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.