


# Teaching in Focus #33


Foreign language teachers  
as ambassadors of  
multilingualism and international  
exchange: Evidence from  
TALIS 2018



Teaching & Learning



# Foreign language teachers as ambassadors of multilingualism and international exchange: Evidence from TALIS 2018

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- On average across TALIS countries and economies, 18% of teachers teach modern foreign languages. Most modern foreign language teachers (63%) teach another subject category in addition.
  - On average across TALIS countries and economies, foreign language teachers are more likely than other teachers to feel prepared for multicultural and multilingual teaching, and to report that this topic was included in their formal education or training.
  - Foreign language teachers have a wider range of international mobility experiences than other teachers, including travelling with their students: 24% of foreign language teachers have accompanied visiting students abroad (compared to 13% of other teachers), on average across TALIS countries and economies that administered this question.
  - Foreign language teachers are six percentage points more likely than other teachers to use ICT in the classroom, on average across TALIS countries and economies. This may imply that they are better prepared than other teachers to use ICT in order to give students access to multicultural and multilingual content in a period of restricted travel.
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In today's world, globalisation, technological innovation and human migration have made interactions between people from different countries and cultures almost inevitable. In this context, being able to communicate in more than one language has become a key skill with important economic benefits for individuals and economies. However, the relevance of learning other languages goes beyond improving communication: it also promotes the understanding of the complexity of cultures and languages and allows students to learn about other visions of the world. These are important prerequisites for active participation in a globalised world. Therefore, learning a foreign language can act as a powerful tool to increase intercultural skills, enhance global co-operation and discover new and innovative ways of thinking and working together (OECD, forthcoming).

Being aware of these benefits, many countries are placing increased emphasis on foreign language teaching.

This *Teaching in Focus* brief will explore the specialisation, training and mobility of foreign language teachers. For the purpose of this brief, foreign language teachers are defined as lower secondary teachers who report teaching the “modern foreign language” subject category, irrespective of what other subject categories they teach.<sup>1</sup>

## What is TALIS?

The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), established in 2008, is the first major international survey of teachers and school leaders on different aspects that affect student learning. It gives a voice to teachers and school leaders, allowing them to provide input into educational policy analysis and development in key areas.

The international target population for TALIS 2018 is lower secondary teachers and their school leaders in mainstream public and private schools. In each country, a representative sample of 4 000 teachers and their school principals from 200 schools was randomly selected for the study. Some countries also opted to survey teachers and school leaders in primary or upper secondary schools, as well as in schools participating in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Across all survey components, approximately 260 000 teachers responded to the survey, representing more than 8 million teachers in 48 participating countries and economies.

An OECD average is estimated based on the arithmetic average of lower secondary teacher data across the 31 OECD countries and economies participating in TALIS. The report refers to the average teacher “across the OECD” as equivalent shorthand for the average teacher “across the 31 OECD countries and economies participating in TALIS”.

More information is available at [www.oecd.org/education/talis](http://www.oecd.org/education/talis).

