

The figures behind language learning

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In this age of globalisation, there is a growing interest for being able to communicate with others in languages different from one's own mother tongue. Gaining proficiency in non-native languages is increasingly desirable and keenly sought after by individuals, education systems and society as a whole. In this new context, the world of language learning is evolving very quickly. Nowadays there is considerably more at stake for the language learner to demonstrate proficiency given the implications for greater mobility and employment opportunities. As a result, more importance is being given to language placement testing and accreditation. This upturn in interest is also apparent from the scope of resources being used to further language learning, such as research in neuroscience, collaborative language learning initiatives and self-study options. There is no shortage of sources of data for observing the wide array of aspects related to language learning which, in turn, can help to assess its impact on society and help shape strategies and policies for the future.

'If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.'

Nelson Mandela,

former President of South Africa.

LANGUAGES IN THE WORLD, MULTILINGUALISM AND PLURILINGUALISM

English is the language of trade, science, media, academia, the Internet, diplomacy, aviation and tourism, with one in four people using it globally (OECD, 2016) and is, therefore, the lingua franca of the globalised world. At the same time, this lingua franca means that there is less emphasis on learners obtaining a strict native speaker competence given that currently the number of non-native speakers of English surpasses that of native speakers. In its table of the most spoken languages worldwide, Statista.com updates the 2017 figure to 1,500 million people worldwide who speak English, of whom only 375 million are native speakers.

To be able to communicate internationally for both travel and employment, learning additional

languages is also a must. This can foster a more profound understanding of cultural diversity and can help citizens to have a distinct advantage in the global employment market. In most strategic documents regarding the statistics of language learning the knowledge of more than one language is commonly known as multilingualism. Nonetheless, with a view to encouraging pupils to study a more diverse array of languages and to reduce the dominant position of English, the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*¹ published in 2001, made the distinction between multilingualism and plurilingualism, defining multilingualism as being the 'knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society' and plurilingualism, as a term to describe the 'attempt by the speaker or language learner to use flexible communicative competence to understand speakers of other languages in different situations'. This is achieved when citizens apply both linguistic knowledge and a crossover between languages and cultures, enabling them to function in a multicultural community, albeit with a limited command of those languages. A visual example of this can be found in the interactive map of statistics regarding plurilingualism from the organisation CDRC. This map (see Figure 1), combines a novel approach of visualising geospatial and socioeconomic data, calculated from the 2011 National Statistics census to show areas of London where foreign languages are spoken by more than 3% of the local population.

Qualitative data regarding this focus on plurilingualism can be found in the LUCIDE project on urban languages. This source contains city reports, which provide an overview of language learning issues in European, Australian and Canadian cities in the areas of education, economic life, public, and private spheres together with the viewpoints of the citizens who live in these cities. For example, the London borough of Tower Hamlets pays a community language honorarium to members of staff who regularly use a language other than English to communicate with public service users.

¹ https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf

Another interesting source with language learning data series is the **Ethnologue**, as it is regularly updated with raw data available for conducting research and analysing demographics. It provides comprehensive profiles for all the 7,099 recognised languages of the world. This information source offers statistics ranging from the distribution of languages in the world by number of native (L1) speakers; lists of the largest languages of the world according to population of first-language speakers and the distribution of languages in the world by their status in terms of language development or language endangerment.

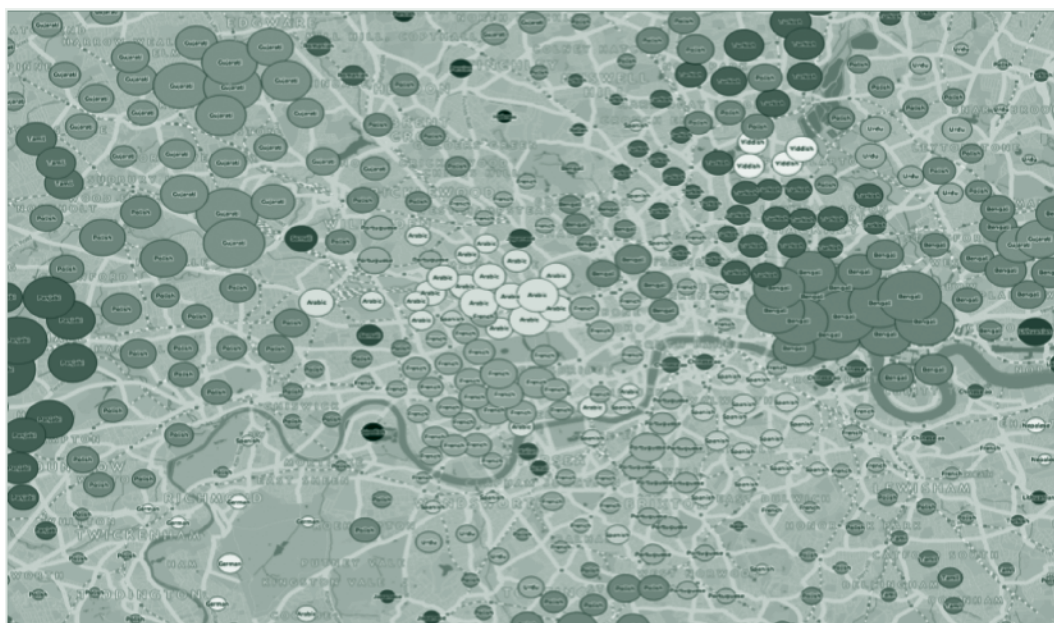
LANGUAGE SKILLS FOR GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS AND STUDENT MOBILITY

