching hours. Within each sector, different types of upper secondary schools exist, including general academic schools, vocational or technological schools, science schools, schools for at-risk students, boarding schools, agricultural schools, and comprehensive schools that combine general and vocational or technological studies.

English is taught in all Israeli schools and is compulsory in the state-education (Hebrew- and Arabic-medium) and state-religious streams from Grades 3 to 12 (Figure 5.1). Some primary schools also choose to allocate two hours per week to English from Grades 1 or 2, at which point the focus is on spoken language and pre-reading programmes. This tends to be funded privately, so depends on the financial resources of the school or families (Aronin and Yelenevskaya, 2021[3]).

In schools in the Hebrew-medium streams, English is taught as a first additional language[1]; in the Arabic-medium schools it is taught as a second additional language as Hebrew is considered the first additional language. Given the diverse linguistic profiles of students in each of the streams, particularly Arabic-speaking students and first-generation immigrants, English can often be a learners' third or fourth language.

There are no national standardised assessments of English proficiency for all students in Israel. While upper secondary education is compulsory, the final matriculation examination, which leads to the certificate required for admission to tertiary education, is not. Only half of students attaining upper secondary education obtain a full matriculation certificate. The ministry supervises matriculation examinations, but obligatory subjects vary according to each school's orientation. Nevertheless, all students choosing to take the matriculation examination must take English, which includes an assessment of all four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing); further foreign languages are optional.

### Figure 5.1. Typical distribution of lesson hours for English in Israel in 2023

| | Primary | | | | | | Lower secondary | | | Upper secondary[1] | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grade | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| English | 2 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |

1. In upper secondary education, students typically have four hours of English instruction. However, local school-level decisions may be taken to add an extra hour if it is deemed necessary either pedagogically or as a result of staffing issues.
Notes: The modal grade and education level for 15-year-olds are outlined in black. Compulsory hours are presented in the shaded boxes.
Source: Based on national information reported to the OECD.

The English language matriculation examination exists at three levels: 1) a basic level of three study points equivalent to A2 level of the CEFR; 2) an intermediate level of four study points equivalent to B1; and 3) an advanced level of five study points equivalent to B2. Success in at least the three-point examination is required for achieving a full matriculation certificate. Alongside the examination, students must also present an end-of-year project based on independent work and research, which is discussed during the oral examination. In upper secondary education, as students work towards taking the examination at one of the three levels based on their ability, they are often divided into English classes according to their level of proficiency.

### *The case study visit to Israel*

In June 2023, the OECD Secretariat joined by Israeli national experts visited three schools in Israel. The schools were selected for their diverse characteristics which include being in different streams with different languages of instruction, locations (urban and semi-urban), and student-cohort characteristics (Table 5.1). However, the schools do not capture the full range of diverse experiences in Israel; case study findings should, therefore, be interpreted as illustrating the experiences of some students and teachers in Israel as opposed to being generalised nationally.

The findings presented in the remainder of this chapter are based on interviews with school leaders, English teachers and 15-year-old students in the case study schools; lesson observations; student activity logs; and short surveys administered to the interview participants. In addition, the analysis is informed by a country background report prepared by national experts from Israel. For further information on the methodology of the case study, see Chapter 1.

### Table 5.1. Key characteristics of the case study schools in Israel

| | | School A | School B | School C |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Location** | | Town | Urban | Urban |
| **Education level** | | Upper secondary | Upper secondary | Lower to upper secondary |
| **School type** | | General education<br>Arabic medium | General education<br>Hebrew medium<br>Single sex (boys) | General education<br>Hebrew medium |
| **Student cohort** | **In whole school** | 772 | 127 | 1 416 |
| | **In modal grade for 15-year-olds** | 275 | 35 | 248 |
| | **% of socio-economically disadvantaged** | 30% | 12% | 12% |
| | **% whose first language is not the language of instruction** | 0% | 7% | 2% |
| **Teacher cohort** | **In whole school** | 86 | 25 | 122 |
| | **Teaching English** | 12 | 4 | 16 |
| **Interviewees** | | School leader<br>Two English teachers<br>Six 15-year-olds | School leader<br>Three English teachers<br>Four 15-year-olds | School leader<br>Three English teachers<br>Four 15-year-olds |

Source: Based on information reported to the OECD by schools.

## How do 15-year-olds in Israel experience English outside school?

### *Students in Israel believe English will be important for their future lives*

Different factors motivate young people in Israel to learn English. The school system itself promotes the learning of English through the priority it gives to the language in the curriculum and examination system. English is a compulsory subject from Grade 3 onwards and has relatively important weight in the matriculation examination at the end of upper secondary school, which determines students' admission into higher education. Interviewees also reported that parents encourage their children to learn the language – sometimes by stressing its relevance, and sometimes by actively creating opportunities for them to use the language at home.

Perhaps most importantly, the interviewed students themselves were highly aware of the importance the language may have for their future studies and careers. Almost all the students reported that they will need English to pursue higher education – whether in Israel or abroad – or their career goals. These varied from becoming a pharmacist or doctor to becoming an actor or a comic book writer. Israel has a large service sector, led by a growing high-tech industry with high-skilled jobs that require English proficiency (OECD, 2018[10]); some students also mentioned this industry as particularly attractive for their future career.

> *I know that whatever I choose to study, I will need English for it. (Student, School C)*

However, contrary to their peers in other countries, for a typical upper secondary student in Israel, mandatory military service means that tertiary education and a career that require English may seem somewhat far in the future. Some students and teachers mentioned this as a factor that can reduce students' immediate motivation to learn English. After completing upper secondary school, Israeli men spend around three years in mandatory military service, and Israeli women two years. Israeli-Arab citizens are exempt. A teacher in School B, a Jewish religious boys' school, explained how this could impact the students' motivation to learn:

> *The kids here will often go to high-tech jobs, that is their goal. If they want to be successful, they need English for every job. But most kids go three years to the army when they graduate, so they don't have their career in mind yet. It's too far away. University and jobs are very far away. Their future is the army. (Teacher, School B)*

Through the interviews it was clear that it is the role of English as a global lingua franca – rather than the specific countries in which it is spoken – that motivates the students to learn it. All interviewed students referred to English as a tool to communicate with people all over the world, a tool that opens doors and gives them opportunities wherever they go. They said they appreciated learning about the culture of English-speaking countries in school, but found that this is less important than the role English plays as a language to communicate across cultures.

> *The point of learning English is so I can speak it and use it wherever I am in the world. (Student, School C)*

### *There is large variation in opportunities to practice productive skills outside school*

The interviews conducted for this case study indicate that there are large variations in the extent to which young people in Israel can practice or improve their English in their daily lives outside school. While some Israelis grow up in families where English is used at home or use the language during study trips or holidays abroad, others are restricted to a more passive use, with particularly few opportunities to speak or write the language outside school.

The variation in exposure to English reflects cultural and socio-economic differences in Israel. A student at School A reported that she had been to English language summer schools in Paris and London, where she had met and established friendships with young people from different European countries. She felt that this experience and continued communication with these friends had helped her become almost fluent in English. However, this type of opportunity to practice English is limited to students whose parents have the financial means to send them abroad.

Other disparities are more related to cultural or linguistic background. In a country with a large immigrant population, it is not uncommon that students from across different socio-economic backgrounds live with one or more parents that are native English speakers or have relatives abroad that are. Several interviewed students gave examples of this type of opportunity. However, even for students who do not have native English-speaking relatives, the family can be an important source of exposure to English. Students reported different examples of family members who encourage the use of English at home, driven by awareness of its importance for future life opportunities. A student from School A reported that her mother encourages her to read in English, including by subscribing to the Jerusalem Post, Israel's largest English language newspaper, which has a "light" version in English for learners. Another student, from School B, reported that his older brother had introduced the use of English in the family to improve their language skills:

> *With my big brother I only speak English. He only communicates to me in English because he wants me to learn it, even though he speaks Hebrew. He also speaks English with the rest of the family. He knows how important it is to be able to communicate, to go abroad and live elsewhere. It has improved my English a lot. I speak Hebrew with my parents and English with my brother. But if my brother is around, we all speak in English. (Student, School B)*

Many students, however, have no one to practice their spoken English with outside school. Their exposure to English is restricted to films, television or social media posts and with very infrequent opportunities to use their productive skills in English. For these students, random encounters with tourists or other people who do not speak the same language can serve as a rare opportunity to practice their spoken English. Students highlight these encounters, although only brief and occasional, as indicating the importance of English as a tool to communicate with people from across the world.

For young people with an Arabic background, English can also serve to communicate with the Jewish majority population. While Arabic students learn Hebrew in school and need the language for many daily purposes, the staff at School A explained that some are better at English than at Hebrew and that English has a high social status. A student at this school explained that she watches movies in Hebrew with English

subtitles, to better understand what is being said. She also explained that she and her friends sometimes use English in the shopping centre to speak with Hebrew-speaking shop assistants:

> *When we go to the mall, sometimes we can't use Hebrew because we forget the words, so we use English instead. Sometimes the saleswomen think that we are foreigners. (Student, School A)*

At the same time, given that for many children and young people in Israel, whether in Arabic-medium education or with an immigrant background, English is a second or third additional language, increasing English exposure outside school may not always be considered a priority among students and their families. For example, School B encourages students to focus on practising their Hebrew more than their English outside of school, as not all students are considered to have the necessary level of Hebrew.

### *Private tutoring is used by some students in Israel but is not encouraged by teachers*

Based on the interviews with students and teachers, there appear to be wide differences in the extent to which Israeli students use private tutoring outside school to improve their English. Teachers and students explained that private tutoring can be expensive and that parents take different decisions when it comes to prioritising tutoring. None of the teachers actively encourage private tutoring; some explained that they discourage parents from paying for their children to take lessons outside school as the school provides the teaching that is needed.

Of the three case study schools, private tutoring was more common in School A – the Arabic-speaking school – and in School C, a Hebrew-speaking secondary school in an affluent suburb. None of the interviewed students in School B had received private tutoring in English. Students at School C explained that their use of private tutoring was motivated by an interest in advancing their English rather than specific learning issues. A teacher at School A explained that:

> *Parents invest a lot of money to send their kids to private schools to improve English. Whenever the kids have a certain exam, most of the kids go. Even parents that don't have money invest in this. A lot of people from this town pay a lot of money to make sure their kid will be an English speaker. It is connected with high status to speak English, and it prepares them for university. Maybe 40-50% of kids receive additional classes outside of school. It is not always in an institution; it can also just be an English teacher in town who offers private tutoring. The private tutoring outside of school is mostly for maths and English because the grades in these exams are important for getting into college or university. (Teacher, School A)*

### *Nearly all students are exposed to English through mass media and social media*

Television, film and other mass media were identified as a common source of English exposure for students from all schools that participated in the case study. Sometimes the content they wish to watch is only available in English; other times they make an active choice to watch in English to improve their language skills, or because their parents encourage them to do so. The teachers notice the impact that students' exposure to films and videos have on their progress in learning English:

> *A lot of them watch YouTube or Netflix. This is why they have a good level of English [...] A few weeks ago I asked the students to give me a word that explained something. A student gave a whole expression from Breaking Bad that he had seen outside of school. It was very clever. (Teacher, School B)*

Students also reported that this type of exposure to English helps them learn the language. When asked what activity is most important for learning English, one student responded:

> *Movies. Music. Podcasts. Listen and repeat. (Student, School A)*

Social media are another common source of English exposure. However, compared with series and films, students and teachers perceived that the impact of social media on learning English is limited. Rather,

social media seems important as a window into a global world where English is a predominant language, therefore providing motivation to learn the language.

Nevertheless, in some cases, students reported examples of translanguaging on social media where they mix their native Hebrew or Arabic with words in English, and without the need to aim for grammatical accuracy. This also happens in face-to-face interactions. A teacher at School A, the Arabic-medium school, reported that the students' habit of integrating English when communicating among themselves serves to signal sophistication and social status.

Online games are another common source of exposure to English. Some students reported connecting with players abroad and communicating with them in spoken and written English. Others reported playing with friends from their own school where the exposure to English is limited.

> *There are games where teenagers from all over the world play together. We meet friends through these games. I have a friend from Spain that I met two years ago through a game. We communicate [in English]. Sometimes we write, sometimes we send voice messages, and sometimes we call each other. (Student, School A)*
>
> *I play video games where the game is in English – the instructions and everything is written in English. But I play with my friends, they are friends here, so I don't talk in English. (Student, School C)*

## How do 15-year-olds in Israel experience English in schools and classrooms?

### *English is mandatory and each student studies towards one of three proficiency levels*

English is part of the core curriculum in Israel. The subject curriculum includes a focus on all four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing), expanding vocabulary and developing conversational skills as well as writing using diverse syntactic structures and reading exposure to works of different genres. The goals are to enable students to use English throughout their adult lives, and to encourage active and meaningful learning in their fields of interest.

Each upper secondary student in Israel studies towards a certain level for the matriculation examination. Students, teachers and school leaders participating in the case study made frequent references to this level system, as it impacts and structures the teaching of English for 15-year-olds. Students can increase their level as their proficiency progresses. Participants reported that this system provides a structure for targeting support to students and for motivating them to progress. Students are typically grouped by ability according to these levels, with different schools using different systems to conduct this grouping, according to the available resources.

> *When the students arrive in Grade 7, we have a test to see what level they have. They can jump up whenever they want. There is a test every year at the beginning of the year. If someone has moved to a higher level, they will move to that class. We want everyone to reach 5 points [i.e. the highest level]. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *Some time into the year we divide the students into 3, 4 or 5 points. And all the time they have the opportunity to move from one to another. (Teacher, School A)*

This assigned level also determines the course content and learning goals, with the teaching focusing on preparing students for the final examination.

> *One class is considered "four-pointers". The entire class is prepared for the same exam. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *Much of what we teach is dictated by the Ministry of Education. I need to get my students to pass the exam. I follow the instructions. (Teacher, School C)*

### *Students find speaking and writing English more challenging than reading and listening*

Most of the interviewed students found that the receptive skills (reading and listening) are easier to learn and use. Some students practice reading in their daily lives with books or movies subtitled in English; others prefer to listen to English. In addition, teachers give some prioritisation to reading due to the emphasis on reading comprehension in the matriculation examinations. One teacher felt that there is less need to focus specifically on teaching listening skills due to students' exposure to English outside school.

> *They listen to music and video clips, and they understand what is being said. So we don't need to teach listening comprehension anymore. It is integrated into a more natural part of the communication we teach. (Teacher, School C)*

Students reported that the productive skills (speaking and writing) are more difficult, and teachers often reported spending the most time on these skills. The challenge with writing could be related to different grammar, syntax and spelling in English compared with Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Arabic. A teacher explained that it can be difficult for students to write a single paragraph due to the considerable differences between the languages. A student echoed:

> *Writing is the most difficult for me. I need to know which word to choose, and the spelling and grammar can be confusing. Most of the writing I see in my everyday life is in Hebrew or Arabic. I don't see so much how English is written, other than on my phone. (Student, School A)*

Speaking is perceived to be equally difficult due to the lack of opportunities to practice spoken language in some students' everyday life. Students who have English-speaking relatives or those following specific programmes that offer more speaking opportunities, such as the *Diplomacy and International Communication in English* programme (Box 5.1), are an exception to this. Nevertheless, when asked to identify something that they wish to change about the way they teach or learn English, teachers and students had very clear ideas, most of which related to supporting more spoken interaction (Figure 5.2).

Recent changes to the design of the matriculation examination may help teachers to include more speaking activities, as the oral assessment has become more rigorous. This module used to be conducted by teachers from another school for which students would prepare something in advance. The school leader in School B reported that the introduction of a digitised oral examination for which students cannot predict the specific content has strengthened the students' focus on developing their speaking skills.

> *With the computerised listening and speaking test, the students cannot memorise stuff in advance because they don't know what they will be asked. It has forced them to work differently. It has increased their level of speaking. (School leader, School B)*

Participants identified several ways in which they are already trying to promote speaking. Teachers explained that they make efforts to encourage the students to use the language actively by conducting the lessons entirely in English. In School A, an Arabic-speaking school with high ambitions for the students' English language proficiency, students reported that they learn the art of debate in English and participate in local and national competitions. A student also explained that they develop speaking skills through drama in English lessons.

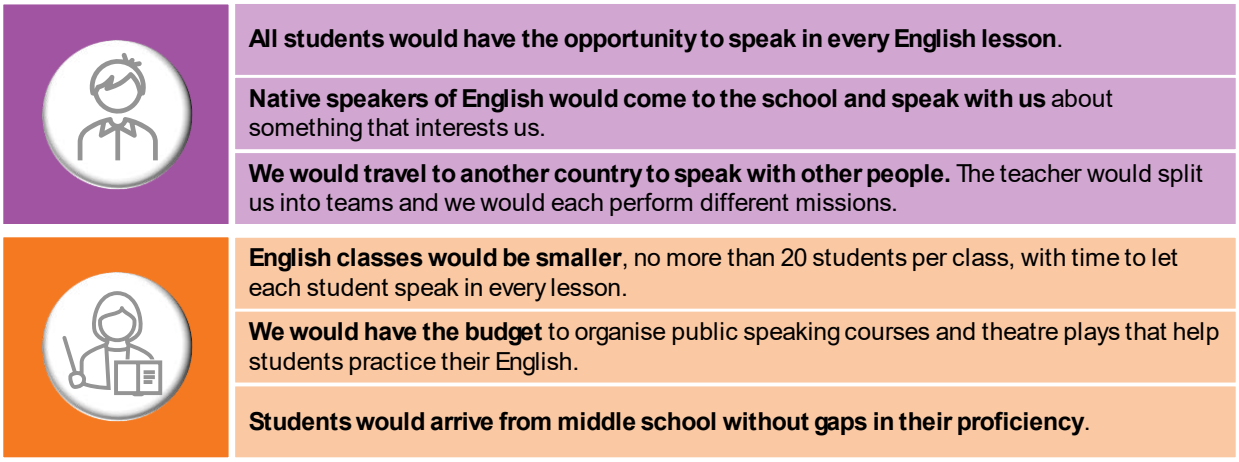
> *When we study a certain play, we really act it, and this way we understand it very well. (Student, School A)*

However, teachers in School C reported that making students speak English can be difficult because many are shy to do so in front of other students. Sometimes this causes teachers to choose to focus on other skills.

> *Speaking is the skill we spend less time on because the students are too shy to speak. In junior high school we try to get them to talk. But most prefer to answer in Hebrew. They are afraid of what the other students will think. We just did a book report with the 9th graders. It had to be done one-on-one because the students were too shy to speak in front of others. (Teacher, School C)*

School B has developed a programme to strengthen students' speaking skills outside lesson time using native English speakers from the neighbourhood. These are retired people without a teaching background, who come and speak with the students to practice communication skills and make learning more engaging. Some of these volunteers do not speak Hebrew, so students are forced to communicate with them in English. Before COVID-19, the school had a group of native English speakers dedicated to supporting students with high proficiency levels, but this was no longer in place at the time of the school visit.

### Figure 5.2. Students and teachers in Israel share their ideas about the perfect English lesson




Note: The figure presents a selection of combined statements in response to the question: "In a dream world where everything is possible, what would you change about the way you teach/ learn English at school?".
Source: Based on case study research conducted in three schools in Israel.

### *Some teachers feel large class sizes restrict their capacity to meet students' needs*

Israel has large disparities in academic performances, as shown in PISA 2022, where both the variation between and within schools in 15-year-olds' performance in mathematics are above the OECD average (OECD, 2023[4]). The interviews with school staff about English teaching reflected these data, as teachers reported having to cover a wide range of English proficiencies and individual student needs.

