

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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