

Special Eurobarometer 386

Europeans and their Languages

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In accordance with the EU population, the **most widely spoken mother tongue** is **German** (16%), followed by Italian and English (13% each), French (12%), then Spanish and Polish (8% each).
- **For the majority of Europeans** their **mother tongue** is **one of the official languages** of the country in which they reside.
- Just over half of Europeans (**54%**) are **able to hold a conversation in at least one additional language**, a quarter (25%) are able to speak at least two additional languages and one in ten (10%) are conversant in at least three.
- **Almost all respondents** in **Luxembourg** (98%), **Latvia** (95%), the **Netherlands** (94%), **Malta** (93%), **Slovenia** and **Lithuania** (92% each), and **Sweden** (91%) say that they are **able to speak at least one language** in addition to their mother tongue.
- Countries showing the **most notable increases in the proportion** of respondents saying that they are **able to speak at least one foreign language** well enough to hold a conversation, compared to data from the previous edition of the Eurobarometer survey, are **Austria** (+16 percentage points to 78%), **Finland** (+6 points to 75%), and **Ireland** (+6 points to 40%).
- In contrast the **proportion able to speak at least one foreign language** has **decreased** notably in **Slovakia** (-17 percentage points to 80%), the **Czech Republic** (-12 points to 49%), **Bulgaria** (-11 points to 48%), **Poland** (-7 points to 50%), and **Hungary** (-7 points to 35%). In these countries there has been a downward shift since 2005 in the proportions able to speak foreign languages such as Russian and German.
- Few countries show a **noticeable increase in the proportion** of respondents **able to speak at least two foreign languages**, with the most marked being in **Italy** (+6 percentage points to 22%) and **Ireland** (+5 points to 18%).

However nine Member States show a **significant drop** of more than 5 percentage points: **Belgium** (-16 percentage points to 50%), **Hungary** (-14 points to 13%), **Bulgaria** (-12 points to 19%), **Poland** (-10 points to 22%), **Portugal** (-10 points to 13%), Malta (-9 points to 59%), **Luxembourg** (-8 points to 84%), **Denmark** (-8 points to 58%), and **Estonia** (-6 points to 52%).

- **Countries** where respondents are **least likely** to be able **to speak any foreign language** are **Hungary** (65%), **Italy** (62%), the **UK** and **Portugal** (61% in each), and **Ireland** (60%).
- The **five most widely spoken foreign languages** remain **English** (38%), **French** (12%), **German** (11%), **Spanish** (7%) and **Russian** (5%).
- At a national level **English** is the **most widely spoken** foreign language **in 19 of the 25 Member States** where it is not an official language (i.e. excluding the UK and Ireland).
- The **majority of Europeans who speak English, German, Spanish and Russian** as a foreign language **believe that they have better than basic skills**. Ratings of skill level are broadly similar to those seen in the 2005 survey.
- Just over two fifths (**44%**) of Europeans say that they are **able to understand at least one foreign language** well enough to be able to **follow the news on radio or television**. English is the most widely understood, with a quarter (25%) of Europeans able to follow radio or television news in the language. French and German are mentioned by 7% of respondents each, while Spanish (5%), Russian (3%) and Italian (2%).
- **Europeans are just as likely to be able to read a newspaper or magazine article** in a foreign language with just over two fifths (**44%**) of Europeans saying they can. Again English is the most widespread foreign language, with a similar proportion of Europeans (25%) able to read a newspaper or magazine article in the language. French is mentioned by 7% and German by 6% of Europeans. Spanish comes next, with 4% of answers, followed by Russian and Italian (2%).
- **Europeans are slightly less likely to say that they understand any foreign language well enough to be able to use it to communicate online** (e.g. using email, Twitter, Facebook etc.), with two fifths (39%) saying that they can use at least one foreign language in this way. Again, the most widely cited language is English, with a similar proportion of Europeans (26%) able to communicate online in the language. French and German are mentioned by 5% of Europeans each, followed by Spanish (3%) and Russian and Italian (1%).
- 54% of Europeans able to speak foreign languages are likely to use them only occasionally (69%). A quarter (25%) uses them every day or almost every day.
- **Europeans** say they **regularly use foreign languages when watching films/television or listening to the radio** (37%), **using the internet** (36%) and **communicating with friends** (35%). 27% of respondents report using foreign languages regularly for conversations at work and 50% during holidays abroad.