## Foreign language teachers are a substantial part of the teaching force

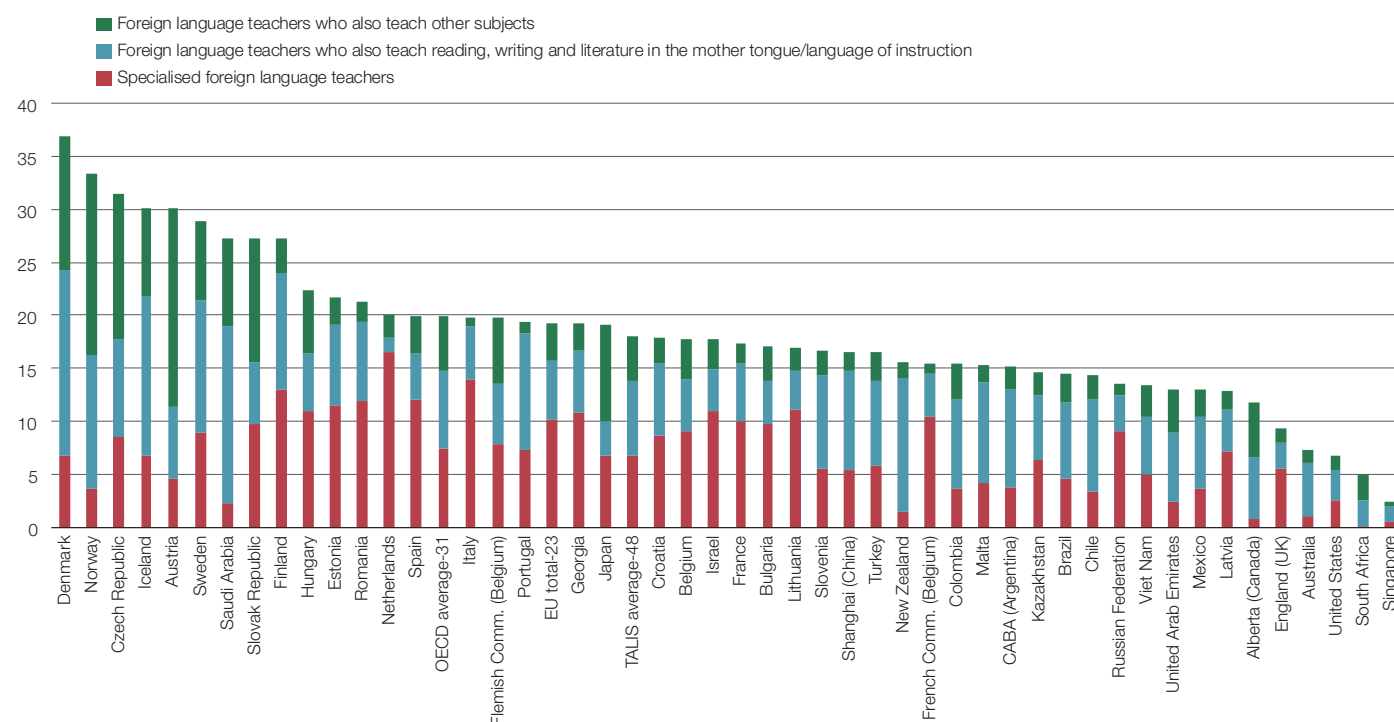
TALIS asks teachers to report which subject categories they teach in the current school year. Teachers can report teaching any combination of 12 subject categories, including “modern foreign languages”, “reading, writing and literature” in the students’ mother tongue or language of instruction, “mathematics”, “science” and “ancient Greek and/or Latin”.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of teachers who report teaching modern foreign languages in TALIS 2018, broken down by the other subjects they teach. On average across TALIS countries and economies, 18% of teachers teach modern foreign languages, but with large differences across education systems. In Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Iceland and Norway, 30% of teachers or more report teaching modern foreign languages (some also teach other subjects). In contrast, this proportion is lower than 10% in Australia, England (UK), Singapore, South Africa and the United States.

On average across TALIS countries and economies, foreign language teachers are more likely to be female and slightly younger than other teachers (Tables 1, 2 and 3<sup>2</sup>). The proportion of male teachers is 22% among foreign language teachers, compared to 33% among other teachers, on average across TALIS countries and economies. The proportion of foreign language teachers who are aged 40 or older is 58%, compared to 61% for other teachers.

Only a minority of foreign language teachers specialise, meaning that they teach only modern foreign languages (Figure 1). On average across TALIS countries and economies, the proportion of specialised foreign language teachers is 7%. The proportion of specialised teachers is particularly large in some European countries, for example, the Netherlands (16%) and Italy (14%).

**Figure 1. Proportion of foreign language teachers**  
Percentage of lower secondary teachers currently teaching the following subject categories



**Note:** The total height of the bar represents the total proportion of teachers who report teaching “modern foreign languages”. “Specialised foreign language teachers” are those who report teaching only modern foreign languages. “Foreign language teachers also teaching other subjects” are those who report teaching other subject categories in addition to modern foreign languages (except for “reading, writing and literature”, which is reported separately in the chart). CABA = Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (Argentina).

**Source:** OECD, TALIS 2018 Database; [www.oecd.org/education/talis/TIF\\_33\\_Tables\\_Foreign\\_Language\\_Teachers.xlsx](http://www.oecd.org/education/talis/TIF_33_Tables_Foreign_Language_Teachers.xlsx), Table 1.