> *The level of English here varies because there are students that are not on the same level – socially and economically. We do our best to raise the level of the students, so the level becomes more than good. We encourage them to be ambitious to do a higher level [of the matriculation exam]. (School leader, School A)*

This challenge is amplified where classes are large, and the availability of English teachers is limited. The average class size in lower secondary education in Israel is among the highest in the OECD at 28 students (OECD, 2021[11]). In the upper secondary schools visited as part of this study, the number of students was reported to reach 35-40 per class. Students and teachers alike referred to large class sizes as a hindrance to learning English and smaller classes was one of the most common responses when students and teachers were asked what they feel could improve English learning.

> *One of the worst things in Israel is that the classes are too big. The teachers were happy during COVID when the lessons were in smaller groups. The shy girls and the unpolite boys started speaking and behaving well because they felt they were getting attention. (School leader, School C)*

### *English teachers in Israel support students who are underachieving in various ways*

In Israel, one of the most common ways to support students that are falling behind is to give them extra lessons in small groups or one-to-one. Teachers in upper secondary schools are required to devote six

lessons a week to individual instruction. In some schools this is particularly targeted at students who are almost eligible to move from Level 4 to Level 5. The teachers map the students by ability and provide specialised lessons for those that need help. However, the extent of this practice depends on the resources available and can be difficult to organise where there is a shortage of English teachers.

> *I used to teach in another school with fewer students in a group. Here we have up to 40 students in the classroom. It is a problem to reach out to the students. We test them and map them, so we can see exactly where they stand. We offer them hours where they can work with a teacher in a small group, but there are not many hours like that, and we cannot take the students out of other classes to do that. (Teacher, School C)*

English teachers in Israel generally reported a high level of involvement in their students' progress, especially for underperforming students. They gave examples of offering virtual meetings after school if there is something the students do not understand, or offering extra one-to-one or small-group support outside of regular school hours.

> *I tell my students that what matters to me is that they work and that they care. If they work, then there will be progress. I don't care about the grade, but I care about them progressing. That motivates them. Whenever a student doesn't understand something, I will explain it again and again and again. At the end of the lesson, the kids will come and ask for further practice. Sometimes I will have a Zoom meeting with them after school about a topic that they don't understand. (Teacher, School B)*

In some schools, teachers take advantage of students' different proficiency levels to promote peer learning. They divide students into heterogenous groups where the advanced students help the less advanced. A student in School A reported that this practice works well both for understanding the content and for reducing discipline problems. The school leader of School B reported that peer learning among students was used to support those that are almost reaching Level 5 to move up. School A, which is the only school in this study without severe problems recruiting English teachers, also organised for a second teacher to attend certain lessons to provide differentiated teaching in support of low-performing students.

### *High-performing students advance through special programmes where available*

The teachers in all the schools visited for this study explained that they also provide attention and support to students who are outperforming their classmates in English. Teachers gave examples of giving extra activities and challenges to ensure that the highest performing students continue to develop. Some schools use occasional ability grouping based on the level that students aim for in the matriculation examination. Other schools provide more comprehensive programmes that give the highest performing students a space to further develop their communicative skills. The most notable example is the *Diplomacy and International Communication in English* major offered at School A. This is an ambitious three-year course for upper secondary education, which is taught entirely in English and attracts high-performing students (Box 5.1).

> *The advanced students have the Diplomacy programme where everything is more challenging. (Student, School A)*
>
> *In Diplomacy we use English for many different topics, the economy, etc. Everyone who wants to progress and be a 5-pointer [in the matriculation examination] goes to the Diplomacy course. (Student, School A)*

However, in some schools, teachers reported that the possibility to offer ability grouping or individually targeted activities for high-performing students is limited by a lack of teachers and large classes. In School C, a school in an affluent suburb, the school leader reported that there has been an increase in students seeking private tutoring outside school, from around 50% to around 70% because an acute shortage of English teachers had impacted the quality of teaching in school. Private tutoring offers smaller classes and is, therefore, often perceived as better supporting the low-performing students and those who wish to progress to the highest levels.

### Box 5.1. Supporting advanced English language learning through an elective course in Israel

Schools in Israel can offer students in upper secondary education a three-year elective course: *Diplomacy and International Communication in English*. The course prepares them to study and work in a global world. It aims to give them practical leadership skills, the mastery of consensus building and a high level of open-mindedness. It is offered mostly in Hebrew-medium schools, but also in some Arabic-medium schools.

The course is taught in English to reflect that English is the predominant language for international communication, both in diplomacy and in day-to-day interactions with people from different nations and cultures. The course is not specifically related to the anglophone world but focuses on English due to its role as a global lingua franca.

The course builds on the content and language integrated learning approach, which aims to enable learners to encounter language in context and use it for authentic communication. But the course also goes beyond traditional content and language integrated learning programmes which seek to develop students' language skills through teaching other school subjects such as mathematics or history in a foreign language. In *Diplomacy and International Communication*, English is both the language of instruction and an essential component of the learning content, as it is the dominant language of international relations.

The course covers up to 450 lesson hours over three years. *International Communication* is the core subject, taking up three hours per week and aiming to develop students' interpersonal and intercultural abilities. Teachers can adapt the course curriculum as necessary given that it centres on current events and the use of authentic materials. This may include, for example, Socratic seminars in which students reflect on a current affair in depth and uncover its embedded cultural assumptions.

Students choose one of two elective extension subjects with an additional three hours per week in Grades 11 and 12. These are *Conflict Management and Resolution*, in which students learn to work through conflicts at all levels, both interpersonal and between communities and nations, and *Translation Skills*, which strengthens students' advanced language skills and their understanding of socio-cultural context during translation.

The *Diplomacy and International Communication* major culminates with an examination that is generally considered challenging and requires schools to provide extensive preparation. All students taking the course sit the matriculation examination for the International Communication component, and within each extension, students complete internally assessed summative tasks.

Source: Ministry of Education (2020[12]).

While the students in need of extra challenge appreciate the activities their schools offer, some explained that they would like to be challenged further. At School C, a student reported that she would like more ability grouping or specific programmes for students who are highly proficient and/or motivated. Another explained that he would like the teachers to only speak English in class and to require the students to only answer in English. Yet another student – who had a non-Hebrew speaking family member and would thus often speak English with family members at home – explained a challenge that may be common to other native or almost native speakers of English in Israel:

> I slept through a lot of English lessons throughout the schooling. I was better than the rest of the class, like many other students, so there was little to learn in class. (Student, School C)

## What resources support English teaching and learning in schools in Israel?

### *English teachers in Israel are generally happy with their training*

All eight English teachers interviewed for the case study had received the national teacher certification and all except one was specifically qualified to be an English teacher. The teachers at School A had Arabic as their mother tongue while the teachers at Schools B and C had Hebrew as their mother tongue, except one teacher who had emigrated to Israel around 18 years earlier and speaks Hebrew fluently. Two of the teachers had studied or worked in an English-speaking country for more than a month during their life.

The participating English teachers were generally satisfied with their initial training, which provided a combination of theory and practical learning. But they also reported that some of the essential classroom skills (e.g. how to deliver material to the class, how to establish respectful relationships with students) are only learnt in practice during the first years in the profession. The English teachers reported they have had to continue learning throughout their careers as the subject evolves, including with the increased availability of digital tools. A teacher at School B summarised some of the challenges of being an English teacher, but also the rewards:

> *Reinventing yourself keeps you on your toes. You have to keep up with the latest developments and inventions. In the six years from 7th grade to graduation, you see how the children grow. It's challenging – you have to do something that caters to them pedagogically and emotionally. You can see them evolve. It's very rewarding. (Teacher, School B)*

One of the teachers also reported that students' increased exposure to English outside of school has had an impact on what is expected from him as a teacher. Students are becoming more motivated to learn and expect more from their English teachers.

> *Today, if you come to class and you are not well prepared as a teacher, you will have a difficult time. Today, the kids use English a lot on social media, and everything you say, you should be careful not to say something wrong, the students are more critical. (Teacher, School A)*

### *Some schools are heavily impacted by a shortage of English teachers*

Israel has a significant problem with teacher shortages, including for English. Data from PISA 2022 reveal that nearly half (46%) of principals in Israel find that their school's capacity to provide instruction is hindered at least to some extent by a lack of teaching staff (OECD, 2023[13]). The school leader of School B referred to the current situation as "a catastrophe"; the school leader of School C similarly referred to it as "a disaster".

Educators at these two schools gave examples of the impact that teacher shortages have on English teaching and learning. Shortages result in increased class sizes, as schools need to fit more students to each available teacher. This means fewer opportunities to target teaching to students' individual needs, and a higher turnover of teachers, which impacts students' learning and motivation.

> *A classic example is last year we had to take on a new English teacher. It was not a successful year. The students lost their motivation. Now the teachers have to remotivate the students and make up for the loss of learning. (School leader, School B)*

The impact of teacher shortages depends on different factors, including the school location and specialisation. At School A, an Arabic-speaking school, the principal reported only minimal problems with teacher shortages. The school has, with some success, encouraged high-performing students to pursue a university degree in English and then return to the school as teachers. At School C, on the other hand, staff reported the most substantial problems with recruiting and retaining English teachers due to the high cost of living in the local area and the availability of higher paid jobs for proficient English speakers in the

high-tech industry. The principal explained that the school can only attract either native English speakers without teacher training, or trained teachers with low English language proficiency.

### *Digital technologies are predominantly used to increase student engagement*

Teachers in the case study schools generally find they have sufficient digital resources available for their teaching. Many classrooms are equipped with a computer and a screen or electronic whiteboard, which the teachers use to show presentations with the agenda and keywords for the lesson, small video clips, or quizzes.

The interviews with teachers demonstrated variation in the use of digital tools and in the perception of how valuable the tools are for the teaching process. Most, but not all, teachers reported using digital tools in their teaching, particularly for showing clips of films or videos connected to the literature pieces they are studying, and to assess learning progress through mobile phone applications, sometimes as homework, sometimes in class. A teacher at School A explained how the use of videos and mobile applications to instantly assess student progress has increased motivation and engagement:

> *The first year at the school I taught literature right out of the book without multimedia. The kids were not that excited. They got bored and wanted to finish as fast as possible, and the next week they didn't remember what they had learned. The year after I played a short clip of the film version of the book and followed up with a Quizzly on the phones, where the kids have to answer questions about the literature piece. They were excited and engaged. The same piece of literature – but everything changed because of the digital tools. (Teacher, School A)*

A teacher in School C reported integrating the latest technologies to engage the students. She explained that she would ask students to write an essay with ChatGPT, then calibrate the essay to what was needed in class. When teaching a story, she had asked the students to use an artificial intelligence (AI) text-to-image generator to create a picture of the main character in the story then share it with classmates to stimulate conversation. During the lesson observations, teachers also used different types of technology, including AI tools, to engage students in their learning in class or their independent study at home (Figure 5.3).

On the other hand, a teacher in School B described herself as "old-school" and said that though she would use the Internet as a source to create quizzes, and the homework she gave sometimes required the use of the Internet, she only occasionally uses technology within lessons.

> *I believe in old-fashioned teaching, not using digital tools (...) During the pandemic we used digital technologies more – because we had to. But in class I don't see the need for it. Sometimes we watch a movie in class. If we are reading a short story, it can be helpful to watch the movie, but other than that I don't feel it's useful. (Teacher, School B)*

The English textbooks in Israel are available in both print and digital form. The students in one school explained that they can choose which version to use, while in another school the English teacher had decided to only use digital textbooks in class.

> *I use digital books in class. It's the textbook available in digital form. All the books we have I put them on the screen. I use listening where the students can hear other voices. I can do it slower so they can see in writing what they are listening to. (Teacher, School B)*

The variation in the extent to which digital tools are used in Israel seemed to reflect that schools and teachers are struggling to find the right balance in the use of new technology. Mobile phones are allowed for certain class activities in one school, but not allowed at all in another school. A teacher in School C explained that she was using digital tools in response to students' relentless phone use.

> *They are teenagers, they are addicted to their phones. They are using it all the time. Instead of fighting it, I am trying to embrace it. (Teacher, School C)*

## Figure 5.3. The use of digital technologies in case study lessons in Israel

| | School A | School B | School C |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| **What digital technologies were used?** | • **Desktop computer**<br>• **Projector**<br>• **Video clips** | • **AI picture generator**<br>• **Virtual learning environment** | • **Desktop computer**<br>• **Projector**<br>• **Game-based learning platform**<br>• **Mobile devices** |
| **How did the teachers use them?** | The teacher used the desktop computer and projector to show a video clip which stimulated a class discussion. | The teacher did not use digital tools in the lesson. | The teacher used the desktop computer and projector to show an electronic presentation in the lesson. |
| **How did the students use them?** | The students did not use digital tools in the classroom. | For homework, the students will use an AI image generator to create an illustration of an innovative product, then upload it to the virtual learning environment and "sell" it in the next lesson. | At the end of the lesson, students used their mobile phones to complete a quiz on a game-based learning platform. Students' results were displayed in real time and responses discussed. |

Note: AI: artificial intelligence.
Source: Based on case study research conducted in three schools in Israel.

At School B, the school leader explained that while the school makes digital tools available, each teacher can determine the pedagogical value of using the tools. The school leader also explained that the use of technologies can go too far.

> *One of the conclusions from the COVID-19 period is that the most important resource in learning is the teacher and the connection with the teacher – not the computer. […] Each classroom is equipped with a computer and a screen, sometimes the teachers use them, sometimes not. [...] We don't see digital tools as something of value in themselves, but if a teacher wants to use them, we want them to be able to do it. We have had some in-school training on the use of digital tools, for all teachers, not just for English teachers. But it's not something we are pushing in particular. (School leader, School B)*

Overall, the main argument for using digital tools appears to be engagement. Teachers and students alike use terms such as *"exciting"*, *"a motivation"* or – simply – *"a change"* to describe the use of films, video clips or AI tools. An exception is the mobile phone applications to assess learning progress, which all interviewed students had experience with, and which are seen as valuable in themselves.

> *I think these tools are useful because they let me know where I am and where I stand. (Student, School C)*

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## Notes

[1] Throughout this report the phrase "additional language" is used to refer to any language that is not the learner's first language and/or the language of instruction. This term encompasses "foreign languages" (i.e. a language that is not an official language in the learner's country) and official languages or those with special status in countries which formally recognise more than one language.

# 6 How 15-year-olds learn English in the Netherlands

In June 2023, the OECD visited three schools in the Netherlands to interview students, English language teachers and school leaders about how 15-year-olds learn English. This chapter presents the key findings from these visits and wider evidence. First, it gives an overview of the Dutch context, including people's exposure to different languages and the key characteristics of the education system. It then explores how students in the Netherlands experience English outside school and their attitudes towards mastering English. Next, the chapter describes approaches to teaching and learning English in schools and the ways in which students with different needs are supported. Finally, the chapter considers the resources available in Dutch schools to support English language learning and how these resources, including digital technologies, are used.

## A snapshot of learning English as a 15-year-old in the Netherlands

- **English inhabits the everyday life of many 15-year-olds in the Netherlands**, and they recognise its value particularly for economic and educational purposes. There is some wider discussion however, as to the effect the prevalence of English is having on the learning of Dutch and other foreign languages.
- **Schools and teachers in the Netherlands have a lot of curricula and pedagogical freedom**. With regards to English, this can cause challenges, such as a wide range of proficiency in the first years of secondary education. However, it also offers opportunities for greater differentiation and creativity in the classroom, and for more personalised programmes.
- **All students in the Netherlands take a national examination in English at the end of upper secondary education**. This means the final years of English instruction are somewhat oriented to examination preparation, including a focus on reading skills.
- **Despite high proficiency levels, many students would like more opportunities to develop their speaking skills**. School leaders and teachers also wish to provide more real-life speaking opportunities, including with native English speakers through international exchanges. This mirrors a broader emphasis on internationalisation in education in the Netherlands, supported by a dedicated organisation, Nuffic.
- **Teaching is not always the first career choice of English teachers in the Netherlands**. However, they are generally satisfied with their job. They particularly enjoy interacting with young people and the opportunities for creativity that teaching English offers.

## Learning languages in the Netherlands

### *The Netherlands is a multilingual and multicultural country*

The official language of the Netherlands is Dutch, spoken by most of the 17.5 million inhabitants. There are also three official regional languages: Frisian (north), Lower Saxon (north-east) and Limburgish (south-east). Meanwhile, according to self-reports, 5% of the adult population typically speaks a dialect and 8% a foreign language, most commonly Turkish, English and Moroccan/Berber. In total, for around one in four people living in the Netherlands, Dutch is not the main language of communication at home (Statistics Netherlands, 2022[1]).

In 2021, 14% of the population was foreign-born and nearly 12% of those born in the Netherlands had a foreign-born parent (OECD, 2022[2]). Most foreign nationals were born in the Republic of Türkiye (8%), Suriname (7%) or Morocco (7%) (Statistics Netherlands, 2023[3]). This means classrooms are linguistically diverse: in in the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018, one in four Dutch lower secondary teachers reported working in schools where over 10% of students are non-native speakers of Dutch, compared to an OECD average of one in five (OECD, 2019[4]). Nevertheless, immigrants tend to be geographically concentrated in cities (Statistics Netherlands, 2022[5]).

English skills are widespread in the Netherlands and, for young people at least, are increasingly essential for cultural or societal engagement and identity construction (Edwards, 2016[6]). People in the Netherlands have high English proficiency in international comparison; over 90% claim to master English well enough to have a conversation (European Commission, 2012[7]; Education First, 2022[8]). English is in high demand in the domestic labour market: in 2021, one in three online job vacancies implicitly or explicitly required English (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023[9]). As a result of extensive use and widespread

proficiency, some suggest that English should no longer be considered a foreign language in the Netherlands (Edwards, 2016[6])

Tourism also exposes people in the Netherlands to English. In 2019, there were around 23 million overnight international departures from the Netherlands and close to 20 million international visitors to the country. (OECD, 2022[10]). In addition, international students accounted for 14% of domestic tertiary enrolments in 2021, the total number having tripled since 2005 (OECD, 2023[11]; Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022[12]). In 2019, 70% of Bachelor's level courses were taught partially or fully in English (Michel et al., 2021[13]).

Popular culture is another source of English exposure. English language programmes or films are rarely dubbed in the Netherlands and increasingly may not even be subtitled. Similarly, in Dutch written media, quotations and passages in English can be included without translation (Edwards, 2016[6]). Internet users are also likely to encounter English language material regularly: estimates indicate that 1.7% of known websites produce content in Dutch compared to 53% for English so (Web Technology Surveys, 2023[14]).

### *English is a core subject with a compulsory examination for upper secondary graduates*

Schools in the Netherlands have considerable autonomy. Around one-third of school students attend public schools run by the government; two-thirds attend publicly funded, privately run schools. Parents have the right to choose a school for their child. As such, schools compete for students and seek to distinguish themselves by adopting a specific pedagogical philosophy (e.g. Dalton, Agora, Montessori) or religious philosophy (particularly in primary education), by focusing on a specialism (e.g. sports, music, international orientation) and/or by offering bilingual education (Box 6.1).

#### Box 6.1. Bilingual education in the Netherlands

Bilingual education in the Netherlands is often identified as a success story for learning subject content in a foreign language (Mearns and Graaff, 2018[15]). There are currently around 150 schools, mostly secondary, offering bilingual programmes, which are nearly all Dutch-English (Michel et al., 2021[13]).