The OECD puts language learning figures into context by focusing on specific aspects for improving adult skills in order to help nations benefit from globalisation and to enable governments and individuals address the challenges that internationalisation and Global Value Chains (GVCs) provide. In its publication **OECD Skills Outlook 2017: Skills and Global Value Chains**, the spotlight is placed on data regarding the share of pupils in the European Union learning

English as a foreign language and the proportion of tertiary education programmes provided in English. This data points to the need to undertake specific policies to foster the internationalisation of education and research systems, highlighting the provision of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in tertiary education. This provision allows tertiary education institutions worldwide to attract students from abroad, thus enabling them to compete with those from English-speaking countries.

Along the same lines, in 2008 the European Commission set out the objective for all citizens of the EU to achieve proficiency in two languages as well as their mother tongue. It is evident that tertiary education has taken heed and has endeavoured to enhance international attractiveness. Spanish universities, for example, have undertaken large steps in recent years to implement policies that focus on language learning and internationalisation to promote the acquisition of a sufficient level of English for teaching and administrative staff alike. For students, studying and working abroad not only requires a certain level of language proficiency but it also improves both language and intercultural skills, which constitute a key condition for employability. There is, however, still scope for improvement as far as mobility is concerned.

Figure 1. Areas of London where foreign languages are spoken by more than 3% of the local population



Source: Oliver O'Brian http://tubecreature.com/#/tongues/current/same/*/*TFTF/12/-0.1000/51.5200/

The university statistical indicators from the Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training indicate that in Spain the number of international students in 2016 made up 5.95% of the total number of students enrolled in Degree and Masters studies, whereas the number of outgoing students through mobility programmes for the same year was only 2.76%.

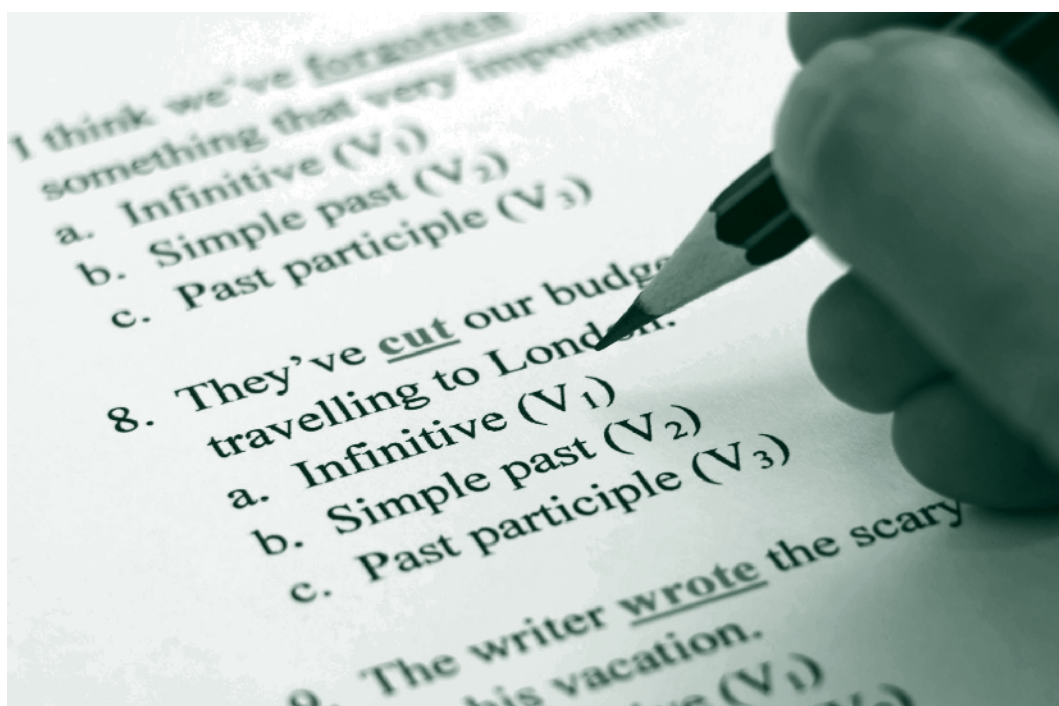
The OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills, in its annual publication 'Education at a Glance' provides an insight into the key indicators regarding educational institutions, the impact of learning across countries, areas of investment in education and country specific information. It points towards the importance of learning foreign languages for enabling individuals to develop special skills other than those pertaining merely to the language,