Most foreign language teachers are not specialised, and also teach other subject categories. The most common subject category taught by foreign language teachers is “reading, writing and literature” in the students’ mother tongue or language of instruction (42% of foreign language teachers, on average across TALIS countries and economies) (Table 4). On average across the OECD, other subjects commonly taught by foreign language teachers are “social studies” (25%), “arts” (21%), “technology” (20%), “mathematics” and “science” (both 19%).

## Box 1. Foreign language teachers in primary and upper secondary education

The proportion of specialised foreign language teachers is significantly smaller in primary education than in lower secondary education for all but one of the 13 countries and economies with available data (Table 1\_I1). This may explain why the proportion of teachers who report teaching modern foreign languages is significantly larger in primary education in 9 of the 13 countries and economies with available data (in Denmark, in contrast, it is significantly smaller). These differences are particularly noticeable in France, where 73% of primary teachers report teaching modern foreign languages (compared to 17% in lower secondary education), but fewer than 1% report teaching only this subject category (compared to 10% at the lower secondary level).

In 4 out of the 11 countries and economies with available data on upper secondary education, there is no significant difference with lower secondary education in terms of the proportion of teachers who report teaching a modern foreign language, or in terms of the proportion of specialised foreign language teachers (Table 1\_I3). In the other seven countries and economies, the proportion of foreign language teachers is smaller in upper secondary than in lower secondary education. In five of these seven countries, the proportion of specialised foreign language teachers is also significantly smaller in upper secondary than in lower secondary education. For example, in Croatia, 14% of all upper secondary teachers report teaching modern foreign languages (compared to 18% in ISCED 2) and 6% of these teachers report teaching only this subject category (compared to 9% in ISCED 2).

## Foreign language teachers receive similar types of training to other teachers, but with some notable differences in the content

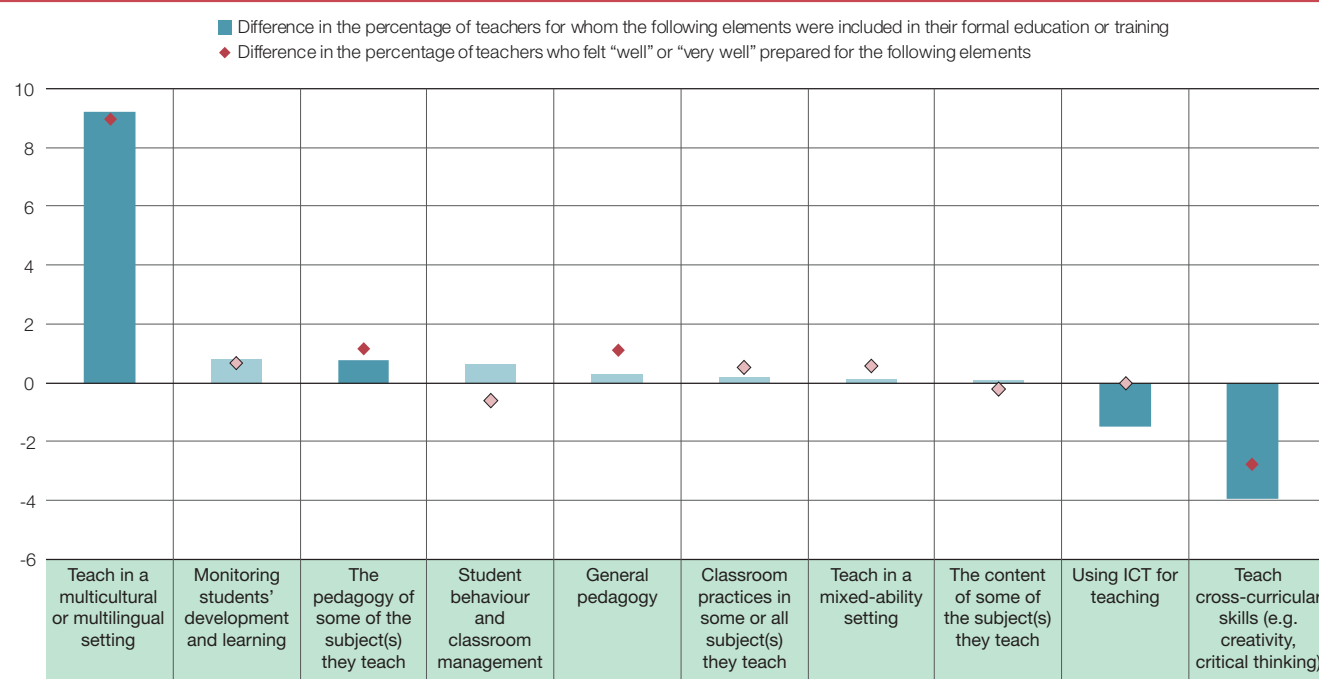
TALIS asks teachers how they received their first teaching qualification, and the responses show that there are no substantial differences among foreign language and other teachers (Tables 5 and 6). On average across the 32 TALIS countries and economies that answered this question, almost the same proportion of foreign language (59%) and other teachers (58%) report that they received their first teaching qualification through a regular concurrent teacher education or training programme, i.e. a single credential for studies in subject-matter content, pedagogy and other courses in education. Another 24% of both foreign language and other teachers received their first qualification through a regular consecutive teacher education or training programme, meaning that they completed two phases of post-secondary education.