Bilingual programmes follow a similar curriculum to standard ones but with an important share of instruction delivered in English and with higher expected language proficiency. In secondary education, programmes are typically for students in pre-university education (VWO) but those for the pre-professional track (HAVO) and pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) are growing in number. In VWO and HAVO, at least 50% of the curriculum is taught in English; in VMBO, the minimum share is 30%. Students take the national examinations at the end of upper secondary education; therefore, at this level, fewer lessons are taught in English (estimated to be around 25% in VWO) (Michel et al., 2021[13]). In bilingual VWO, many upper secondary students also follow the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (Mearns and Graaff, 2018[15]).

Bilingual education has also been expanding to primary schools. In 2014, a pilot project started with 17 bilingual programmes at primary level, where 30-50% of the curriculum is taught in English. Evaluative research suggests that the English proficiency of students in these programmes is consistently higher than that of students who follow standard primary school programmes, both those with the regular starting age for English (age 10) and those with earlier onset (Jenniskens et al., 2020[16]).

Despite the relative success of bilingual education in the Netherlands, there are some ongoing challenges, all of which were echoed by case study participants. It can be difficult to staff bilingual programmes as teachers of subjects using English as the language of instruction must have advanced-intermediate English with a proven commitment to improving to advanced. They must also

undertake training in applying a content and language integrated learning approach. In addition, schools are strongly encouraged to have at least one native English speaker teaching bilingual programmes.

There are also equity concerns. Typically, schools apply selective criteria for bilingual education and charge additional fees; these can be relatively high as they may include foreign exchanges and trips. Although most schools support parents who cannot afford the school fees this can present a barrier to less advantaged families. In 2023, the Netherlands made parental contributions voluntary in all schools, regardless of the family's economic situation. While this removes potential equity concerns, it may also make additional activities such as school trips and international exchanges financially unviable.

Sources: Jenniskens, T. et al. (2020[16]); Mearns, T. and R. Graaff (2018[15]); Michel et al. (2021[13]).

Education in the Netherlands is compulsory from ages 5-16, or until students have reached a qualification up to age 18. At age 12, students are tracked into different programmes according to academic ability based on the teacher's recommendation and national test scores. These are within four main tracks: 1) a typically five-year practical track (Pro); 2) a four-year, pre-vocational track (VMBO); 3) a five-year, pre-professional track (HAVO); and 4) a six-year, pre-university track (VWO). Most schools in the Netherlands offer a combination of tracks so that students can transfer between them within the school, as appropriate.

All students must learn a foreign language during primary education in the Netherlands. This is typically English. Most often, foreign language instruction starts in the last years of primary school, but around 15% of schools start earlier, including some from pre-primary level (Michel et al., 2021[13]). Students must learn two foreign languages from ages 12-17 but duration varies by track and is typically shorter than in other European countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[17]). There is no minimum prescribed number of teaching hours for any subject in the Netherlands (Eurydice, 2021[18]).

Since the 1990s, English has been considered a core subject in the Netherlands, alongside mathematics and Dutch. Therefore, to graduate from upper secondary education, students in the Netherlands must pass a national examination in English which accounts for half of their final grade; the other half is assessed through school examinations. This is not the case for the second foreign language which has a compulsory examination for students in VWO, only. In English, students in VMBO are expected to reach B1 or A2 level on the Common European Framework Reference, depending on the specific programme and skill area. Students in HAVO are expected to reach B2 level in reading and B1 in other skill areas; VWO students are expected to reach C1 in reading and B2 elsewhere (Michel et al., 2021[13]).

The national standardised examination in English for upper secondary students covers reading comprehension only. This examination accounts for 50% of the students' final result; the remaining 50% comes from school-based examination of listening and speaking. As such, the final years of schooling tend to be oriented towards reading (Fasglio et al., 2015[19]). Although there are no other mandatory standardised assessments of English proficiency in the Netherlands, the Central Institute for Test Development offers an optional standardised assessment at the end of primary school that focuses on receptive skills (reading and listening) at A1 to A2 levels. Every six years, the government arranges a system-level evaluation of English proficiency at the end of primary education.

### *The case study visit to the Netherlands*

In June 2023, the OECD Secretariat visited three schools in the Netherlands selected for their diverse characteristics. The schools are different sizes, serve different types of communities and have different pedagogical models (Table 6.1). However, they were not selected to be representative: the case study findings should, therefore, be interpreted as illustrating the experiences of some students and teachers in the Netherlands as opposed to being generalised nationally.

### Table 6.1. Key characteristics of the case study schools in the Netherlands

| | | School A | School B | School C |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Location** | | Rural | Urban | Urban |
| **Education level** | | Lower secondary, upper secondary | Lower secondary, upper secondary | Lower secondary |
| **School type** | | General and vocational; Agora[1] and bilingual programmes | General and vocational; Dalton school[2] | General and vocational; Global citizen school[3] |
| **Student cohort** | **In whole school** | 1 331 | 485 | 1 290 |
| | **In modal grade for 15-year-olds** | | 67 | 262 |
| | **% of socio-economically disadvantaged** | | 12-24% (by track) | 36% |
| **Teacher cohort** | **In whole school** | | 55 | 136 |
| | **Teaching English** | | 6 | 12 |
| **Interviewees** | | School principal<br>Four English teachers<br>Nine 15-year-olds | School principal<br>Three English teachers<br>Six 15-year-olds | School principal<br>Two English teachers<br>Four 15-year-olds |

1. The Agora pathway offers students a fully self-directed learning programme.
2. Dalton schools follow an education philosophy that aims to enable students to work at their own pace and receive individualised support.
3. Global citizen schools aim to educate students to become global citizens who are well prepared for international and intercultural society.
Source: Based on information reported to the OECD by schools.

The remainder of this chapter presents the findings of the case study based on interviews with school leaders, English teachers and 15-year-old students in the three case study schools; student activity logs; short surveys administered to the interview participants; and lesson observations. In addition, the analysis is informed by a country background report and an interview with Nuffic, the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education. For further information on the methodology, see Chapter 1.

## How do 15-year-olds in the Netherlands experience English outside school?

### *Students in the Netherlands see English as useful and use it widely outside school*

The 15-year-olds participating in the case study engage with English outside school in various ways. In activity logs completed by eight of the students, the most common activities were watching videos, gaming, listening to music and engaging with social media. Students also watch English language series and films, read books, and listen to podcasts. A school leader explained that students generally conduct research on line in English as there is more and better-quality content in English on line. In the short student questionnaires, half reported always using English when using digital technologies.

> *In the media a lot of things are in English, videos on YouTube, etc. At first, I did not understand all the videos, but now I understand them better. I also play video games in English. (Student, School C)*
>
> *They start getting this exposure [to English] at primary age. The moment they get the phone, the [English] world opens up. (Teacher, School B)*

Beyond digital environments, some students reported occasionally speaking English at home with their parents. For two this had started as a “secret” language between parents and is now something the whole family partakes in. A teacher suggested that having parents that speak English (as a first or additional language) plays an important role in exposure to English outside school. Many of the students also sometimes use English with friends, including Dutch-speaking ones, and two reported occasionally having internal dialogues in English instead of Dutch.

> *[We use English] when we are with friends and we are making jokes. You only understand the context in English. It's a funnier language than Dutch. (Student, School C)*

Nevertheless, exposure to English outside school in the Netherlands is not universal. For one teacher, students that speak a language other than Dutch or English at home are sometimes less exposed to English outside school as they seek to engage with popular culture in their first language. In addition, it is likely that students living in one of the main urban centres are more exposed to English than those living in rural areas; one interviewee explained that in the big cities, it would be quite possible to need to interact with a non-Dutch-speaking staff member in a café or restaurant in English.

> *The area we live in contributes to [the high exposure to English outside school]. I also taught in the east of the country where exposure to English seemed less… they were more exposed to German. (Teacher, School C)*

A difference in the frequency of exposure was also observed in the activity logs: the number of hours that students reported using English during their day ranged from 4 to 14. Some students suggested that the frequency of English use outside school is related to proficiency: those with higher English language proficiency engage with the language more frequently and more intensely.

All the interviewees see English as essential for life in the Netherlands and beyond. Most emphasised its importance for higher education and employment, with many students expressing a desire to travel, study and live abroad. According to one school leader, students and parents are aware of the utilitarian advantages of English but less concerned by the intercultural value of learning another language. This is also seen in the fact that students are less likely to value learning other foreign languages.

> *Students are aware of what English could mean to them. A lot of higher studies in university and vocational pathways are in the English language. (School leader, School C)*
>
> *English is highly valued because… it is vital for the stability of the country. (Teacher, School A)*

### *Interviewees see both benefits and drawbacks to high exposure to English outside school*

Several of the participating teachers and school leaders agreed that English exposure outside school can enhance learners' foreign language proficiency. Specifically, they suggested that it helps students gain fluency, become more comfortable with the language and see the value of learning it, which motivates them.

> *It really helps. They are more comfortable, they like the language the more they use it. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *I actually think English improved during COVID…This is something we see all over the Netherlands, we think it's the influence of Netflix and consuming English language media. (School leader, School C)*

However, teachers and students had different views about which activities have most value.

> *There are two groups [of students] who are really strong with English: the boys that do online gaming and the girls with fan accounts or those who read for fun. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *I think videos such as YouTube [are most useful] because you can hear and read at the same time. In films people speak more and you can make the connection [between speaking and the subtitles] more easily than in games. (Student, School C)*

Nevertheless, when discussing out-of-school exposure, some teachers also identified challenges. This might be due to students being unable to connect the two learning contexts. One teacher explained that they teach and use British English in the classroom whereas students are mostly exposed to North American English outside school. Another emphasised the difference between the formal register of English in the classroom and the informal register that predominates outside school. Students sometimes

adopt words, expressions or uses of English that they may fail to contextualise accurately. In two schools, teachers pointed to students using common expressions such as “gonna” instead of “going to” in writing without realising it is grammatically incorrect. In one of the lesson observations, some students used slang and inappropriate language in exchanges with their peers or the whole class.

> *I have issues as we have a problem of how we teach. We give them a foundation, but they are so exposed to English so much outside of school, and there is no connection. (Teacher, School B)*

Beyond this, there is also a perceived gap between the goals and content of English learning in school and those outside school. In their explanations, several students felt that studying English at school is just about studying grammar whereas outside school they can communicate and interact in the language. Some teachers acknowledged this feeling among students, explaining that it can demotivate them: one highlighted that despite having a high level of fluency in English, some students – even native English speakers – become self-conscious in the classroom, where the emphasis is on accuracy.

> *I use [English] on line, I learn it on line, I watch movies, series, have conversations with friends in English on Instagram, etc. The grammar I learn at school. (Student, School C)*
>
> *It’s hard because the things they learn from movies, social media, etc. are different from what we teach them about grammar, vocabulary, etc. [Even] some…native speakers have very bad grades. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *On the streets, there is no self-consciousness with the English language. In class, it’s a bit different because we provide building blocks and sometimes they struggle. (Teacher, School B)*

In addition, some students may feel demotivated when learning English at school as they think they already learn enough English outside school. As a teacher explained, this (false) confidence is not always helpful.

> *[At school] I haven't learned anything I didn't know [already]. (Student, School A)*
>
> *[English] is a subject where they say “Oh we can do that”… When it comes to preparing for exams, they’ll start with other subjects and if they have time left they’ll do English. And that’s ok because their grades are ok, but in class it can be harder. [Teacher, School C]*

Teachers described efforts to make English classes more relevant to students’ experiences outside school. For example, one teacher reported striving to provide real-life examples in class; another focuses on skills and activities that students will use outside lessons, such as writing emails or conducting an interview.

### *The prevalence of English is seen by some as a threat to Dutch and other languages*

There are concerns in the Netherlands about declining standards in young people’s literacy. In the final examinations at the end of upper secondary education, one-fifth of students in HAVO and VWO programmes do not reach the minimum expected grades in Dutch (Inspectorate of Education, 2023[20]). Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicate a downward trend in Dutch reading skills among 15-year-old students over both the long term and in the most recent cycle (OECD, 2023[21]). Similar trends can be seen in younger students’ performance (Grade 4) (Mullis et al., 2023[22]).

The spread of English is sometimes perceived as contributing to these declining standards and there is active public debate about the dominance of English in Dutch society (Van Gulik et al., 2019[23]; Edwards, 2020[24]). In recent years, this has included controversy around the growing role of English as a language of instruction in Dutch higher education. The government plans to limit this phenomenon (Government of the Netherlands, 2023[25]). Some of these tensions are also felt in schools.

> *I write a weekly article for the school journal and sometimes I’ll use an English phrase; some staff will then make a point of saying “Dutch is very important”. (School leader, School C)*

> *Language education in general at the moment is a challenge – today it is very difficult to teach a language because even the Dutch language nowadays is not as good as it used to be. So that then makes it difficult to learn other languages. (School leader, School B)*

The prevalence of English in the Netherlands is not only perceived as a threat to Dutch but also to the teaching of other modern foreign languages. This was reflected in the case study interviews where school leaders, teachers and students pointed to students' lack of motivation to learn French and German. English teachers explained that their colleagues teaching French and German envy the number of teaching hours allocated to English and the good results that students attain in the subject.

> *We do see that our students do very well in English... This is because students enjoy it, they progress quickly and so they keep enjoying it in comparison to French or German, where they progress more slowly and get demotivated. (School leader, School C)*

Nevertheless, there is no evidence of a relationship between the diverging trends in students' proficiency in Dutch and in English and none of the case study participants drew this connection. Indeed, results from bilingual schools in the Netherlands suggest that English instruction does not affect students' knowledge of Dutch (Nuffic, 2016[26]; Freije, 2015[27]).

## How do 15-year-olds in the Netherlands experience English in schools and classrooms?

### *Different starting ages for English mean varying abilities in lower secondary classrooms*

As Dutch schools have autonomy regarding the starting age for English instruction, participating students reported starting English at different ages. In one school, ages ranged from 5 to 12. Teachers in two schools reported that this leads to very mixed-ability classes, which can be challenging.

> *[The biggest challenge is] the difference in proficiency levels, as some students start [English] in kindergarten while others start in Year 7 or 8 and don't even do much in those years. (Teacher, School B)*

Participants had mixed opinions as to whether this initial difference persists beyond the first years of secondary school. Some educators described it as a persistent challenge; others explained that students catch up rapidly. Students who had started English later than their peers did not report feeling behind. Nevertheless, a teacher highlighted that the heterogeneity of students' previous experiences of learning English at the start of lower secondary may lead to disengagement among high-performing students.

> *The kids who start [learning English] early have not always been taught well. This means that the level of English you get in first grade here is very varied. And then the book starts from the beginning again. So those who are competent, have had lots of exposure outside school, they're bored. Then those that have not been taught much are intimidated [and] find it hard, etc… (Teacher, School C)*

### *Schools in the Netherlands try to individualise approaches to teaching English*

Beyond the initial challenge experienced at the start of secondary education, students' different English language proficiency was not seen as a major obstacle, particularly in comparison to other countries in this report (see Chapter 8). This may be due in part to the range of approaches to adapting English language teaching and programme content to different learners' needs, as observed during the case study visit (Figure 6.1).

Although there is no ability grouping for English in the Netherlands, wider ability grouping takes place with the sorting of students into different tracks from lower secondary education. English instruction in each

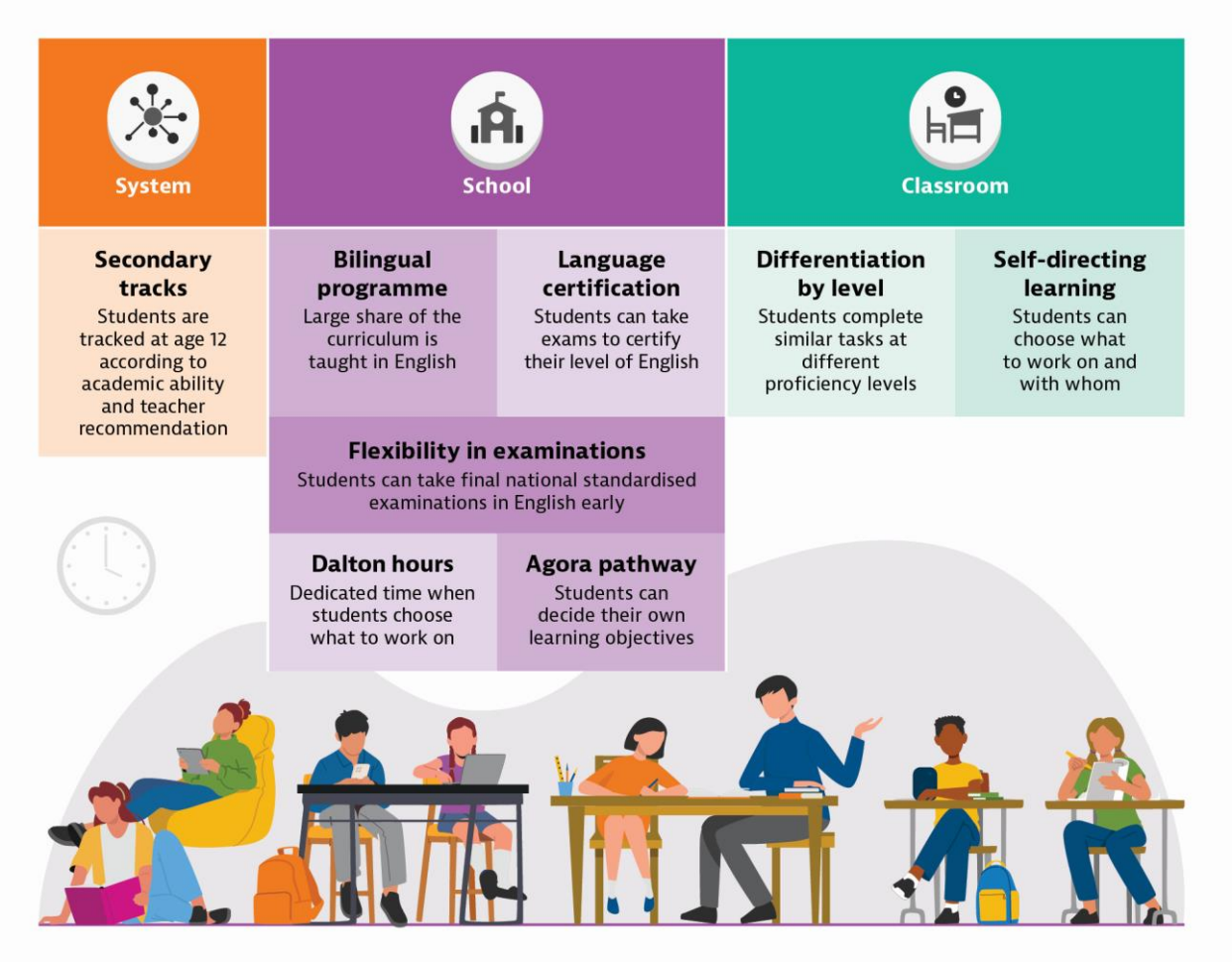
track is adapted: students are expected to reach different proficiencies, instruction hours vary and learning content is tailored to their needs.

> *In VMBO we keep the textbooks to maintain the structure – those kids need it, but we do of course try and supplement that with other resources to make sure it is lively. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *In the more vocational courses you can practice how to do an interview, a letter of application, etc. It's very practical. (Teacher, School B)*

By offering multiple tracks, each of the case study schools can provide students with the opportunity to move in and out of different paths if needed, or, as in one school, to study English in a different path. School A has an Agora pathway available to students through which they are encouraged to choose their own learning objectives based on their abilities and interests. The school leader explained that students in this pathway pursue project-based learning which may include aspects of English, or not. There are no formal English lessons for these students until they are ready to prepare for their upper secondary diploma.