- The most notable changes since 2005 are an **increase in the proportion of Europeans who regularly use foreign languages on the internet** (+10 percentage points) and when **watching films/television** or **listening to the radio** (+8 points). The proportion of Europeans who do not use a foreign language regularly in any situation has fallen from 13% in 2005 to 9% in 2012.
- The **majority of Europeans do not describe themselves as active learners of languages**. Around a quarter (23%) of Europeans have never learnt a language, while just over two fifths (44%) have not learnt a language recently and do not intend to start.
- Only a minority (**14%**) **have continued learning a language in the last two years**; less than one in ten (7%) have started learning a new language in the last two years; and a similar proportion (8%) have not learnt a language recently, but intend to start in the coming year.
- Europeans are most likely to identify working in another country as a key advantage of learning a new language, with three fifths of Europeans (61%) holding this view. Just over half of Europeans (53%) perceive as such using the language at work (including travelling abroad). A slightly smaller proportion (46%) evoke here ability to studying abroad and possibility of using it on holidays abroad (47%).
- **88%** of Europeans **think that knowing languages** other than their mother tongue **is very useful**.
- Two thirds of Europeans (67%) consider English as one of the two most useful languages for themselves.
- Languages perceived as the most useful that come up right after are the following: German (17%), French (16%), Spanish (14%) and Chinese (6%).
- There has been a decrease in the proportion thinking that French is important (-9 percentage points), and in those thinking German is an important language for personal development (-5 points). **Europeans are more likely** now than they were in 2005 **to think that Chinese is an important language** (+ 4 points).
- **98%** of Europeans **consider mastering other foreign languages as useful for the future of their children**.
- Among languages perceived as such, French and German are mentioned by 20% of Europeans each, Spanish by 16% and Chinese by 14%. Around four in five Europeans (79%) consider English as one of the most useful languages for the future of the children.
- There has been a decrease (-13 percentage points) since 2005 in the proportion of Europeans thinking that French is important for children to learn for their

future and a (-8 points) in the proportion thinking German important for children to learn.

- Whilst the perception that **Chinese** is a useful language for personal development is slightly more widespread now than in 2005 (+4 percentage points), the perception of its value **as an important language for children to learn is significantly more widespread than in 2005 (+12 points)**.
- **Europeans are most likely to say that free lessons would make them significantly more likely to learn or improve skills in a language**, mentioned by around three in ten (**29%**). Around a fifth of Europeans say they would be significantly more likely to learn or improve language skills if they were paid to learn (19%), if they were able to learn it in a country in which it is spoken (18%), and if it improved career prospects (18%).
- The **most widely mentioned barrier to learning another language is lack of motivation**, with a third (34%) of Europeans saying this discourages them. Around a quarter of Europeans cite **lack of time** to study properly (28%) **and that it is too expensive** (25%). A fifth (19%) of Europeans say that not being good at languages discourages them.
- The **most widespread method used to learn a foreign language** is through lessons at school. Just over two thirds of Europeans (68%) have learnt a foreign language in this way. Much smaller proportions of Europeans have learnt a foreign language by talking informally to a native speaker (16%), with a teacher outside school in group language lessons (15%), and by going on frequent or long trips to the country in which the language is spoken (15%). Europeans are most likely to think that school language lessons are the most effective way they have learnt a foreign language.
- There is a **broad consensus** among Europeans that **everyone** in the EU **should be able to speak at least one foreign language**, with more than four in five (84%) agreeing with this view.
- Europeans, for the most part, support the EU's vision that EU citizens should be able to speak at least two foreign languages; more than seven in ten (**72%**) **agree that people in the EU should be able to speak more than one language** in addition to their mother tongue.
- The majority of Europeans (**81%**) **agree that all languages spoken within the EU should be treated equally**. Even if around seven in ten (69%) think that Europeans should be able to speak a common language this view does not extend to believing that any one language should have priority over others.
- Slightly more than half of respondents (**53%**) **agree that EU institutions should adopt a single language** when **communicating with citizens**, whilst more than two in five disapprove of this idea.

- More than three-quarters (**77%**) of respondents **think that improving language skills should be a policy priority.**
- More than two in five respondents (**44%**) **agree that that they prefer subtitles** to dubbing when watching foreign films or TV programmes, but a slightly larger proportion (52%) disagree that they prefer subtitles.
- **Europeans recognise that translation has an important role to play in a wide range of areas across society,** most notably in education and learning (76%) and in health and safety (71%). European perceive translation as important while looking for a job (68%), getting news about events in the rest of the world (67%), participating in or getting information about EU activities (60%), accessing public services (59%) or enjoying leisure activities such as TV, films and reading (57%).
- Just over two in five Europeans (**43%**) say that **translation has an important role to play in their everyday lives,** and just under one in six (**16%**) consider this role to be **very important.**

Three in ten Europeans (30%) say that translation plays no role at all in their everyday lives.