Teachers also answer questions about the elements included in their formal education or training, and on how prepared teachers felt in related areas of teaching. This reveals interesting differences (shown in Figure 2) between foreign language and other teachers, even after controlling for their age, gender, teaching experience and for the proportion of students from disadvantaged homes in their classroom. On average across TALIS countries and economies, foreign language teachers are nine percentage points more likely than other teachers to report that “teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting” was included in their formal education or training, as well as to report that they feel “well” or “very well” prepared for this type of teaching. The largest differences are observed in Latin America, where the difference between foreign language teachers and other teachers exceeds 20 percentage points in Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (hereafter CABA [Argentina]) and in Chile in terms of the proportion of teachers reporting inclusion in formal education or training; and in Brazil, Chile, CABA (Argentina) and Mexico for the proportion of teachers feeling “well” or “very well” prepared for multicultural and multilingual teaching (Table 7).

In contrast, foreign language teachers are four percentage points less likely than other teachers to report that “teaching cross-curricular skills” was included in their education or training, and three percentage points less likely to report that they feel prepared for this type of teaching, on average across the OECD (Figure 2 and Table 7). Singapore is a notable exception, with foreign language teachers (who are only a small fraction of the teacher population) 23 percentage points more likely than other teachers to report that they feel prepared to teach cross-curricular skills (e.g. creativity and problem solving).

No significant differences between foreign language and other teachers are observed for most other areas of teaching, on average across OECD countries (when there are significant differences, their magnitude is always smaller than two percentage points) (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Content of teacher education and sense of preparedness for teaching**  
Percentage point difference between foreign language teachers and other lower secondary education teachers, TALIS average



**Note:** Coloured bars and diamonds represent significant differences. The percentage point differences between foreign language teachers and other teachers are derived through linear probability models in which a dummy variable for the inclusion of a certain topic in education/training or for the teacher's feeling of preparedness is regressed on a dummy variable for being a foreign language teacher. Teachers' age, gender, teaching experience in the surveyed school, and the reported percentage of students from disadvantaged homes in the classroom are included as control variables.

**Source:** OECD, TALIS 2018 Database; [www.oecd.org/education/talis/TIF\\_33\\_Tables\\_Foreign\\_Language\\_Teachers.xlsx](http://www.oecd.org/education/talis/TIF_33_Tables_Foreign_Language_Teachers.xlsx), Table 7.

## Foreign language teachers have a wide variety of international experiences

TALIS asks teachers questions about their international mobility, and the responses show profound differences in the mobility of foreign language teachers and other teachers in many countries and economies. These questions were optional in the survey, with 36 countries and economies administering the question on overall teacher mobility and 34 administering the question on purposes for mobility.

On average across the 36 TALIS countries and economies that opted for this question, 34% of foreign language teachers have been abroad for study during their teacher education, compared to 14% of other teachers (Figure 3). This difference is particularly large in the European Union, where the proportion of foreign language teachers studying abroad during their teacher education is 52%, compared to just 18% of other teachers (estimate based on TALIS countries belonging to the European Union) (Table 8).