> *In Agora, there's not really any specific support system, as everything is personalised already – the…programme is designed differently for every child. (School leader, School A)*

### Figure 6.1. Individualisation strategies that support English language learning in the Netherlands




Note: The strategies included in the figure are not exhaustive; they refer only to those observed or reported during the case study visit.
Source: Based on case study research conducted in three schools in the Netherlands.

In addition to Agora, School A – like a growing number of schools in the Netherlands – offers bilingual programmes for VWO, HAVO and VMBO (Box 6.1). Students with a high proficiency in English or with strong motivation to improve can join these programmes. Those in VWO participating in these programmes complete the International Baccalaureate for English; those in HAVO and VMBO complete Anglia language certification examinations.

Also, typically for high-performing students though not exclusively, all three schools offered extra-curricular classes to prepare students for language certification. The classes are voluntary and open to students in different grades; families must cover the cost of the examination. A school leader explained that schools increasingly offer these classes as they attract parents and students to the school. The schools also offered flexibility in the national examination for English: high-performing students can take their examination early or sit the examination designed for students in a different pathway and at a higher level. These measures are not exclusive to English but are more common for this subject.

> *In the Cambridge class [for language certification] we learn a different kind of English. Not necessarily focused on grammar, but on the exam and use of English. We choose it because we want to go abroad and we can prove we speak English. (Student, School B)*
>
> *About 60 students are doing their final exam early (18-20%). That's fewer than previously – at one point the criteria was just being good at English, now we want them to have stronger performance across the board. (School leader, School C)*

For low-performing students in English, the schools also offered various supports. School B is a Dalton school following an education philosophy that aims to enable students to work at their own pace and receive individualised support. It has a timetabled weekly "Dalton hour" for self-directed learning; English support is offered in this time. Meanwhile, School A offers two extra classes a week for English where students can voluntarily seek teacher support. All three schools have peer mentoring programmes for low-performing students, although in one school a teacher emphasised that this is rarely used for English.

> *We don't have a remedial teaching programme for English – only the Dalton hours give them extra time to seek support... Our students are also very helpful with each other so students from the higher grades are pre-disposed to helping those from the lower grades. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *When we had more financial space (during COVID), we were able to hire students from university that could help them or …children who are really good in English can help the others for a small fee…The students really know what [their peers] need to learn. (School leader, School A)*

At classroom level, English teachers reported adopting multiple strategies to differentiate learning according to students' needs; this was also seen in lesson observations. Strategies include adapting the seating arrangements, designing lessons in which students choose the tasks they complete, offering learning activities at different language proficiency levels and providing individualised formative feedback. In one lesson, the teacher explicitly directed students to online grammar exercises aligned to their level of proficiency. In another, students were able to choose which teacher to learn with: one offering structured grammar instruction or another offering project-based learning.

> *In my class I have tables in the middle with people who are struggling and the students who are ok surrounding the tables, and I focus on the ones who need it. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *I divide students into groups: ones who need help, those who don't necessarily and those who are independent. You can do it with grammar, reading a book… it doesn't work for all classes. (Teacher, School B)*

Two system-level factors may support these efforts to individualise teaching and learning in the Netherlands. First, schools and teachers have considerable autonomy when it comes to school policies, curriculum and instruction. In TALIS 2018, 91% of school leaders in lower secondary education in the Netherlands reported that teachers have significant responsibility when choosing learning materials and determining course content. Meanwhile, 96% reported having significant responsibility themselves for

deciding which courses to offer (OECD, 2020[28]). Second, the high level of school choice means that schools are in direct competition for students. As such, they seek to differentiate themselves by offering different programmes or pedagogical approaches perceived as having a competitive advantage.

Nevertheless, interviewees reported ongoing challenges when adapting to the needs of different students. Several noted that it is difficult to provide adequate support, particularly in large classes and because needs change every year, demanding more time for lesson preparation. Teachers also explained that some learners prefer traditional whole-class instruction to more individualised approaches. This was evident in lesson observations: some students were very engaged by open-ended tasks working either independently or in groups. However, a few were reluctant to engage in any of the material on offer.

> *It's harder with larger classes, I have a class with 31 students, the group is noisy, the dynamic changes and the struggling students suffer. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *Part of the class really liked the [project], particularly the girls. Others just wanted structure. But that provided some more space for those who already had a higher level to do the more creative exercises. But I don't always have time to do that – if I had more time … I'd try and do more of it. (Teacher, School C)*

Many case study participants also noted that, despite efforts, high-performing students of English are not sufficiently stimulated. For some, this was a wider issue: support across subjects is oriented towards low-performing students. Others highlighted the challenges of structural adaptations for high-performing students. For example, bilingual programmes can be difficult to provide, as they are more expensive to run and harder to staff (Box 6.1). Moreover, while advancing the final examination helps motivate high-performing students, the results are only valid for two years, which limits the level of flexibility schools have. Some students felt that, even when learning is differentiated, they are still not sufficiently challenged.

> *I think in general in the Netherlands we have trouble stimulating the… more proficient, because we focus on the other end. And that's important, but maybe there's more we can do. (Teacher, School C)*

### *English teaching in Dutch schools is seen as prioritising reading and grammar*

The case study and broader research indicate that not all language skills are practiced to the same extent in English lessons in the Netherlands. Many of the teachers acknowledged a focus on linguistic knowledge. Teachers from two schools explained that grammar and vocabulary dominate in lower secondary education as they are the necessary foundations of more creative, project-based approaches in later years. According to the literature, relatively little time is given to English exposure and interaction in lessons in the Netherlands, especially in the first three years of lower secondary school, where explaining grammatical rules, often in Dutch, dominates (West and Verspoor, 2016[29]). Several teachers noted a desire to include a greater variety of skills and pedagogical approaches in their lessons for all ages.

> *For me there could always be less attention on grammar…and more time for projects. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *[Learning grammar] is too abstract for [students in the first years of secondary school] but you do have to start somewhere and you do have to teach them the basic [building] blocks. (Teacher, School C)*

In addition, one teacher emphasised that the last years of upper secondary education focus on exam preparation leaving less room for projects. The national standardised examination exclusively assesses students' reading comprehension through short English texts with multiple-choice questions formulated in Dutch. Even though teachers assess other communicative skills, the central examination has a washback effect and students often do a lot of reading comprehension in their final years of school (Fasglio et al., 2015[19]). The emphasis on the final examination can also promote a misconception that reading is both harder and more important than other skills (Westhoff, 2012[30]).

> *Maybe speaking is more in younger years, then I'm more worried about the exams, their reading in university, etc. and we need to prepare them for that. (Teacher, School B)*

> *We focus more on reading in VMBO as writing is less of a priority. We do have some different types of writing but not as extensive as HAVO. Their final exam is all reading so we focus on reading skills more. Speaking is also important as that motivates them – they want to travel, etc. (Teacher, School A)*

In the interviews, some students reported wishing to speak more English in class and this was repeatedly identified by teachers and students as the least practiced of the four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing). One student claimed that they only practice speaking in the preparation classes for language certification. Several teachers agreed on the importance of practicing speaking but some noted challenges. For example, one explained that speaking activities take time and students are sometimes shy or reserved. Another noted that, because they speak English outside school and can communicate well, speaking is less important in lessons. Indeed, students' speaking proficiency in the final year of schooling in the Netherlands reaches or exceeds target attainment levels in all educational pathways whereas in writing, in particular, an important share does not reach target proficiency (Fasoglio and Tuin, 2018[31]; Fasglio et al., 2015[19]). Nevertheless, some participating students identified speaking as being the most difficult skill.

> *I would prefer to speak English in class the whole time rather than the teacher do it partially and [I would like to] speak English with other students. Peer pressure stops me, no one else does it. (Student, School B)*
>
> *Speaking is the hardest because we don't focus on this in class. (Student, School C)*

The new curriculum for modern foreign languages, which is currently under development, will pay more attention to productive skills (speaking and writing) and social interaction.

### *Schools would like to offer students more authentic opportunities to speak English*

In all three schools there was a clear desire to increase opportunities for students to practice spoken English in real-life situations. This was expressed by students, teachers and school leaders. In each school, several students wanted to speak English in the case study interview, although it should be noted that most of these students reported themselves to be of average or above-average proficiency relative to their peers.

When asked to name three things that they would wish for to improve the teaching and learning of English in their school, all school leaders focused on providing international exchanges for their students. However, numerous barriers were also identified, including the extra workload it places on teachers and other school staff, the challenge of relationship-building, and the need for extra funding.

> *There's only one wish. I want there to be no barriers to sending students abroad… Nowadays, it's very expensive for a lot of families to participate in field trips. We have a bit of funding from the government but it's not sufficient. So it's a big challenge to keep an international programme going. It's important for them to see the world but going to locations outside Europe is just not possible for all children. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *I wish all my students could experience going abroad and receiving students from other countries more. This would give them context, a better understanding of the world around them. (School leader, School C)*

The Netherlands provides some support to schools for developing exchange programmes including from Nuffic (Box 6.2). School C is part of Nuffic's Global Citizen Network and recently appointed a teacher to lead the co-ordination of related activities. This came with a reduction in teaching hours as well as additional remuneration. The school leader noted that the school had invested in this position with a view to developing Erasmus+ and other student exchanges in the following school years.

### Box 6.2. Nuffic: The Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education

Nuffic aims to strengthen the internationalisation of education in the Netherlands from primary to higher education, vocational and adult education. The key objective is to support learners of all ages in the Netherlands to acquire international competences, including foreign language learning. Nuffic is supported by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the European Commission. It promotes the use of English and other foreign languages as follows:

- **International student mobility**: Nuffic supports more than 32 000 students and staff per year to go on international exchanges with programmes such as the Orange Knowledge Programme, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the Erasmus, Erasmus+ and eTwinning programmes funded by the European Commission. A further 2 000 students are supported to study abroad through scholarships. Programmes cover those in secondary and tertiary education, and general and vocational programmes.
- **Bilingual schools**: Nuffic oversees bilingual education, accrediting bilingual schools, evaluating them every three years to determine whether they meet the required standards and providing information and support to schools offering or wanting to offer bilingual pathways.
- **Promoting and developing global competences:** Nuffic runs the Languages and Global Citizenship Network and the Global Citizen Network in primary, secondary and adult education. These programmes aim to enhance learners' international competences, including foreign language proficiency. Among secondary schools, the network currently has around 80 member institutions. Nuffic accredits the participating schools, supports them to implement related initiatives and fosters networking between member organisations.
- **Research, knowledge sharing and international knowledge partnerships**: Nuffic conducts research and organises knowledge-sharing sessions with different education sectors and stakeholders. It also has partnerships with relevant actors abroad providing support for various types of co-operation across countries.

Source: Nuffic (2023[32]).

## What resources support English teaching and learning in Dutch schools?

### *Schools in the Netherlands are well-equipped with material resources*

The case study schools were generally well-equipped with digital and other material resources and none of the interviewees identified challenges regarding their availability. During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were able to apply for additional funding to support remote and catch-up learning; each of the schools highlighted this as having been important in supporting low-performing students. More recently, the government has established a basic skills subsidy through which schools apply for extra funding to support students' Dutch, mathematics and English skills. Other earmarked funds are also available. One school leader explained that the challenge is not the availability of financial resources but rather that these funding streams are short term and are often allocated at inconvenient times in school planning cycles.

During the school visits, teachers and students noted regularly using digital resources in English lessons. This was also evident in the lesson observations: teachers had their own laptops, used interactive whiteboards and projectors to show videos or lesson activities, and prepared online quizzes. Teachers reported using both pedagogical and non-pedagogical material from a wide variety of online sources, such

as English language media, blogs, podcasts or films. In two lessons, students used either a set of school laptops or their own devices to access online exercises or digital material from the class textbook.

> *All students have a Chrome book here, so a lot of the writing they do is on that. I also use British Council resources, particularly for listening. Sometimes I Google random games. (I use) Kahoot quizzes. The book also has an online space. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *We use online websites and apps, and something using flip-cards instead of physical cards. We find these very useful and it's quicker. (Student, School B)*
>
> *In the later years, we work a lot with media, speech, videos… we look at lots [of different resources] all the time. So, if we don't bring the laptop to school, it is like forgetting your coursebook. (Student, School A)*

Nevertheless, there were differences between the schools. Teachers in School C felt that digital technologies are used less than in other schools due to a more traditional pedagogical culture. In contrast, the school leader in School A estimated that 10-20% of lesson time in all subjects is spent in digital environments. This school has a working group led by teachers who are particularly skilled with digital technologies to support other teachers and suggest initiatives. In School B, the use of digital technologies seemed to depend largely on the teacher's preference.

Teachers generally agreed that digital technologies were useful for English language teaching and learning, particularly for more individualised approaches, as they facilitate the preparation and administration of different activities for different students. Other identified benefits included student engagement and access to a variety of modern and appealing teaching resources, as well as exposure to global current affairs.

> *The digital textbook offers us authentic material that then we don't have to spend time looking for and they provide exercises with those which are also good for differentiation. (Teacher, School A)*

However, teachers also noted that there should be a balance between digital and non-digital approaches and that there are associated challenges. For example, according to teachers in School B, digital devices can be a source of distraction for students and complicate classroom management. Following the case study visit, the Netherlands announced a ban on the use of smartphones, tablets and smartwatches in schools from January 2024 (Government of the Netherlands, 2023[33]).

> *There should be a balance. I notice that if you do everything digitally it can be hard to get it to stick. Digitally, you swipe and swipe … A book helps you to focus. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *The challenge is when you allow them to use their laptop or phone they get distracted with other things. They need to learn what is appropriate, when. (Teacher, School C)*

In addition to digital resources, English teachers in each of the case study schools use textbooks. Again, teachers see advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, some see textbooks as a source of high quality pedagogical material, particularly for teaching grammar. They can also provide clarity and structure, which may benefit some students. In addition, the digital resources that come with the textbooks facilitate differentiation according to students' English proficiency and needs. On the other hand, some teachers and students claimed that the textbook material is not engaging and that it is easier to learn from presentations that teachers prepare themselves or project-based activities.

> *Textbooks are very useful for the basic learning of English like grammar. Once you've captured that, it's easier to take the Chrome book and explore the media. (Student, School A)*
>
> *There is lots of repetition within the textbook, which makes it all the same and very boring. (Student School B)*
>
> *I am not too much of a fan of those [textbooks] because they often overcomplicate the grammar in a way that is really not relevant for Dutch students….as a teacher it basically lists everything you have to do in a lesson, and it feels like you have zero creative freedom. (Teacher, School C)*

Some teachers also emphasised the importance of their own pedagogical creativity and freedom, for example, choosing English language books for students to study or preparing their own projects. However, they noted that this is time-intensive and therefore they are not able to be as creative as they wish.

> *If you are intimidated there are textbooks you can use, but in general, freedom makes the job much more interesting. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *We get a lot of freedom – if we decided to change things we'd be allowed to. But it takes time and we don't have that so we rely on the things we already have. (Teacher, School C)*

To combat the workload challenge, teachers in two schools emphasised the importance of collaboration. In School B, each English teacher takes the lead in preparing lessons for a certain grade, with input from colleagues. All materials are shared through a common online platform. In School C, teachers described sharing lesson materials for project-based work. However, the extent to which teachers collaborate may differ between schools. According to TALIS 2018, teacher collaboration varies widely across Dutch schools, with more than 20% of the variation lying at the school level (OECD, 2020[28]).

### *English teachers enjoy their work despite it often not being their initial career choice*

During the interviews, all teachers reported being satisfied with their job identifying positive aspects such as working with students, developing emotional connections and being able to open up the world for students. This is despite many reporting not having wanted to be a teacher at the start of their studies. These responses align with data from TALIS 2018, where despite relatively high teacher satisfaction in the Netherlands, less than half reported that teaching was their first career choice (OECD, 2019[4]).

> *When I finished secondary school, I wanted to be a primary school teacher like my mother, but she said you're too smart for that. I went to study English at university and I was adamant I wouldn't be a teacher. I did an optional course where you could visit schools to try teaching. Then I did a PhD and the only thing I liked was the teaching. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *I hated languages, didn't want to be a teacher. I did a very difficult degree, then accidentally got two teacher degrees. Now, I love being a teacher even if I still don't really like languages. (Teacher, School B)*

The case study teachers generally felt that their initial teacher education had not fully prepared them for teaching but that no programme ever could. They followed a variety of paths into English teaching but nearly all agreed that they learnt most on the job. Several teachers felt that their initial training was not practical enough; however, a teacher who had followed the more practically oriented professional teacher education programme felt she would have benefitted from more subject-oriented input.

> *My one-year post-grad course was like a pressure cooker. Realistically, you only learn how to be a teacher once you do the teaching… I would have needed more than one year to do it well. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *I don't think…that you can be perfectly prepared for the teaching. Understanding how to do the job is more about experience. (Teacher, School C)*

As in many other countries, the Netherlands is currently facing teacher shortages. In PISA 2022, nearly three-quarters (72%) of 15-year-olds were in schools whose leaders reported that instruction is hindered by a shortage of teaching staff (OECD, 2023[34]). These shortages are more important in urban areas, where there is a higher diversity of students, and in certain subjects such as mathematics and foreign languages. Shortages in French currently represent 18% of total full-time employed teachers; however, the share is only 3% for English teachers (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2022[35]).

Among the case study schools, school leaders agreed that shortages are not currently felt for English, especially compared to other foreign languages, although one school leader noted that finding teachers willing to teach in the bilingual programme or finding native anglophone teachers is a challenge.

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# 7 How 15-year-olds learn English in Portugal

In April 2023, the OECD visited three schools in Portugal to interview students, English language teachers and school leaders about how 15-year-olds learn English. This chapter presents the key findings from these visits and further evidence. First, it gives an overview of the linguistic and educational context of Portugal. It then explores the ways in which 15-year-olds in Portugal are exposed to English outside school. Next, the chapter provides insights into how English is taught and learnt in schools and the resources available to support English learning. The chapter also considers the ways in which students with different needs are supported to learn English and how digital technologies influence 15-year-olds' exposure to the language and their learning experiences.

# A snapshot of learning English as a 15-year-old in Portugal

- **English is highly valued in Portuguese society.** Students are often enthusiastic about their English lessons, which they describe as engaging compared to other subjects. Nevertheless, some English teachers find that STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are often prioritised in schools and by parents, to the detriment of languages.
- **School leaders, teachers and students strongly value authentic opportunities for students to practice spoken English in contexts beyond the classroom.** This might include international exchanges, school trips or extracurricular activities. English teachers and schools invest considerable time, effort and other resources to provide such opportunities and also make use of European schemes such as Erasmus+.
- **Schools and teachers have several strategies in place to support the needs of different students, particularly those who are underperforming or have low proficiency**. However, they generally agree that more could be done to support these students and to better challenge high-performing students.
- **Portugal has made considerable efforts in recent years to increase the use of digital technologies in education.** Many English teachers use digital tools and resources to support their teaching. Teachers and students generally see the benefits of this, particularly to increase engagement and facilitate classroom management. However, there were fewer examples of using digital technologies to the specific benefit of foreign language pedagogy.

## Learning languages in Portugal

### *Portugal's population is relatively language homogenous*

The official language of Portugal is Portuguese, spoken by most of the 10 million inhabitants; it is the fifth most spoken language in the world. Portugal has one official regional language, Mirandese, spoken in the region of Terra de Miranda in the north-east of the country.