such as culture and global awareness. The language of instruction is a strong determinant of students' choice of destination, countries whose language of instruction is widely spoken such as English and Spanish, are invariably more attractive for international students. According to the OECD in 2013 almost 4.5 million tertiary students were enrolled outside their country of citizenship. What is more, looking ahead, the OECD estimates that the number of students seeking study abroad could double to 8 million by 2025.

LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR SCHOOLS

To gain an understanding of the language learning figures available for primary and secondary schools, Eurostat provides several data collections. The database related to **Education and Training** provides information on education and language learning, with indicators related to language learning and self-reported language skills. It provides comparable information for the EU on the number of foreign languages known, as well as levels of command and proficiency. The data can be analysed by age, sex, level of educational attainment, labour status and occupation. This report is accompanied by 'themes in the spotlight' series which presents infographics about language learning at the secondary education level for EU students and highlights that English is

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studied by 97.3%, followed by French with 33.8%, 23.1% for German and 13.6% for Spanish.

EURYDICE, the network established by the European Commission and the Member states to support European cooperation in the field of education, provides interesting reports on '*Key data on teaching languages*' at schools in Europe. The areas covered range from what languages students are learning in schools across Europe, assessment and support for migrants, to the expected level of language proficiency for students at the end of their compulsory education. Similarly, comparative data regarding testing of language competency can be found in '*Languages in secondary education: an Overview of National Tests in Europe*'. The Eurydice 'mobility scoreboard: Higher education background report' looks at national approaches to compulsory foreign language learning in schools, pointing out that the pupils more than half of the education systems have to learn foreign languages for up to 10 to 12 years and in 18 out of the 24 countries assessed, pupils in general education have to learn at least two foreign languages at the same time for five years or more.

LANGUAGES FOR COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

With around 21 million students studying Spanish as a foreign language worldwide, it is clearly becoming one of the most commonly spoken languages in the world. The annual report '*El Español una lengua viva*' published by the **Instituto Cervantes** addresses statistical data regarding the growth forecast of Spanish as a foreign language particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States. Interestingly, it points towards the competitive advantage that can be gained with Spanish as a vehicle of communication in the world of business as it touches upon the fact that the influence and potential of Spanish as an economic asset is closely related to the macroeconomic indicators of the countries where it is an official language.

The 'Languages for the Future' report published by the **British Council** analyses the UK's long-term language needs by assessing a variety of economic, geopolitical, cultural and educational indicators and by scoring different languages against these. The aforementioned indicators include cultural, educational and economic priorities. Apart from highlighting the deficiency of foreign language skills in the UK's adult population, the report

concludes that the most important language that UK citizens need to learn is Spanish followed by Arabic and in third position French. In the tables offered in the report it is noteworthy that Spanish comes out top in the figures regarding 'High growth markets and their languages', 'Languages most frequently offered as part-time evening classes in the UK' and Languages for cultural, educational and diplomatic purposes. Along the same lines, Statista.com makes reference to the financial gains to be made in the language learning market with its statistics regarding 'Market size of the global language services industry from 2009 to 2020 (in billion U.S. dollars)'. In 2016, the global language services industry market size reached 40.27 billion U.S. dollars and is forecasted to rise to 45 billion by 2020.

For more information...

- <https://www.statista.com/statistics/266808/the-most-spoken-languages-worldwide/>
- <https://www.ethnologue.com/statistics/country>
- www.urbanlanguages.eu
- http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/oecd-skills-outlook-2017_9789264273351-en
- <http://www.oecd.org/edu/education-at-a-glance-19991487.htm>
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- http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Foreign_language_skills_statistics
- <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/news/themes-in-the-spotlight/language-learning>
- https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/images/0/06/KDL_2017_internet.pdf
- <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/en/mobility-scoreboard>
- https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Publications:Languages_in_Secondary_Education:_An_Overview_of_National_Tests_in_Europe_-_2014/15
- https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/espanol_lengua_viva/pdf/espanol_lengua_viva_2017.pdf
- <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages-for-the-future-report.pdf>
- <https://www.statista.com/statistics/190462/projected-revenue-growth-in-language-services-market-by-region-by-2013/>