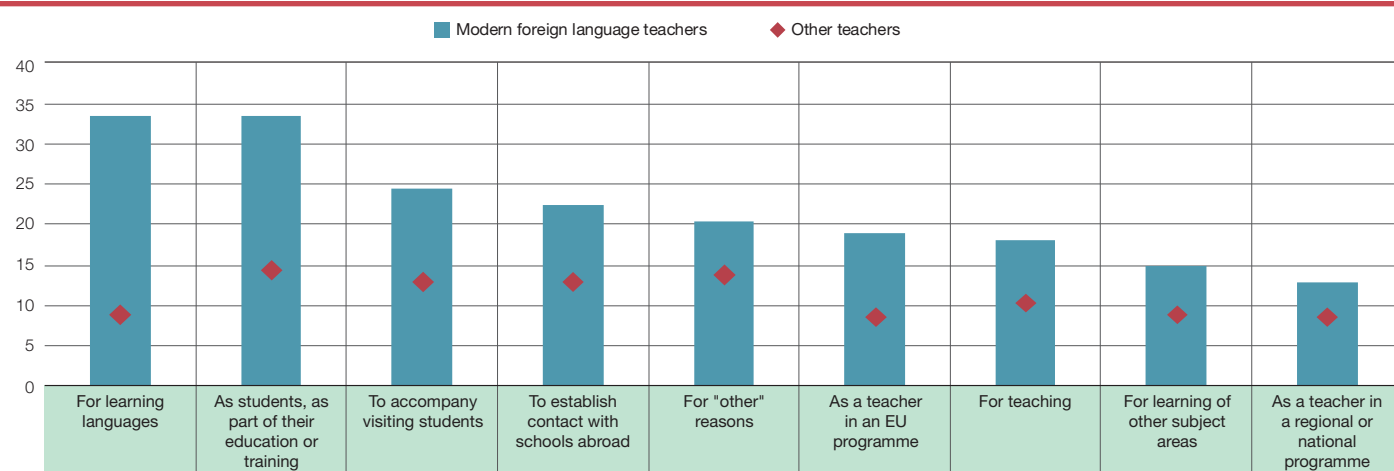
Foreign language teachers are much more likely than other teachers to report having been abroad to learn languages (by 25 percentage points), but they are also more likely to have been abroad to learn other subject areas (by 6 percentage points). In addition, foreign language teachers are more likely to benefit from the experience of teaching in a foreign country (Figure 3). On average across the 34 TALIS countries and economies that opted for this question, 18% of foreign language teachers have been abroad for teaching, compared to 10% of other teachers. The difference is especially large in the European Union, where the proportion of foreign language teachers who have taught abroad is 26%, compared to just 9% for other teachers. Foreign language teachers are significantly more likely than other teachers to have been abroad to learn languages in all education systems with available data, except for Viet Nam. They are also significantly more likely than other teachers to have been abroad for teaching in all these education systems, except for Alberta (Canada), Finland, Iceland, Malta and Viet Nam (Tables 11 and Tables 15).

Considering their higher propensity to go abroad for professional reasons, it is not surprising that foreign language teachers make more use of existing mobility schemes. On average across the 36 TALIS countries and economies that administered this question, 13% of foreign language teachers have been abroad within a regional or national programme, compared to 8% of other teachers. In addition, 19% of foreign language teachers have been abroad for professional reasons within a

European Union programme (e.g. Erasmus+, Comenius), compared to 8% of other teachers. Teachers outside European countries also make use of such programmes. For example, 13% of foreign language teachers in the United Arab Emirates and 11% in Mexico report having gone abroad as a teacher in a European Union programme (Figure 3 and Table 9).

The international orientation of foreign language teachers to move across borders extends beyond professional development (Figure 3). For example, 24% of foreign language teachers have been abroad to accompany visiting students (compared to 13% of other teachers), on average across the 34 TALIS countries and economies that administered this question. In addition, 22% of foreign language teachers have been abroad to establish contacts with other schools (compared to 13% of other teachers). In the European Union, 43% of foreign language teachers have been abroad to accompany visiting students and 29% to establish contact with other schools. By comparison, 16% of other teachers have been abroad to accompany visiting students and 12% to establish contact with other schools (Tables 13 and 14).