In 2022, around 11% of Portugal's population was foreign-born, up from 8% a decade earlier; over one-in-three come from other Portuguese-speaking countries (OECD, 2023[1]). Nevertheless, Portugal has a relatively language-homogeneous population: only 5% of students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 reported mainly speaking a language other than Portuguese at home, compared to the OECD average of 11% (OECD, 2023[2]). Despite this, in 2018, 79% reported speaking two or more languages (including the language they speak at home), and 24% reported having contact with people from other countries in their neighbourhood (OECD, 2020[3]).

Portugal receives a lot of tourists, exposing inhabitants to different languages. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Portugal received nearly 17 million international visitors, with France, Spain and the United Kingdom as the leading countries of provenance. The Portuguese are also exposed to other languages through their own international travel: in 2019, inhabitants made 3.1 million international departures (OECD, 2022[4]).

The workplace provides another form of exposure to other languages. Portugal's main trade partners are France, Germany and Spain (Statistics Portugal, 2022[5]). Meanwhile, English is a highly desired skill on the Portuguese labour market: in 2021, 42% of online job vacancies in Portugal implicitly or explicitly required some level of English, compared to the OECD average of 33% (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023[6]).

People in Portugal are also exposed to English and other languages in their daily lives through film, television, music and digital technologies. The share of Portuguese language web content is estimated to be around 3%. Although this is greater than for many other OECD languages, Internet users are still likely to engage with some English, which is estimated to account for 53% of content (Web Technology Surveys, 2023[7]). Television and films are typically shown in the original language with subtitles in Portuguese.

### *English is a compulsory subject for all students from age 8 in Portugal*

Portugal has made several reforms to schooling decisions in recent years to increase decision making at the local and institutional levels. Almost all schools are now aggregated into multi-school clusters and the Ministry of Education has established autonomy contracts with a growing number of schools to give them greater control over their finances and the curriculum (OECD, 2020[8]).

Compulsory education in Portugal begins at age 6 and ends at age 18. Typically, 15-year-olds are in the first year of upper secondary education when they may opt for either general or vocational programmes. In 2015, Portugal made English a compulsory subject for students from Grade 3 of primary education (age 8) (Figure 7.1). Some schools choose to start from Grade 1. However, compared to other education systems, the share of total instruction time dedicated to foreign language teaching in primary education in Portugal is small at less than 5%.

During lower secondary education, students are required to learn a second foreign language: French is now the most popular, with growing numbers of students choosing it over Spanish (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[9]). In upper secondary education, students in both general and vocational education follow the same language learning requirements to study English and a second foreign language for two years; those selecting study programmes that include languages have more hours, additional language(s) and a further year of language education. In contrast to trends in most other European countries, in Portugal, the share of vocational students learning English is higher than for those learning English in general education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[9]).

## Figure 7.1. Typical distribution of lesson hours for languages in Portugal in 2023

1. In upper secondary education (general and vocational), the hours shown are those for compulsory courses; students can choose pathways which may include additional hours for languages. It is compulsory to study one foreign language at this level.
Notes: The modal grade and education level for 15-year-olds is outlined in black. Compulsory hours are presented in shaded boxes. For boxes that cover multiple subjects, the total time allocation must reach the number indicated in the relevant grade.
Source: European Commission (2023[10]); national information reported to the OECD.

Portugal has set expected levels of attainment for first and second foreign languages that are aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). At the end of lower secondary education, students are expected to have a B1 level in English and an A2 level in their second foreign language unless it is Spanish, in which case the target is B1 for reading and listening and A2 for speaking and writing. At the end of compulsory education, students are expected to have a B2 level in English and a B1 level in the

second foreign language, with similar exceptions for Spanish (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[9]).

In Portugal, some students take a final national standardised examination in English and/or another foreign language at the end of upper secondary education as a requirement of successful completion of this stage of education. However, this depends on their study choices. The examination assesses all four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing), although the speaking component is assessed internally by the school.

### *The case study visit to Portugal*

In April 2023, the OECD Secretariat visited three schools in Portugal. The schools were selected for their diverse characteristics, which include different locations (urban and rural) and different sizes and student characteristics (Table 7.1). Nevertheless, they are not representative of schools across the country and the findings in this case study should be interpreted as illustrating the experiences of some students and teachers in Portugal as opposed to being generalised nationally.

**Table 7.1. Key characteristics of the case study schools in Portugal**

| | | School A | School B | School C |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Location** | | Urban | Urban | Rural |
| **Education level** | | Primary to upper secondary | Primary to upper secondary | Upper secondary |
| **School type** | | Public, general and vocational | Public, general and vocational | Public, general and vocational |
| **Student cohort** | **In whole school** | 1 020 | 1 127 | 1 685 |
| | **In modal grade for 15-year-olds** | 169 | 180 | 397 |
| | **% of socio-economically disadvantaged** | 16% | 18% | 15% |
| **Teacher cohort** | **In whole school** | 121 | 133 | 182 |
| | **Teaching English** | 11 | 9 | 13 |
| **Interviewees** | | Head of English<br>Two English teachers<br>Five 15-year-olds | School leader<br>Three English teachers<br>Five 15-year-olds | School leader<br>Three English teachers<br>Six 15-year-olds |

Note: Schools A and B are each part of a multi-school cluster, as is typical in Portugal. The responses correspond to the cluster.
Source: Based on information reported to the case study team by schools.

The findings presented in the remainder of this chapter are based on interviews with school leaders, English teachers and 15-year-old students in the three case study schools; lesson observations; student activity logs; and short surveys administered to the interview participants. The analysis is also informed by desk-based research and background interviews with the Portuguese Association of English Teachers and representatives from the Directorate-General of Education within the Ministry of Education. For further information on the methodology of the case study, see Chapter 1.

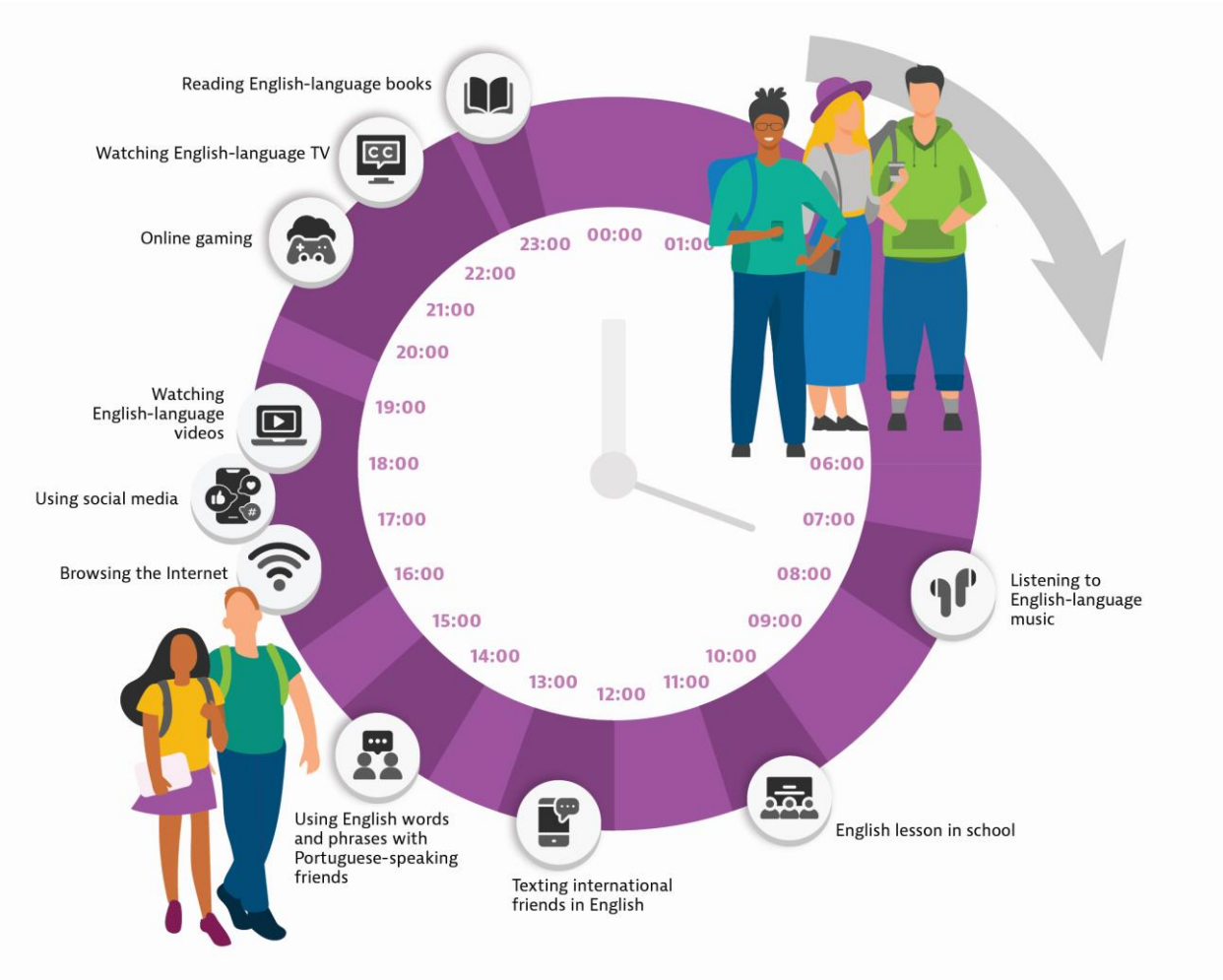
## How do 15-year-olds in Portugal experience English outside school?

### *Students regularly encounter English outside school and believe this supports learning*

The students participating in the case study in Portugal are regularly exposed to English outside school. In the interviews, 15-year-olds reported engaging in a range of activities in English including gaming, watching videos, listening to music and communicating with friends (Figure 7.2). Studying English outside

school through private tutoring or language education does not seem to be common in Portugal; only one student reported attending English classes outside school.

### Figure 7.2. Examples of engagement with English during a 15-year-old's school day in Portugal




Notes: The activities in this figure are taken from activity logs voluntarily completed by 12 students participating in the case study in Portugal. The figure depicts a selected combination of activities as reported by different students to portray the wide range of activities in English that students engage in.
Source: Based on case study research conducted in three schools in Portugal.

English is used with friends and family that are not Portuguese-speaking and often on line through virtual communities or video games. Even among Portuguese-speakers, students revealed that they typically use some words and expressions in English. Teachers from School A shared that a few shy students communicate with each other in English as they are more comfortable socially using a non-native language.

> *[There are] two students that talk to each other in class and outside always in English. I find it interesting because I find that students who are shy use a foreign language […] It's as if they have a mask and they are…role playing someone else. (Teacher, School A)*

Some students reported watching English language films and series with Portuguese or English subtitles and, when possible, without them. However, a few teachers mentioned that this may change, as dubbing

seems increasingly common in Portugal, particularly in series for children and young people. Students generally feel that engaging with English language media helps improve their language proficiency and many teachers agree.

> *Films and gaming sometimes teach them many different words. They gain a lot, they profit a lot from that input of language because it consumes all their free time. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *When you're listening to a conversation in a film [in English] and if you have access to the Portuguese translation, you can learn how to say specific things and use specific words. (Student, School B)*

Tourism is a key driver of the Portuguese economy, particularly in the areas where the case study schools are located. In all schools, 15-year-olds and teachers shared experiences of students using English to interact with tourists. As explained by one teacher in School C, a school located near a much-frequented part of the Portuguese coast, these interactions are unavoidable. Their impact on students' English language proficiency is particularly notable when older students get part-time jobs while finishing their upper secondary education. The teacher pointed out that these jobs are often in the service industry where a basic knowledge of English is an advantage and interaction is constant.

> *Some of our students already have part-time jobs and since this is a tourist area, they are almost compelled to [speak English]… They have to manage how to communicate because communication skills are important for the employer as well. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *My mum has an Airbnb. She is not very good with English… so she asks me to help with the bookings. (Student, School C)*

In the interviews, students generally perceived using English outside school to be very useful, helping them realise the importance of knowing the language, providing a friendlier and more relaxed environment to practice in, and creating real-life opportunities to interact with native speakers.

> *It helps you expand your vocabulary range and gives you the possibility to use English much more informally whereas school English tends to be very formal and not very useful. (Student, School A)*
>
> *It helps you put into practice what's in the textbook and it also helps you realise that what's in the textbook ends up being useful. (Student, School A)*

Teachers also saw benefits. In one school, teachers felt that any contact with English is a good thing, particularly for speaking and listening, as it helps students become familiar with the language. Another teacher explained that students get a clear sense of pride from interacting with foreigners in English outside of school which helps them value learning the language. However, some teachers also had reservations: one teacher explained how mere exposure does not lead to learning to use English appropriately, particularly in speaking and writing. Another was concerned about the quality of English students encounter outside school.

> *In terms of fluency and sensitivity to language and sounds and rhythm yes, that helps them. In terms of accuracy, I wonder. (Teacher, School B)*

Students identified differences between the English learnt at school and that practiced outside school, which can create a challenge. First, while students mostly learn British English in schools in Portugal, the English material they are exposed to outside school is mostly in North American English. The registers also differ: the English used outside school is mostly informal, often using slang that would not be appropriate for writing or more formal settings. Most students understand the differences between both registers. Although some teachers reported trying to make connections between the English students use outside school and the English they are taught in school to increase student engagement, some students did not recognise these efforts and conceptualised the two uses of English as clearly distinct from one another.

> *I find myself being a lot friendlier and just being different and more informal outside the classroom than inside the classroom. (Student, School C)*
>
> *I don't think teachers really make any connections between what happens inside and outside the classroom. (Student, School A)*

### *Students' engagement with English outside school varies*

Among the case study participants, there was a clear disparity in the extent to which different students engage with English outside school; some appear to have many opportunities to use English in a typical day while others have very few. This was reflected in the activity logs: while one student reported being exposed to English 13 different times in a day, mostly through music and television, two said they had no exposure apart from their English lesson and homework.

Some teachers suggested that there may be an association between the students' proficiency in English, their enjoyment of the language and the extent to which they use English outside school. According to interviewees, disparities may also be related to socio-economic background, as less affluent families may not be able to provide as many opportunities to practice English or receive extracurricular support if needed. Finally, geographical location can influence exposure: students from areas with a lower number of international visitors may have fewer opportunities for real-life practice.

> *There is limited access to social and economic opportunities [among families in this school] which in turn means students' skills and abilities in English language learning also tend to be limited. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *I have students with a higher [level of] English. They watch films with subtitles, they like to read in English, they like to speak English (…). The ones that have more vocabulary, do more. (Teacher, School C)*

Disparities were also present in the English skills students tend to use outside school. Despite some of the interviewed students actively communicating orally or via online messaging, productive skills (speaking and writing) are not frequently used by all students beyond the language classroom. Most activities that involve English outside school only involve listening and reading English. This was also seen in the activity logs: half of the students did not report using any productive skills outside school.

### *English is highly valued in Portuguese society but this is not always reflected in schools*

Participating students find English useful for their present and future lives. Many envision using English to study abroad or for work purposes. In particular, students who are considering completing part of their higher education in English reported finding it essential. Although most bachelor's courses in Portugal are in Portuguese, some courses are offered in English. Meanwhile, student mobility has steadily increased, and English is key for academic success, as most research is published in English (Pinto and Araújo e Sá, 2020[11]; European Commission, 2020[12]). Furthermore, English was a highly desired skill for managerial and professional occupations in Portugal: in 2022, more than 60% of the job postings online for such roles required English language competence, compared to around 40% on average across OECD countries (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023[6]). Indeed, one school leader linked students' command of English to ambition and academic success.

> *Students who have higher grades, tend to have more future prospects, tend to attach more importance to English. Unlike those who are less ambitious and don't have as many future academic prospects. (School leader, School C)*

Beyond studying at home or abroad and for career-related purposes, the participating 15-year-olds also consider English essential for communicating with non-Portuguese speakers, for travelling and accessing information or online content which is not available in Portuguese.

> *English is very important because it is the most widely spoken language in the world. (Student, School B)*

Many students reported that their parents are also enthusiastic about them reaching a high level of English language proficiency. While most recognised this support positively, one student commented on the pressure she feels from her parents in this regard.

> *My parents were always very concerned and focused on me learning English, also because the future university degree I'll do in economics will involve many courses in English. In that sense, there has been a bit of pressure from their side. (Student, School A)*
>
> *Although [my mother] can't speak very well she wants me to have better opportunities than she had so she finds English very important (Student, School B)*

Despite English being considered important in Portuguese society, the English teachers and school leaders interviewed for the case study feel that it is not necessarily a priority in schools. In all schools, teachers reported that science subjects are considered more important than other disciplines. An English teacher described these tensions as a "rivalry" with science teachers, which often leads to English being understood merely as a tool for understanding science.

> *English is important. It's recognised to be very, very important, even for the science world. But again, it is not "the" subject. Science is "the" subject. English is kind of like an accessory to it. It's just helping science learning. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *The vast majority of my students are science students and those teachers normally think that their subjects are the ones which matter. So, physics, chemistry, maths, those are the important subjects, biology. All the other [subjects] are just there. (Teacher, School A)*

The mismatch in the value attributed to English in life as opposed to in schools is also present for students. They generally believe English is important and useful, but they admit dedicating little to no independent study time to the subject. This was also observed in the activity logs, where only one student reported studying or completing homework for English. An English teacher provided an explanation: as students are regularly exposed to English outside school they consider that to be sufficient to learn the language and often perceive it as an easy subject at school. Some students corroborated this idea. One teacher, however, noted that this is a false confidence that contributes to the stagnation of students' English proficiency.

> *[Learning English] is considered to be easy because people have the idea that [students] are exposed to it so it's an automatic process, and it is not. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *I don't study English that much or that often. (Student, School C)*

## How do 15-year-olds in Portugal experience English in schools and classrooms?

### *English lessons are viewed positively but productive skills may require more attention*

Compared to other subjects, students often reported English as being a particularly "fun" and relaxed subject. When untangling this idea further, teachers explained that English teaching allows for flexibility in teaching methods, for a wide range of activities, for the discussion of different topics, and for extensive interaction with students.

> *English is my favourite subject despite having chosen a science and technology specialisation. [English lessons] are very easy to follow, very relaxing and not as difficult as other subjects. (Student, School A)*

Students in School C agreed that they generally have a closer relationship with their English teachers compared to teachers of other subjects, and that English lessons are more engaging. The fact that speaking and interactions are an essential part of the lessons may help build these relationships. One teacher from the same school emphasised that English teachers have to adopt an empathetic teaching

approach. Students' shyness and nervousness is sometimes their greatest barrier to improving their English, particularly when practicing speaking; it is, therefore, paramount that teachers focus on encouraging students, incentivising active participation and providing emotional support to those who struggle the most.

> *There is a different relationship with the teacher [in English lessons]. The teacher is very much connected to us and our needs, unlike in other subjects. The power imbalance is not that much there in terms of hierarchy, so things tend to happen in a much calmer, fun, and more natural way. (Student, School C)*

In Portugal, the curriculum for English covers the four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) in a balanced manner from Grades 3 to 11. However, when implementing the curriculum, the four skills do not seem to be equally present in English lessons. According to teachers and students participating in the case study, there is still generally a focus on grammar and listening. Teachers explained that writing is less common, as these activities and the associated marking and feedback are time intensive. Speaking is also practiced less, with teachers citing large classes and students' shyness or lack of confidence as key barriers, as well as a lack of time to ensure all students actively participate in group speaking activities. Some teachers feared that, in small group activities, students switch to Portuguese and disengage.

> *Perhaps, writing [is the most challenging as] it's what they do least in class. […] We don't tend to practice writing and then sometimes when they have a test, they are asked to write a composition or something and they don't have much practice. Even in Portuguese they don't. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *Writing, we have a problem. Houston, we have a problem. We don't have time. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *It's the most difficult part, to make [students] speak. They understand, but speaking is very difficult. (Head of English, School A)*

Students also considered speaking and writing to be the hardest skills to master, with the exception of three students in School B who highlighted reading as being the most challenging.

In the lesson observations, teachers mostly used English, but students often used Portuguese among themselves. This was supported by the student questionnaires, where most of them reported sometimes speaking Portuguese in their lessons. Some of the teachers reported that more efforts are needed to include speaking activities in the earlier grades to generate a habit of speaking English. These teachers feel that there is a gap between lower and upper secondary education, with some teachers in earlier years focusing mostly on grammar. From Grade 10 onwards, students take a compulsory oral evaluation as part of their school-level assessments, which introduces more of a focus on speaking. Students and teachers mentioned this lack of continuity.

> *Until ninth grade, [students] only learn grammar. Grammar is important if we can use it to speak and to write. But if we spend until ninth grade, lots of years, only learning grammar, how will we learn how to speak and write? (Teacher, School C)*

In addition, one teacher expressed a desire to use more English in the classroom or to make this the sole language spoken but felt that this is impossible given the diverse proficiency levels in each class as it would alienate students with low language proficiency.

### *Supporting all students to thrive in mixed-ability classes is seen as a challenge*

All the teachers and school leaders interviewed strongly expressed their willingness to support low-performing students. For students with special educational needs, there are specific adapted measures such as an individualised curriculum, adapted conditions for assessment, use of specific equipment and tools and support from specialised professionals, sometimes in the classroom (European Commission, 2023[10]). The English teachers participating in the case study found these measures helpful

but were frustrated that they did not reach all the students that would benefit from them. This includes students who may have an undiagnosed special need; those with a weak level of English; and low-performing students who struggle in all subjects, including English.

Within lessons, teachers reported trying to provide differentiated supports for students. As seen in the lesson observations, this includes providing more teacher support or translation for certain students and allowing them to use additional support material. In addition, the schools conduct diagnostic assessments at the start of the school year to measure students' English language proficiency, although teachers acknowledged that the results are not always acted upon due to time and other resource pressures. Furthermore, teachers explained that students do not like teachers to allocate different tasks according to students' language proficiency, as it is perceived as being "unfair". Some teachers added that this approach would also involve more time for lesson preparation, which is not possible, especially in the current context of teacher shortages in Portugal (see below).

In Portugal, students in Grade 10 have a spare hour in their weekly schedule that schools can choose how to organise. In School B, the leadership team and teachers decided to dedicate this hour to English. During this time, students are grouped by ability level and there are more teachers available to provide support than in regular English classes. The English teachers in the school spoke very positively of the impact of this arrangement and wished to implement it in other grades too. However, given that the flexible hour is not available in every grade, this is not possible.

In general, teachers felt that their capacity to adapt instruction to the needs of different students within class is not sufficient given the diversity of English language proficiency levels within each group of students. As such, teachers offer measures outside the classroom. Free, additional English support outside lesson time is available on a voluntary basis in all the case study schools; this is also typically available for Portuguese and mathematics. However, both school leaders and teachers acknowledged the limits of this initiative, as teachers often do not have enough available hours to dedicate to extra support, there are clashes in student and teacher schedules, and the students perceived as having the greatest need for support often lack motivation to attend. Indeed, several teachers noted that it is more common for high-performing students to attend additional sessions than the lowest performing students. To try and overcome this, some teachers mentioned that they also provide support via online platforms, including outside school hours.

> *It's like a cat and mouse situation where we try and convince underperformers to stay after school but it's very difficult to make them do so. (School leader, School B)*

Another key strategy implemented across schools is peer mentoring and peer support. Through this strategy, the school or teacher pairs a high-performing student with a low-performing one. The "buddies" often sit together in class but are also expected to support each other outside class. As well as supporting struggling students, some educators described these initiatives as helping to challenge high-performers further and promoting a sense of collaboration among peers. These initiatives are voluntary in each school and, again, some students decide not to participate.

Participating teachers generally felt that given the diverse levels of proficiency in English in each class, they cannot always adequately support all students. All lessons observed were with mixed-ability classes covering a wide spectrum of English proficiency, sometimes from A1 to C1. When asked what could help them better support students' individual needs, teachers had several different suggestions with little consensus among them. Some felt that ability grouping would be helpful while others suggested having more than one teacher in a class. Some believed that it would be better to improve the structures already in place, in particular the extracurricular support. Nevertheless, teachers across the three schools agreed that smaller classes would increase their capacity to offer individualised support to students. In 2019, there were 22 students per class in lower secondary education, on average, in Portugal, compared to the OECD average of 23 (OECD, 2019[13]).

> *The school tried grouping classes by ability before but in my opinion it doesn't work. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *I wouldn't mind having another English teacher in class. I wouldn't mind at all. That would be very helpful. […] It would be a dream come true. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *If we [English teachers] have 15 students, more likely they'll be able to engage with each other than 28 or 30, because there is always a group lost in the crowd doing something else or talking to each other in Portuguese. (Teacher, School C)*

Teachers also felt that schools should provide more support to students who arrive in the middle of the school year, many of whom have an immigrant background and may have little experience of English instruction or formal schooling. The teachers felt that they do not have sufficient time to provide these students with the individualised support they need. One teacher also noted that it is sometimes school policy to provide incoming students whose first language is not Portuguese with additional Portuguese lessons instead of English lessons. This exacerbates the challenge for English teachers.

> *Even yesterday, there was a new student in my class! And that's a problem that we also have, is that almost every week we receive students. […] We have that situation almost every day, it's ridiculous. (Teacher, School A)*

Specific supports and programmes to challenge high-performing students were less common across the case study schools. Some schools referred to having exchange programmes or extracurricular activities which usually attract students with a high proficiency in English. However, as one school leader explained, given resource constraints, schools typically take the decision to focus on the students who are struggling the most.

> *[The school] has to cater for different needs and of course, we try to focus on high-performing students [too]. We'd like to do more, but it's not possible. What we do essentially is try to attract them to the mentorship programme, where they can offer what they do best. (School leader, School C)*

### *Schools seek opportunities for students to practice their English outside lessons*

The English teachers and school leaders in all three schools are motivated to organise opportunities for students to engage with English through extracurricular enrichment activities. Examples include field trips to plays in English or to a local film festival with English language films, an annual whole-school Spelling Bee, an annual creative writing contest in English and a reading scheme in which students are encouraged to read books in their own time, including in English.

Teachers and students consider these activities beneficial for students' English and enjoyable. However, due to time requirements, financial cost and the need to co-ordinate with other school subjects, extracurricular activities of this nature are not easy to co-ordinate and are not as common as the educators would like. Several teachers reported that they are not able to organise many of these activities due to a lack of dedicated resources and a heavy teaching workload. In addition, some teachers noted that the voluntary nature of such activities means that they typically attract students with greater proficiency in English and not necessarily those who could benefit the most.

> *I would suggest more school trips and more study visits. A while ago we visited an interactive theatre [in English] and that was very good. I hope we could do more of that. (Student, School A)*
>
> *The [teacher] shortage means that most of our teachers have to do extra [teaching or support] hours which really limits opportunities to do extracurricular hours. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *We are always on the lookout for [extracurricular] activities and that's something that still has to be developed. We don't have that many opportunities where English is a must. (Head of English, School A)*

Participating students are also eager to increase their use of English outside lessons. In particular, they expressed wanting to participate in international exchanges, typically highlighting the importance of interaction with native speakers and of "experiencing" a culture and a language instead of just "studying" them. Teachers also stressed the importance of exchanges for providing students with opportunities to use English in a practical, authentic context, where students experience the advantages of knowing the language first-hand. Other benefits such as learning about other cultures, becoming comfortable with speaking the language and gaining an international perspective were also mentioned. A school leader claimed that exchanges allow students to develop an open mindset and a European sense of citizenship.

> *Instead of just focusing on the culture, it would be important to experience it. (Student, School A)*
>
> *The Erasmus programme has greatly contributed to this…multiculturalism and an attitude of openness. (School leader, School C)*

The extent to which the case study schools in Portugal are involved in exchanges varies, but they all look to expand such opportunities. This was repeatedly expressed by all three groups of participants when asked to identify things they would wish to improve about English language teaching and learning. However, they identified several challenges, too. First, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted school priorities and disrupted relationships that had been built with partners abroad; this negative impact is still present in School A, which, at the time of the visit, had not yet managed to re-start its former exchange programmes. Furthermore, on an even more intense scale than other extracurricular activities, language exchanges require one or several committed teachers to look for opportunities and funding and organise the country visit and reciprocal hosting. In one school, teacher shortages were, therefore, identified as having a direct impact on the school's capacity to engage in exchanges. School C, which has a major focus on exchanges, has a full-time member of staff working on Erasmus programmes and is in the process of becoming an Erasmus-accredited school to increase and diversify exchange opportunities for students, including vocational and adult learners.

## What resources support English teaching and learning in schools in Portugal?

### *Teachers and students have mixed feelings about the use of textbooks*

English teachers in Portugal typically follow a textbook, which is based on the national English curriculum and certified by accredited bodies (Directorate for Education, n.d.[14]). Teachers and schools have the autonomy to decide which of the accredited textbooks to use. Since 2016, Portugal has been phasing in the supply of free textbooks and by 2019 this extended to all students in compulsory education (Office of the Assistant Secretary of State and Education, 2019[15]).

Both teachers and students participating in the case study feel the textbooks are useful in structuring learning and as a self-study guide. They are also seen to be a source of activity ideas for teachers. However, a lot of them also described the textbook content as uninteresting, repetitive and outdated, particularly when dealing with topics related to technology and the environment. English teachers in all schools explained that, when possible, they research on line or elsewhere for complementary material. This allows teachers to tailor the content to their students' interests and learning needs as well as to choose relevant, up-to-date material to increase student engagement. However, as some teachers explained, this is not always possible, as searching for resources or developing their own material takes time.

> *I think textbooks are good for self-study, but classes should be different. (Student, School A)*
>
> *English textbooks are not interesting, the students don't like them. I don't like them, so if I'm bored, they will be bored. (Teacher, School A)*

> *Because they have the books, we need to use them because we need to justify the fact that they have the book. So we are condemned to using them, in a way. It's very annoying. (Teacher, School A)*

### *The use of digital resources is increasing, bringing both opportunities and challenges*

School leaders and English teachers pointed to an increase in the use of digital resources since the COVID-19 pandemic. The Recovery and Resilience Facility (European Union, 2021[16]), a temporary instrument of the European Union to mitigate the social and economic consequences of the pandemic, financed measures for the digitalisation of school education, providing Portugal with a budget of approximately EUR 500 million (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[9]).

In this context, as part of the Digital School programme (2020), the government has been providing laptops to all students and teachers in compulsory education, starting with the socio-economically disadvantaged. The number of students with a personal laptop has increased; however, this does not necessarily translate into them being used regularly in the classroom. In the case study schools, many English teachers explained that parents are often reluctant for their children to bring their laptop to school, as students may lose or damage it. There are also infrastructural barriers, such as the number of available plug sockets in classrooms to charge students' laptops. Nevertheless, teachers notice that students are increasingly familiar with digital equipment for learning and several explained that there has been an increase in the use of digital resources in classroom activities and homework.

> *Tenth grade [students] are for the first time using the computers in class and so it's much more difficult to manage that type of student. For the eleventh grade [students] it's almost automatic, they know, they come into class, they have their computers, and they do the activities very easily. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *Now the students have the digital kit so it's much easier for them to access the Internet and so, of course, my classes are different than last year's. (Teacher, School A)*

In the interviews, teachers and students shared three common uses of technology. Teachers often use a projector or screen to guide the lesson and to share online resources with the whole class. These include videos and other material from the Internet, as well as digital activities provided by the textbook publishers. Teachers also use online games and quizzes via platforms such as Kahoot!, which seemed very popular among students. Lastly, teachers reported often using online platforms for students to hand in their work, for them to provide feedback and for other administrative purposes.

> *I give feedback through Teams. For [students], it's easier. (Teacher, School A)*

Beyond these routine uses of technology, the OECD team also observed some more creative activities during the lesson observations. For example, an English teacher in School B had asked students to conduct a research project in small groups. Students had to develop and administer an online survey, analyse the data, participate in their peers' surveys and prepare a presentation to share the results with the class. The activity was fully in English. In School C, the OECD team observed a lesson in which the teacher provided quick-response codes to small groups of students. The codes directed each group to a short video. Students watched the video individually on their mobile phones and with their own headphones and then, as a group, completed a worksheet and prepared a short presentation about the video to deliver to the whole class. At the end of the lesson, each group used what they had learnt from their classmates' presentations to compete in a final online quiz, which included questions on the topics of all the videos.

When asked about their views on the use of digital technologies, teachers and school leaders stressed the importance of understanding digital technologies as a support for learning, not as the focus or the objective of English lessons. They also reported some benefits of using digital technologies for teaching English, including for monitoring students' progress and accessing online resources to help plan more engaging lessons. Having accessible devices also had practical implications, such as the possibility of projecting the

digital textbook to the whole class for group exercises or to support students who may have forgotten the physical book.

> *I even make them have a digital notebook. It's easier for me to check if [students] are working or not, if they are doing what I ask or not. It's actually easier, instead of collecting notebooks I have it in an [online] notebook which I have access to. (Teacher, School A)*

Most students reported liking the use of technologies in English lessons as it makes classes more engaging. The lesson observations in all schools supported this claim, particularly when technology was used for games or quizzes. Teachers explained that maintaining students' attention is increasingly hard and that they use apps, websites or online resources with this objective in mind.

> *Because it's a competition and we want to win it's very motivating, so it ends up having a positive effect because it makes us study in order to be prepared to try to win. (Student, School B)*

Despite these benefits, teachers identified some challenges of using digital technologies. Although all the case study schools had digital equipment in the classrooms, including a projector and screen, a computer or laptop for the teacher, and audio equipment, teachers repeatedly highlighted that the hardware and software can be unreliable, which creates uncertainty. It was partly for this reason that teachers in School A wanted a dedicated classroom for teaching English or other languages (see below). Other challenges relate to financial constraints, which limit the accessibility of certain online resources. As an example, in School C, English teachers have recently had to stop using a digital application through which they were developing assessments because it became subscription-based after the pandemic. As the school has no funds for this resource, one English teacher decided to bear the cost personally. Finally, a small number of teachers also lacked confidence when it comes to using digital technologies in the classroom and would like more dedicated professional development.

> *For me some of the challenge is that I don't feel comfortable with some of the digital materials. I don't master them. I don't really know how to use them. As a teacher, I have to say that because I haven't been trained for that. I have been teaching English for the past 34 years, so obviously at the beginning of my career we didn't have this kind of things and all of a sudden, we are flooded with lots of things. So we don't know which one is best, how am I going to learn this and that. (Teacher, School C)*

### *Teachers want a dedicated space for leaning languages in school*

In all the case study schools, English language lessons take place in ordinary classrooms, shared with other subjects. Teachers and school leaders in two of the schools mentioned the need for a "language lab", which they described as a dedicated space for foreign language teaching and learning. Appropriate arrangements could include, for example, language-related posters on the walls or a seating arrangement that would facilitate small group discussions for speaking activities. Some English teachers felt that always teaching in the same space could also facilitate the use of digital technologies and specialised material such as dictionaries would also be more easily accessible.

> *We don't have a language lab which, although I'm not an English teacher, I think is essential for language learning. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *Having a room where [English teachers] have this kind of audio and visual equipment in place…means they can teach English in a more practical, technical and professional way. (School leader, School B)*

One teacher from School A added that a language lab could also support students with low proficiency in English. Currently, the extracurricular support is provided in the same space and at the same time as support for Portuguese and mathematics. If the school established a language lab, students would be clear on where to go for support if they are struggling with English specifically. School A was in the early stages of developing a language lab; it was at the top of the English teachers' wish list:

> *[The English teachers] are trying to assemble a specific classroom for languages, but we haven't seemed to be able to get that in motion. We are struggling because we have other contingencies, like the working hours of each teacher. We are getting older so we have less time to do those activities. It's a bit complex to explain, it has to do with rules and a lot of bureaucratic details. It's been a bit difficult to get that in motion, but we are trying to get a language lab – that's how we call it. We have the project done, we just need to get it started. A classroom and specific teachers to work there. We need the resources. (Head of English, School A)*

### *Teacher shortages in Portugal are causing challenges for English teachers*

Most of the interviewed teachers were satisfied with their decision to become an English teacher. They explained they particularly enjoy interacting with students and observing their progress. All teachers reported using English outside of their work. Nearly all had completed a university degree on English language, sometimes together with a second specialisation in Portuguese or German. They had then completed a master's programme to become English teachers. Two of the English teachers also teach a second foreign language, in both cases German.

> *I've been teaching English for 30 years and I am happy with my choice. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *[Choosing] the English language was the best choice I've made. I have been teaching for 21 years. I like it a lot. (Teacher, School B)*

However, teacher shortages, across subjects and education levels, are currently a major challenge in Portugal, partly due to large numbers of the current teacher cohort approaching retirement and a reduction in the perceived attractiveness of the profession (European Commission, 2022[17]). In PISA 2022, 62% of students were in schools whose principal reported that a lack of teaching staff hinders the quality of instruction at least to some extent. It is estimated that the country will need around 34 500 newly qualified teachers by 2030 to avoid shortages (Catela Nunes, Balcão Reis and Mesquita Gabriel, 2021[18]).

Although high for several subjects, in the case study schools, teacher shortages for English were seen to be particularly problematic. Interviewed teachers hypothesised that this is because young people with a high proficiency in English and university credentials have a wide choice of possible careers in tourism or other sectors that are seen to be more attractive than teaching. One school leader and several teachers also raised concerns about the level of training that incoming (replacement) teachers receive.

> *In an ideal world, I would like to have better teachers. As a consequence of the shortages of teachers, the criteria to admit teachers have been lowered. This means we have less prepared, less trained teachers. So, I would like to get back to having teachers who are strongly qualified. (School leader, School C)*

Teacher shortages are seen to be having an impact on current teachers' workload. For example, in each of the case study schools, teachers reported having extra teaching hours to cover for human resource gaps. At the time of the visit, School C was waiting for a replacement English teacher to arrive but did not expect this to happen until the following academic year. To fill the gap, another English teacher was regularly teaching nine extra hours a week. Several of the teachers explained that teaching more hours is not necessarily the issue, but rather that this reduces their capacity to provide extra support to students who are underperforming or to organise extracurricular and enrichment activities.

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# 8 English learning in five countries: Key comparative findings

Despite the widespread policy attention English language teaching and learning has received in recent years, internationally comparable information about the ways in which students in different countries learn English is scarce. To support countries to gain insights from each other, this chapter presents findings from case studies of how 15-year-olds learn English in Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal, identifying key similarities and differences within and across countries. It explores the ways in which students in different countries encounter English outside school in both digital and real-world environments. It also considers students' and teachers' perspectives on the ways in which they learn and teach English in school, as well as the resources – including digital technologies – that are available to support learning.