**Figure 3. Foreign language and other teachers who have been abroad for professional purposes, by reason for the visit abroad**  
Percentage of lower secondary teachers who went abroad in their career as a teacher or during their teacher education or training, TALIS average based on the countries and economies that opted for these questions.



**Note:** The differences between foreign language and other teachers are all significant. For the series "for study", "as a teacher in an EU programme" and "as a teacher in a regional or national programme", the average refers to the 36 countries and economies that administered the question on overall mobility; for all other series, the average refers to the 34 countries that administered the question on mobility purposes.

**Source:** OECD, TALIS 2018 Database; [www.oecd.org/education/talis/TIE\\_33\\_Tables\\_Foreign\\_Language\\_Teachers.xlsx](http://www.oecd.org/education/talis/TIE_33_Tables_Foreign_Language_Teachers.xlsx), Tables 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16.

## How will the disruption brought about by COVID-19 impact foreign language teachers?

The current COVID-19 situation has impacted international travel and will probably continue to do so in the short and medium term. Foreign language teachers will find part of their roles strongly affected, and in order to continue their international orientation they will need to find strategies other than travel. The use of ICT can help solve this problem, given its potential for long-range communication and worldwide connection. Teachers can connect with peers from other countries on line, particularly through participation in professional networks. On average across TALIS countries and economies, almost the same percentage of foreign language (49%) and other teachers (48%) participated in a network of teachers formed specifically for professional development purposes in the past 12 months (Table 18). In addition, 42% of foreign language teachers reported participating in online courses or seminars in the last 12 months (compared to 40% of other teachers) (Table 17).

By integrating ICT in their teaching, teachers can give students access to content from other cultures and language communities regardless of the limitations to travelling that are currently in place. Across TALIS countries and economies, foreign language teachers feel as well prepared as other teachers to use ICT in their teaching (Figure 2). However, they are more likely to use ICT in the classroom. On average across TALIS countries and economies, 62% of foreign language teachers report that they "frequently" or "always" let students use ICT for projects or classwork in TALIS 2018, compared to 56% of other teachers (Table 19). Particularly large differences between foreign language teachers and other teachers are observed in Brazil (21%) and Sweden (14%).

## The bottom line

Some 18% of teachers teach modern foreign languages, typically alongside other subject categories. Foreign language teachers are more likely to have been trained in multilingual and multicultural teaching, and they feel better prepared to teach in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. This suggests that they can contribute to their schools' activities and missions in unique ways. They can help students learn how to live together in multicultural and multilingual societies, which is an important competence in a globally connected world.

Foreign language teachers are much more likely than other teachers to have studied abroad or to have been abroad for a variety of professional purposes. This makes them more likely to become their school's "international ambassador": for example, foreign language teachers are much more likely than other teachers to accompany visiting students abroad, or to have been abroad to establish contact with other schools.

The limits to international travel that have been imposed in the current crisis will constrain the opportunities for these teachers to participate in and promote international exchanges and experiences. However, ICT can provide students with access to content from other cultures and language communities. Many foreign language teachers may already be prepared for this, and most already use ICT frequently in their teaching.

## Notes

1. In this *Teaching in Focus* brief, a TALIS average is estimated based on the arithmetic average of lower secondary teacher data across the 48 OECD countries and economies participating in TALIS. However, for some items, only a selection of countries and economies opted to include them in their questionnaires. These exceptions are duly noted in the appropriate sections. In the last section of this brief, a European Union total is estimated based on lower secondary teacher data across the member countries that took part in the item involved.
2. The tables referred to in this *Teaching in Focus* brief can be found at: [www.oecd.org/education/talis/TIF\\_33\\_Tables\\_Foreign\\_Language\\_Teachers.xlsx](http://www.oecd.org/education/talis/TIF_33_Tables_Foreign_Language_Teachers.xlsx)



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## For more information

OECD (forthcoming), *PISA 2024 Foreign Language Assessment Background Questionnaires Framework*, Paris, OECD

The tables referred to in this *Teaching in Focus* brief can be found at:

[www.oecd.org/education/talis/TIF\\_33\\_Tables\\_Foreign\\_Language\\_Teachers.xlsx](http://www.oecd.org/education/talis/TIF_33_Tables_Foreign_Language_Teachers.xlsx)

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