## International insights into how 15-year-olds learn English

- **Students across countries are regularly exposed to English outside school with digital technologies increasing both the accessibility and frequency of these encounters.** While students and educators see the benefits of this, teachers also identify challenges, including tensions between language form or register in school and outside school, and concerns about the quality of language students are exposed to. Some feel that such increased exposure can lead students to develop an inflated sense of proficiency.
- **Countries adopt different approaches to organising the teaching and learning of English in school education.** The starting age of English instruction ranges from age 4 in Greece to ages 10/11 in the Netherlands (for most students). Expected proficiency at the end of upper secondary education varies from A2 in Israel (for some students) to C1 in Greece. In European Union countries, students are expected to learn at least two languages in addition to the language of instruction but in Israel this is only true of students in Arabic-medium education. English is compulsory in every country except Finland.
- **Across countries, writing and speaking are the skills students spend the least time practising in class, and those they and their teachers find the most challenging.** Reasons for this include the additional time required to carry out and assess written and spoken English; socio-emotional barriers to students' use of English in the classroom; and, except in Israel, the washback effect of high-stakes examinations that do not assess speaking and/or writing skills.
- **Supporting students with different proficiency levels in English in the same classroom is a key challenge across countries** except for in the Netherlands, where individualised approaches are more common. Many teachers feel that smaller classes and ability grouping would help but research indicates that changes in teaching and pedagogy are key.
- **The use of digital technologies in English language teaching varies within and across countries with some examples of teachers employing these tools to individualise learning.** However, the most common uses are related to classroom management and some teachers – as well as a few students – are sceptical about the added value technology offers foreign language teaching.

## How do 15-year-olds in different countries experience English outside school?

### *Digital technologies increase the frequency and accessibility of exposure to English outside school*

Students in all five countries reported regularly encountering English outside of school in various ways (Figure 8.1). The most frequently reported activities, referred to by all participating students, were those involving digital technologies. Students often engage with English language content through watching videos, films or series; listening to music; and browsing the Internet and social media. School leaders and teachers in several countries recognised that this frequent interaction with English in digital environments is a relatively new phenomenon, but one that touches most students and from an increasingly young age. A teacher in the Netherlands explained that as soon as today's children start engaging with digital devices, the English-speaking world opens up to them.

Many students across the five countries also reported using English to communicate with speakers of different languages either on line or offline. This includes interactions with friends and family members who do not share the same first language, or with tourists and when travelling abroad. Students in all five

countries recognised that English is typically the chosen language in such interactions. A small number explicitly explained that this status as a global *lingua franca* motivates them to be proficient in English.

### Figure 8.1. How 15-year-olds encounter English outside school

Based on reports by students and educators in Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal

Note: The size of the boxes corresponds to the frequency with which the activity was reported by case study participants across the five countries. The larger the box, the more times it was reported.
Source: Based on the responses of 15-year-olds, teachers and school leaders during case study interviews.

However, national contexts are likely to mediate this type of exposure to English. There are important shares of speakers of foreign languages in each of the case study countries, but in Israel and the Netherlands, large immigrant communities and, in the Dutch case, widely used regional languages and dialects, mean that the principal language of communication for around a quarter of the total population in each country is not the national language (Statistics Netherlands, 2022[1]; Aronin and Yelenevskaya, 2021[2]). In contrast, Portugal is relatively language homogenous: although 11% of the population was foreign-born in 2019, around one-third of these foreign nationals has Portuguese as their first language (OECD, 2022[3]).

Nevertheless, in Greece and Portugal, learners may be more exposed to different languages through tourism. In 2019, international visitors to Greece equated to around three times the total population whereas a number closer to half the respective populations visited Finland and Israel (OECD, 2022[4]). Exposure to foreign languages also comes from visiting other countries oneself: data indicate that among the case study countries, people in Finland and the Netherlands are particularly likely to travel abroad with international departures in 2019 exceeding the total population for both (OECD, 2022[4]).

Local contexts also play a role in exposure to English in offline environments. In the Netherlands, one teacher stated that exposure to English outside school was likely more common in urban centres, where immigrant communities are larger. Similarly, in Finland, a school leader explained that while in Helsinki it is increasingly possible to need English to interact with staff in cafés or restaurants, this is not the case in other parts of the country. Tourism is also experienced locally and although participants in all countries raised interactions with tourists as a form of out-of-school exposure, at least two of the schools visited in each country are in popular tourist destinations. Students in schools located away from these tourist spots are inevitably less likely to encounter foreigners in their daily lives.

In all five countries, some students (and their teachers) also referred to using English among friends with the same first language. This may be through integrating English words or phrases into first-language conversations – translanguaging – or, less commonly, using English as the principal means of communication. For many of the students, using language in this way is seen as playful and fun. However, from a teacher's perspective in Israel, it is also a social marker used by students to indicate sophistication and status. In Greece, a teacher described it as being a natural linguistic development, as anglicisms have become so common in the Greek language.

While the examples of "extramural English" described thus far are not generally done with the aim of improving English language proficiency, in all countries there were also some examples of students intentionally using English outside school to enhance their learning. This includes subscribing to an English language media outlet, reported by a student in Israel, and using language learning apps, reported by two students in Finland. Students in Greece, Israel and Portugal described intentionally watching English language media without subtitles or with English subtitles only; a student in Greece had set the language on her mobile phone to English. Individual students in Israel and the Netherlands reported interacting with siblings or parents in English with the explicit intention of improving their language skills. Finally, out-of-school English lessons were particularly common in Greece, where all students reported engaging with private language education, and Israel, where some did.

### *Out-of-school exposure supports language learning but can also create challenges*

Research indicates multiple benefits of out-of-school exposure to English as a foreign language. For children and young people, findings include a positive impact on reading and listening skills, meaning negotiation and conversation repair, as well as greater self-efficacy in relation to English language competence and benefits for identity construction as a speaker of English (Sayer and Ban, 2019[5]). The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Foreign Language Assessment (FLA) 2025 will contribute further internationally comparable evidence on this topic (Box 8.1).

Among the case study participants, students and educators across the countries typically had diverging perspectives about how encounters with English outside school can impact proficiency. Generally, students were convinced of the advantages: they identified direct linguistic benefits such as vocabulary development and the acquisition of more up-to-date terminology and expressions as well as having a low-stakes, authentic environment in which to practice content introduced in school. In contrast, although some teachers identified metalinguistic benefits such as sensitivity to the language, they and school leaders were more likely to note the indirect impact of exposure on language proficiency suggesting that it helps students understand the purpose and value of learning English, therefore motivating them to do well.

Certainly, all students participating in the case study felt that English would be useful and relevant – if not essential – to them in the future. One student in Portugal described it as "imperative", while another in Greece felt it is a "requirement" of transitioning to life beyond school, whether into higher education or employment. This is important, as students' motivation is one of the main correlates of language learning and internal, identity-related motivations are more powerful predictors of proficiency than external motivations related to social pressures (Dörnyei and Chan, 2013[6]).

Nevertheless, there were some nuances between countries in the drivers of students' motivation to learn English. In the Netherlands and Portugal, for example, students more typically saw that English could support them to study or live in English-speaking countries; those in Israel were primarily interested in the role English plays as a language to communicate across cultures. In Greece there was a focus on the employment opportunities that come with knowing English. This aligns somewhat with international data: recent analysis indicates that the demand for English language skills in the domestic labour market in European countries is particularly strong in Greece, where around half of vacancies advertised on line in 2019 required some degree of English language proficiency (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023[7]).

### Box 8.1. Learning about out-of-school exposure through internationally comparable data

One of the goals of the Programme for International Student Assessment Foreign Language Assessment (FLA) is to describe the relationship between students' performance in English as a foreign language and their background and experiences outside school, identifying the factors that seem to have the greatest impact on proficiency. The FLA can also reveal how out-of-school exposure and proficiency relate to certain student or school-level characteristics, such as gender, socio-economic background, and rural or urban setting, providing insights into aspects of equity.

The FLA will ask students about the different ways in which they encounter English outside school. This may include English exposure through the media, visits to other language communities or face-to-face exposure and use of English. The FLA will also explore background-related factors through student and parent questionnaires. This may include information about parents' English proficiency, family support for English learning, and the perceptions and attitudes of students' families and peers towards English in general and English language lessons in particular.

The insights provided by the FLA can support schools and governments to take evidence-based decisions about how best to foster out-of-school exposure and provide insights for parents into how best to support their child's language learning. In addition, some aspects, such as language background, will provide important contextual information for comparing proficiency data across students and countries. Some of these factors can even be considered outputs in themselves, such as comparing exposure to media content in English across countries.

There was little consensus among participants as to which out-of-school activities have the most impact on students' language acquisition. In Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal, several students and a few teachers identified watching films, series or videos in English as particularly useful. In the Netherlands, one teacher noted online, interactive gaming and common-interest online communities (e.g. fan-based sites) as having a greater impact than other activities. These impressions align with findings from research (Sayer and Ban, 2019[5]). In Portugal, a teacher explained that there is a clear difference in proficiency between students with part-time jobs that require some interaction in English and those without.

In general, though, teachers were more measured than students regarding the extent to which out-of-school activities can influence language proficiency and many in all five countries identified both advantages and challenges. Some questioned the specific linguistic value of such activities. A teacher in Portugal raised concerns about the accuracy of the language students are exposed to. Similarly, a teacher in Israel felt that English use on social media is not linguistically useful, recognised that, from their perspective, its advantage lies more in it being a window into a global world where English is a predominant language.

Several teachers in Finland, Greece and the Netherlands suggested that the frequent use of English outside formal education can give students a misplaced sense of their own competence. This may demotivate students or lead them to find formal lessons frustrating or boring. It may also give them the (false) impression that they do not need to study or work hard for English lessons or assessments in

comparison to other subjects. This so-called “authenticity gap” has been raised in previous research with students in upper secondary education (see Henry and Cliffordson (2015[8])). In Israel, a teacher reported that this attitude also puts added pressure on English teachers, as students can be more critical.

In the Netherlands and Portugal, teachers were also concerned about the lack of connection between the two learning contexts (school and out-of-school), whether that be in terms of the type of English (British English versus North American English), register (formal versus informal) or goals and content (e.g. grammar and vocabulary development versus communication). Teachers in two schools in the Netherlands noted that students can pick up non-standard uses of language and then implement them in inappropriate contexts; both used the example of some students not knowing that “gonna” should be “going to” in formal or written contexts.

The tension between English learning inside and outside school was also evident in Greece, although there the challenges relate to tensions between formal schooling and non-formal private language education. Several interviewees – school leaders, teachers and students – saw the prominence of private education as problematic for the teaching of English in schools. The very different objectives (e.g. holistic development versus preparation for language certification) and organisational structures (e.g. large, mixed-ability groups versus smaller, ability groups) lead to automatic comparisons in the eyes of many students and families, who are seen as typically favouring the private settings.

Finally, teachers in several countries recognized challenges related to the heterogeneity of out-of-school exposure across different groups of students. As well as exposure varying by geographical location, as described above, there may also be a cultural dimension. In Israel, it is not uncommon for students to live with one or more parents that are native English speakers or have English-speaking relatives abroad. Similarly in Finland, teachers in a very multicultural school noted that non-Finnish speaking students more often use English with each other. In the Netherlands, however, one teacher described the reverse: students that speak a language other than Dutch or English at home are sometimes less exposed to English outside school, choosing to engage primarily with their own first language. In Israel, where English is a second or third additional language[1] for many learners, educators in one school reported that they encourage students to focus on practising their Hebrew more than their English outside of school.

Variation may reflect socio-economic differences too. In Israel, teachers explained that students whose parents have the financial means are more likely to attend summer camps, make international friends and continue these relationships over time. They also more commonly receive private tutoring. In the Netherlands, educators raised concerns that students from advantaged families are more likely to take part in bilingual programmes and international exchanges although recent reforms may change this (see Chapter 6). In Greece, where private language education is widespread, participants felt that only a very small minority of the most disadvantaged families would not fund additional English instruction for their children. These socio-economic inequities mirror those found in school-based language learning: on average across OECD countries, students in socio-economically advantaged schools spend almost one hour more per week in foreign language lessons than those in disadvantaged schools (Salinas, 2021[9]).

Although not a widely expressed opinion, some teachers in Portugal suggested that there may be an association between a students’ level of English, their enjoyment of the language and the extent to which they use it outside school. This sentiment was echoed by two students in Greece. This may contribute to exacerbating the heterogeneity in language proficiency among students in the same class, which was identified as a key challenge in all five countries.

## How do students' experiences of English in school compare across countries?

### *The organisation of English language instruction differs across countries*

Countries take varying decisions regarding the organisation of language learning in school education (Table 8.1). These are influenced by a different prioritisation across subjects but also different views regarding the ideal starting age, intensity and duration of instruction to maximise learning and optimise resources (OECD, 2020[10]). Research currently does not offer any clear answer as to the best way to organise foreign language education in schools; the PISA FLA aims to help address this knowledge gap through internationally comparable insights (Box 8.2).

#### Box 8.2. Investigating best practices in organising English language teaching and learning through internationally comparable data

The general framing for the teaching and learning of a foreign language is often determined by system- and school-level policies, guidelines and practices. However, research does not provide clear answers regarding the ideal structural arrangements. In a comparative study of European education systems, earlier onset was found to correlate with higher proficiency (European Commission, 2012[11]). But other research indicates that contextual and individual factors have more influence than age of onset and some researchers suggest that starting in secondary education is more effective (see Marconi et al. (2020[10]) for an overview). There is more consensus regarding intensity of instruction, with a strong correlation between the time spent learning a language at school and proficiency, although this is inevitably mediated by the quality of teaching and other factors (OECD, 2020[10]).

One of the aims of the Programme for International Student Assessment Foreign Language Assessment is to describe the general framing for learning English as a foreign language at school in the countries and economies participating in the assessment, and to investigate the impact this may have on learning outcomes. For this, four constructs will be explored:

1. the age at which students start learning English at school
2. the hours dedicated to learning
3. the size of English classes
4. the language of instruction and the other languages, if any, students study at school.

Sources: European Commission, (2012[11]); Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, (2023[7]); OECD, (2020[10])

Among the case study countries, Greece has the earliest starting age for English, with introduction from pre-primary school. Greece also has the longest duration for compulsory English language instruction (14 years) and the highest expected proficiency at the end of upper secondary education (equivalent to C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference [CEFR]). In contrast, in the Netherlands, there is no compulsory starting age and many schools decide not to introduce English until the final years of primary education (i.e. age 10). Dutch schools also have autonomy over the number of hours of English instruction. For 15-year-olds, the intensity of English language instruction is the highest in Israel, where all students have four hours of English lessons per week. However, in Portugal, the intensity of instruction depends on students' study choices.

Learning multiple foreign languages can also affect language proficiency. Equipping young people with the skills to communicate in two languages in addition to the language of instruction by the end of secondary education is a key goal in the European Union's (EU) language policy. In the four EU case study countries,

students are expected to study at least two additional languages, with timetabling for up to five in Finland. In Israel, only students in Arabic-medium schools study two languages – English and Hebrew.

## Table 8.1. The organisation of formal English language instruction in the case study countries

| | Finland[1] | Greece | Israel | Netherlands[2] | Portugal |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Compulsory language learning in school education** | Two languages, one of which must be the other national language | English plus an additional foreign language | English plus Hebrew for Arabic speakers | English plus an additional foreign language | English plus an additional foreign language |
| **Starting age and grade of compulsory English language instruction** | 7 years old Grade 1 | 4 years old Pre-primary | 8 years old Grade 3 | N/A | 8 years old Grade 3 |
| **Modal education level and grade for 15-year-olds** | Lower secondary Grade 9 | Upper secondary Grade 10 | Upper secondary Grade 10 | Upper secondary Grade 10 | Upper secondary Grade 10 |
| **Compulsory instruction hours of English language per week for 15-year-olds** | (7 hours) | 2-3 hours | 4 hours | N/A | 2.5 hours |
| **Duration of compulsory English language instruction** | 12 years | 14 years | 9 years | N/A | 10 years |
| **Expected proficiency in English language at the end of upper secondary education[3]** | B1 (all skills) | C1 (all skills)[4] | A2-B2 (all skills) | Reading B1-C1 Listening B1/A2-B2 Writing B1/A2-B2 Speaking A2-B2 | B2 (all skills) |
| **National standardised external examination of English proficiency at the end of upper secondary education** | Yes, optional matriculation examination (reading, listening and writing) | Yes, optional Panhellenic examination (reading and writing) | Yes, optional matriculation examination (all skills) | Yes, mandatory (reading only) | Yes, mandatory[5] (reading, listening and writing) |
| **Typical qualification for English language teachers** | Master's degree with English as a major or minor subject | Bachelor's degree in English language and literature and Certificate of Pedagogical and Teaching Competence | Bachelor's degree Teaching license | Bachelor's degree in Education or certificate of higher professional teacher education following a Bachelor's degree in another subject | Master's degree in Education and Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature |

1. In Finland, starting age, minimum proficiency and number of hours applies to the first additional language studied by students. In Finnish-medium education this is nearly always English. For the compulsory number of instruction hours, the time allocation must reach this number in total across the three years of lower secondary education.
2. In the Netherlands, schools have autonomy over the age of introduction and number of instruction hours.
3. Expected proficiencies are expressed as the equivalent level on the Common European Framework of References. In Israel, the expected proficiency differs according to the final examination level for which students are preparing. In the Netherlands, expected proficiency differs according to the track students follow in secondary education.
4. In Greece, this refers to expected proficiency for students in general upper secondary pathways only.
5. In Portugal, the English examination is mandatory for successful completion of upper secondary education, depending on students' study choice.
Source: Information reported to the OECD by countries.

However, student preferences and school resources appear to limit the variety of languages learnt. English is a compulsory additional language in all the countries except Finland. Yet there, as in Greece, the Netherlands and Portugal, interviewees highlighted the privileged position of English compared to other foreign languages: 15-year-olds are much more motivated to learn English and are more likely to see its value and relevance compared to other foreign languages. In 2021, around 96% of children in

Finnish-medium schools chose to study English as their first additional language (Vipunen, n.d.[12]). This is either due to parental preference or, increasingly, because municipalities only offer English in Grade 1 (Finnish Government, 2021[13]). In Finland, and to some extent the Netherlands, there are concerns about the narrowing effect the increasingly dominant presence of English is having on young people's language repertoire. However, in both cases, these views were not expressed by participating students or teachers themselves.

### *Students and teachers see speaking and writing as the most challenging skills*

Across the world, Communicative Language Teaching, which emphasises learner-centred pedagogies and meaning making over traditional didactic approaches and linguistic knowledge, typically underpins foreign language curricula. This approach focuses on developing students' receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing) skills both individually and in an integrated manner.

Despite their different national contexts and organisational structures for English learning, it is notable that teachers and students across several countries felt that one or both of the productive skills is the hardest to teach or learn, as well as being the skill or skills they spend the least time on in lessons. While in Israel and Portugal answers varied between writing and speaking, there was consensus among teachers in Finland that speaking is the most challenging skill for students to practice in class and master, although students' responses were more mixed. In the Netherlands, in alignment with findings from national research, many teachers and students reported a focus on grammar and vocabulary in lower secondary education and reading in the final years of upper secondary at the expense of speaking and listening. Views were much more mixed in Greece and seemed dependent on the teacher's or school's approach.

With regards to the teaching of productive skills, participants across countries identified similar challenges: a lack of class time to administer extended writing or speaking tasks and the additional time required to assess these tasks and provide feedback. Some teachers also suggested that speaking and writing are more challenging because students are less likely to use these skills outside school.

Barriers specific to each of the two skills also emerged. For writing, some teachers and students in Israel identified the language distance of English from Hebrew and Arabic as a key challenge. In the Netherlands and Portugal, some teachers suggested that challenges in writing in English reflect wider problems with general literacy skills among today's learners.

For speaking, teachers in each country identified socio-emotional challenges. For example, in Finland, Israel and Portugal, they pointed to a lack of self-confidence among students as a key barrier. In Finland, a teacher observed that this is particularly true among teenagers and was exacerbated by the isolation experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Israel, teachers in one school reported that they purposefully spend less time on speaking in class due to students' shyness. Some teachers in Portugal also reported that classroom and behaviour management are more challenging when conducting speaking activities. Students, on the other hand, were more likely to point to linguistic challenges. Several of the 15-year-olds in Finland gave reasons related to pronunciation and vocabulary. In Greece, some felt that the immediacy of spoken communication and the need to practice a lot to "master" it makes it difficult.

The design of high-stakes examinations may also contribute to the perceived challenge of productive skills although this was only raised as a possible factor in the Netherlands. Israel is the only case study country to include a compulsory speaking component in the national standardised examination of English in upper secondary education (Table 8.1). While examinations in Finland and Portugal cover the three other skills, only reading and writing are examined in Greece and in the Netherlands, only reading is assessed via a national standardised test. This is important as high-stakes examinations can have a strong washback effect on student learning, often determining what teachers focus on (OECD, 2013[14]). Indeed, teachers in the Netherlands reported that reading dominates English teaching in upper secondary education. Careful assessment design can influence teaching and learning more positively: in Israel, one school leader

reported that the introduction of a computerised oral assessment in the matriculation examination has strengthened students' focus on speaking skills.

Perhaps linked to the perceived challenge of teaching spoken English, there is a clear desire among students and their educators for more authentic opportunities to use the language. This sentiment was particularly strong in Finland and the Netherlands. In all countries, many students wanted to speak English in the case study interviews. Furthermore, when asked to identify something that would enhance their English learning, several students, as well as their teachers and school leaders, wished for more trips to English-speaking countries and to receive international visitors in school. In the Netherlands, when asked to name three things that they would wish for to improve the teaching and learning of English in their school, all three school leaders focused on providing international exchanges for their students. In Israel, students and teachers gave insights into how they try to have more authentic opportunities for spoken English in their lessons: this included roleplay and drama-based activities, as well as debating and conversational practice with English speakers in the community (see Chapter 5).

Results from the PISA FLA will offer new insights into students' proficiency in different skill areas, as well as possible relationships between skills, background factors and students' characteristics (Box 8.3).

### Box 8.3. Comparing English language proficiency in different skills through international data

Productive skills are typically recognised as being harder to master than receptive skills. In previous international assessments of foreign language proficiency, students performed higher in reading and listening than in writing (European Commission, 2012[11]). Among the case study countries, when assessed, speaking skills have been mixed. In the Netherlands, average speaking proficiency among 17-18 year-olds reaches or exceeds targets for each secondary track and is typically the strongest skill (Fasoglio and Tuin, 2018[15]). In contrast, for 15-year-olds in Finland, speaking skills were considerably lower than reading and listening skills in 2021 (Härmälä and Marjanen, 2022[16]). Although the reliability of these results requires further investigation, the general trend aligns with a 2018 study of the same students (see Chapter 3).

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Foreign Language Assessment (FLA) will provide a description of students' proficiency in English as a foreign language in three skills: reading (comprehension), listening (comprehension) and speaking (spoken production). This will enable investigation into the ways in which student proficiency varies across these skills, if at all. It will also explore how different background factors relate to each of these skills. For example, is the use of English in class related to a higher performance in speaking? Does an early onset have a different effect on reading than on listening? What are the gender differences in students' proficiency in the three skills? Moreover, as the PISA FLA is an optional module available to countries and economies participating in PISA 2025, it will also offer insights into the relationship between reading performance in the language of instruction and reading proficiency in English as a foreign language.

Sources: European Commission (2012[11]); Fasoglio and Tuin (2018[15]); Härmälä and Marjanen (2022[16]).

### *Supporting students with different proficiencies is a common challenge for teachers*

Nearly all teachers and school leaders across the case study countries raised meeting students' needs as a key challenge in English language classrooms. For most, different needs were discussed in terms of a large range in language proficiency, which could be from A1 to C1 level on the CEFR in some classes.

However, the nature of the challenge was framed differently in each country. In Greece, educators feel heterogeneity is intensified by the proliferation of private language education. In Israel, the range in

proficiencies was seen to be a result of wider social and economic disparities or the varying quality of instruction in primary education. In Finland, educators noted a general increase in learning needs, including learning difficulties, weak literacy, mental health or behavioural challenges, high dropout rates, and rising numbers of students with an immigrant background. In Portugal, teachers in two schools highlighted the specific challenge of receiving immigrant or refugee children in the middle of the school year. In the Netherlands, the challenge seemed more localised: most teachers agreed that the initial range in proficiency caused by different starting ages in primary education quickly resolves itself in lower secondary.

Various strategies to meet the needs of both low- and high-performing students were observed across schools in all five countries (Table 8.2). However, certain country-level characteristics emerge. In Portugal, there was a clear emphasis on supporting low-performing students through peer tutoring or mentoring, and extra support from the English teacher outside normal lesson time either virtually or in-person. In one school, this extra support was provided through an additional instruction hour per week of English for students in Grade 10 although this measure was not available to all grade levels nor in all schools.

### Table 8.2. Strategies used in case study schools to support low- and high-performing students

Based on reports by students and educators and/or lesson observations

| | Level | Strategy | Finland | Greece | Israel | Nether-lands | Portugal |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| For low-performing students | Classroom | Enhanced teacher support | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | | Diagnostic assessment / formative feedback | | | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | | Seating arrangements/group work | ■ | ▒ | | ▒ | ▒ |
| | | Special needs support (in class) | ▒ | | | | |
| | School | Extra lesson time in the curriculum | | | ■ | ■ | ▒ |
| | | Extra support from teacher outside lessons | ■ | ▒ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | | Special needs support outside lessons | ■ | ■ | | ■ | ■ |
| For low- and high-performing students | Classroom | Learning activities at different levels | ■ | ■ | ▒ | ■ | ▒ |
| | | Occasional team teaching | | | ▒ | ▒ | |
| | | Peer support/peer mentoring | | ▒ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | School | Ability grouping with flexibility | | | ■ | ■ | ▒ |
| | | Pathways with individualised learning | | | | ▒ | |
| For high-performing students | Classroom | Assigning specific responsibilities | | ■ | | | |
| | School | Assigning extra learning activities | ■ | ▒ | ■ | ▒ | ▒ |
| | | Extra-curricular activities (including exchanges) | ■ | ■ | ▒ | ■ | ■ |
| | | In-school language certification | | | | ■ | |
| | | Accelerated examination/grade progression | ▒ | | ▒ | ■ | |
| | | Specific advanced English programme | ▒ | | ▒ | ▒ | |

Notes: The information in the table corresponds to strategies as reported by students, English teachers or school leaders in case study interviews or as seen in lesson observations. The shaded cells refer to the number of schools the strategy was reported or observed in. The absence of a strategy does not imply that it does not exist in a school or country, rather that it was not reported or observed during the case study visits.

■ Reported or observed in two or more schools

▒ Reported or observed in one school

□ Not reported or observed

Source: Based on school visits in Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal.

While peer mentoring was also an important strategy identified in Israel, there, unlike in Portugal, it is common to have extra learning time built into the curriculum for lower achieving students. Moreover, teachers in upper secondary schools are required to devote six lessons a week to individual instruction. In some schools this is particularly targeted to students who are almost eligible to move from Level 4, the

second-highest level, to Level 5, the highest. In Finland, interviewees concentrated on the official support model introduced in 2014 which envisages three levels of support across all subjects, emphasising the use of the second level whereby students are referred to an in-house special needs teacher. Supporting students beyond standard lesson time was less common in Greece, where the focus is on teacher initiatives in the classroom and private language education is often seen as a source of remedial support.

In all five systems, teachers reported that high-performing students receive less attention than low-performing students. Beyond specialised programmes in Israel and the Netherlands, both of which apply a content and language integrated learning approach, supports for these learners generally rely on the English teacher's willingness to commit additional time to setting and reviewing extra work or organising extra-curricular activities, and on the student's motivation to improve.

In Israel and the Netherlands, structural factors support teachers to target instruction to learners' proficiency level, as students have well-defined target proficiencies based on ability. In Israel, the final matriculation examination at the end of upper secondary education is available at three levels and students work towards a target level based on their proficiency. In the Netherlands, this is achieved through the different secondary tracks into which students are organised at the end of primary school. Furthermore, in the Dutch schools, there was a clear culture of individualising learning to meet each learner's needs, which may be facilitated by broader system-level factors (see Chapter 6). Notably, there was much less focus on the difficulties posed by mixed-ability classrooms in the Netherlands than in the other case study countries.

Nevertheless, educators in all countries raised common persistent challenges. This includes a perceived lack of time in teachers' schedules to meet all students' needs (Finland, Greece and Portugal); a lack of human resources whether that be English teachers (Israel and Portugal) or specialist support staff (Finland and Portugal); or the additional workload for teachers (Finland and the Netherlands). There are also obstacles perceived to be coming from the students themselves, such as a lack of willingness to engage with the extra support on offer (Finland and Portugal), opposition to receiving extra or differentiated work (Finland, Greece and Portugal), or reluctance to engage with non-traditional teaching methods (the Netherlands).

When asked what would improve their teaching or learning of English generally, or in relation to supporting students with different needs specifically, two clear themes emerged. In all countries, several of the students and teachers wished for smaller classes. In Israel, the number of students was reported to reach 35-40 per class in the case study schools, partly due to increased pressures due to teacher shortages. In other countries, the classes were smaller. However, in each country, students and teachers alike referred to large class sizes as a hindrance to the learning of English and smaller classes was one of the most common responses when students and teachers were asked what they feel could improve English learning.

In Finland, Greece and Portugal, some educators called for students to be taught English in groups determined by ability. In Greece, all teachers raised this as a desire, highlighting the private language education sector's capacity to have small classes grouped by ability as being a competitive advantage over schools. In Finland and Portugal, teachers were more divided in their attitudes towards ability grouping. Research offers some insights into whether these approaches could help (Box 8.4). Israel is the only case study country where ability grouping was a common practice in the schools visited; nevertheless, teachers there still perceived considerable challenges related to supporting students' needs.

### Box 8.4. Findings from research into the impact of class size and ability grouping

Although the case study teachers are not alone in wanting smaller, more homogenous classes, research as to the cost-benefits of this suggests caution. In general across school subjects, beyond specific advantages for very young learners, those with very low attainment and students with special needs, there is only a weak association between smaller classes and student performance (OECD, 2018[17]). Meanwhile, data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) cycles in 2022 and 2018 indicate that differences in mathematics and reading performance between students who attend schools that sort students into different classes by ability and those that do not tend to be small at school level and non-existent at country level (OECD, 2020[18]; 2023[19]). Ability grouping within classes, a more common practice, seems to have a negative impact on performance (OECD, 2023[19]). Other research suggests there are profound negative equity effects for all learners (Hattie, 2008[20]).

Nevertheless, there may be benefits beyond student performance. Smaller classes can facilitate certain pedagogical approaches such as student-centred interaction, peer collaboration and active learning (all features of impactful foreign language pedagogy), and differentiation and individualisation (essential strategies to support students with different needs) (Blatchford and Russell, 2020[21]). Ultimately, the quality of teaching and the nature of the student interactions matter more than classroom composition: the benefits of class size reduction or ability grouping will only be felt if they lead to more impactful pedagogical practices.

Sources: Blatchford and Russell (2020[21]); Hattie (2008[20]); OECD (2023[19]; 2020[18]; 2018[17]).

## What resources support English teaching and learning in schools in different countries?

### *Digital technology use varies and not all teachers see an added value for languages*

Today's digital technologies offer teachers and learners easy access to a range of foreign language material, enhanced reading or listening experiences, scope for greater collaboration and interaction beyond the classroom, and support for individualised approaches to learning (see Chapter 2).

The availability and use of digital technologies in English language teaching varies across the case study countries (Table 8.3). In Finland and the Netherlands, classrooms were generally well-equipped with digital tools, including a teacher device, a projector, audio equipment and/or an interactive whiteboard. While in most countries, all teachers had access to a computer in the classroom, it was less common for students to have their own device, except in the Netherlands and Portugal, where all students had access to a laptop or tablet provided by the school or local authority. Students also use mobile phones in the classroom, although this may have changed recently: the Dutch government has announced a ban on the use of personal smartphones, tablets and smart watches in school (Government of the Netherlands, 2023[22]).

School culture and teacher preferences clearly impact the extent to which digital technologies are used in foreign language classrooms. In the Netherlands, teachers in one school felt they use digital technologies less than in other schools due to a more traditional pedagogical culture. In Greece, the use of digital technologies was much higher in the Model school, an academically selective school intended to be a centre of excellence and innovation. A teacher highlighted this difference, explaining that the quality of the digital infrastructure plays a key role. In Finland, in one school the school leader spoke of efforts to increase the use of digital technologies by providing all students with devices and teachers with professional

development; however, the teachers interviewed clearly remained sceptical about the benefits digital technologies could bring to their English lessons.

Based on the lesson observations and teacher and student interviews, in all countries, digital tools are principally used in English language teaching to facilitate or enhance traditional approaches. This includes supporting classroom management by increasing engagement. For example, with the exception of two schools in Greece, all teachers and students reported using game-based platforms to test learning and online media and other web content as stimuli for classroom activities. Teachers also commonly use technology to facilitate giving instructions or the administration of homework, either by creating a lesson presentation or using a virtual learning environment.

Nevertheless, during lesson observations, there were also some notable examples of using technologies to individualise learning. In a Finnish school, students worked independently on their own laptop throughout the lesson, going through the teacher's presentation and completing written tasks at their own pace. In a lesson in the Netherlands, the teacher directed students to a website where they could practice grammar and vocabulary exercises according to their own target level. In one Portuguese school, students were working on a project where they had to develop, administer and analyse an online survey in English and prepare a visual presentation to report the findings to the rest of the class.

### Table 8.3. Digital technologies used in English language teaching in case study schools

Based on reports by students and educators and/or lesson observations

| | Finland | Greece | Israel | Netherlands | Portugal |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher device (provided by school/municipality) | | | | | |
| Student devices (provided by school/municipality) | | | | | |
| Student mobile phones | | | | | |
| Interactive whiteboard | | | | | |
| Projector | | | | | |
| Audio equipment | | | | | |
| Learning management system | | | | | |
| Game-based platforms/applications | | | | | |
| Digital textbook | | | | | |
| Computer lab or dedicated space for webinars/calls | | | | | |
| Online media (e.g. songs, videos, web content) | | | | | |
| Digital resource bank | | | | | |
| Other web content | | | | | |
| Artificial Intelligence-powered text or image generators | | | | | |

Notes: The information in the table corresponds to strategies as reported by students, English teachers or school leaders in case study interviews or as seen in lesson observations. The shaded cells refer to the number of schools the strategy was reported or observed in. The absence of a strategy does not imply that it does not exist in a school or country, rather that it was not reported or observed during the case study visits.

Reported or observed in two or more schools

Reported or observed in one school

Not reported or observed

Source: Based on school visits in Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal.

In general, however, there was little evidence of teachers using digital tools in ways that take advantage of the specific benefits technology offers foreign language learning such as to facilitate collaborative or interactive experiences or to support written or spoken production. Similarly, in the interviews, the benefits of digital technologies identified by teachers and students – which included increasing engagement, better

aligning with students' interests and digital habits, facilitating lesson planning, or marking – are applicable to any subject. The only subject-specific benefit interviewees identified was the ability to integrate non-pedagogical English language material into learning activities more easily.

The related challenges identified by teachers and some students were in line with obstacles identified more widely in the research into technology use in foreign language teaching (see Chapter 2). In Greece in particular, challenges were related to a shortage of adequate digital resources. This includes, for example, an unreliable Internet connection and a lack of devices for students and equipment for teachers. In some countries there were also more attitudinal barriers: several teachers in Greece and the Netherlands, and some students in Greece highlighted the need for balance between digital and traditional approaches, and passive and active uses. In Finland, teachers questioned the pedagogical added value of digital technologies both in terms of the quality of digital resources available or speculating that the use of digital technologies can have a limiting impact on students' interaction and communication in the classroom.

### *English teachers enter the profession for different reasons but typically enjoy their work*

Across the case study countries, participating English teachers typically have the language of instruction as their first language but speak many other foreign languages in addition to English. In Finland, they all speak at least one additional language, typically Swedish, but also German, Spanish and Turkish; all but one teach one of these languages as well as English. Speaking multiple additional languages was less common in Israel and the Netherlands, where only around half of teachers reported knowing another language and none teach other languages. In Finland, Greece and Portugal, all teachers had taught age groups different to the one they currently teach, including several who had taught adult learners and, in Greece, many who had taught in settings beyond schools, typically in non-formal language education.

Teachers across the countries described different motivations for becoming an English teacher and different sources of job satisfaction now they are in the role. In Finland, interviewees typically cited being good at or liking English as the key motivation to join the profession, while in Greece, it was more often related to positive working conditions and employment opportunities, particularly in comparison to teaching English in non-school settings. In Israel and Portugal, motivations varied between teachers, covering those already cited as well as a desire to teach, particularly to teach languages or English, and direct inspiration from one of their own English teachers. In the Netherlands, nearly all teachers reported not having wanted to be an English teacher initially, although they are now satisfied with their career choices.

Some of the case study countries are experiencing teacher shortages that impact English teaching in different ways. In Israel and Portugal, teacher shortages are a major challenge across subjects and education levels. In Israel, where they mainly affect Hebrew-medium schools, interviewees explained that this results in larger English classes. In Portugal, impacts included English teachers having to take on extra teaching hours and to provide additional support to emergency replacement staff who may not have the experience or qualifications expected of standard English teachers. In both countries, teachers emphasised that this makes supporting the needs of all learners and providing extra-curricular activities much harder. In Greece, teacher shortages were less of a challenge, although there are some difficulties related to the large number of non-permanent teachers in the system, which can cause extra pressure at the start of the school year. In Finland and the Netherlands, although some subjects are experiencing teacher shortages, the case study schools did not report that this was affecting English teaching.

In Israel and Portugal, where shortages concern English teachers in particular, educators noted that, as English skills are in high demand on the job market, tertiary-educated people with English proficiency can get higher paid jobs in different sectors. This indicates a key irony in English teaching today. The importance of English for communication on a global labour market helps teachers to motivate students to engage in their English lessons and practice English outside school. It also means that English instruction is receiving more political attention than ever before. However, it may also be demotivating future English teachers from entering the profession, creating a complex situation some school systems must navigate.

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## Notes

[1] Throughout this report, the phrase "additional language" is used to refer to any language that is not the learner's first language and/or the language of instruction. This encompasses both foreign languages and official languages or those with special status in countries formally recognising more than one.

PISA

# How 15-Year-Olds Learn English

## CASE STUDIES FROM FINLAND, GREECE, ISRAEL, THE NETHERLANDS AND PORTUGAL

This report takes the reader into the lives of young people in Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal to explore the question: how do 15-year-olds learn English? Gone are the days when learners only encountered English for a couple of hours a week in a classroom. For today's teens, English is often the preferred language of communication in increasingly diverse online and offline communities. Yet relatively little is known internationally about how students learn English inside and outside school, and the resources available to help them. This report presents country findings from interviews with 15-year-olds, English-language teachers and school principals and wider background research, as well as a comparative chapter on key international insights. The report also explores how today's digital technologies can support learners to develop foreign language proficiency. These findings support the forthcoming PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment through which the OECD will generate comparable data on students' proficiency in English in different countries and on the factors related to it.

Co-funded by
the European Union

PRINT ISBN 978-92-64-48735-2
PDF ISBN 978-92-64-59150-9

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