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## How 15-year-olds learn English in Israel

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The OECD team visited Israel in June 2023 to explore how 15-year-olds learn English. This chapter presents findings from this case study visit and further research. It provides key information about the linguistic and educational context in Israel. It also describes the main findings from interviews with students, English teachers and school leaders, as well as observations of English lessons. The findings include insights into the interactions 15-year-olds have with English outside school, approaches to the teaching and learning of English in school, and the resources – including digital technologies – available to schools in Israel to support students to improve their English. The case study included schools from the Hebrew and Arabic state-education streams and a school from the state-religious stream.

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## A snapshot of learning English as a 15-year-old in Israel

- **English is given strong emphasis in the Israeli school system** as a mandatory subject from Grade 3 onwards and with a significant weight in the final examination from upper secondary school. Students feel motivated to learn the language and perceive it as a prerequisite for pursuing a career, whether in Israel or abroad. This focus on English reflects its growing significance within parts of Israeli society, particularly in academic and business life, and for communicating with tourists and the important immigrant population.
- **Israel has implemented a level system for the instruction of English in upper secondary education** wherein each student strives to attain proficiency corresponding to levels A2, B1 and B2 of the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR). This level system groups students by ability and is seen as the foundation for offering targeted support, fostering student motivation and facilitating peer learning among students.
- **Schools in Israel can offer ambitious upper secondary students an elective three-year course called *Diplomacy and International Communication in English*.** Taught entirely in English, this innovative course builds on the content and language integrated learning approach. It integrates language learning with consensus building, conflict resolution and communication in a global world. English is not only the language of instruction but is also an essential learning component of the course due to its importance in international relations.
- **Some school staff in Israel find the shortage of English teachers a serious challenge to the teaching and learning of English.** In some schools this shortage results in larger class sizes. The shortage can also make it difficult to recruit teachers with the right combination of language proficiency and pedagogical training.
- **Opportunities for Israeli students to practice their English outside the classroom vary greatly.** Most Israelis encounter English in their daily lives through television or social media. But while some have few opportunities to practice their productive skills (speaking and writing) outside school, others have daily opportunities to do so with family or friends.

## Learning languages in Israel

### ***The Israeli population speaks many different languages***

Hebrew is the official language of Israel. Since 2018, Arabic has special language status. Hebrew-speaking Jewish Israelis make up most of Israel's 9 million inhabitants. Arabic-speaking Arab Israelis account for around 20% and principally populate three distinct geographical areas: 1) the Galilee area in the north; 2) the "Triangle" in the central region; and 3) the Negev in the south. There are also several Jewish-Arab "mixed cities". Arabic is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world and is the official language of many countries in the Middle East, as well as in northern and eastern Africa. Hebrew is not widely spoken outside Israel.

Israel has a large share of foreign-born inhabitants. In 2019, international migrants accounted for 23% of its total population. Since then, the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine has led to a significant increase in immigration; in 2022, around 58 000 (0.6% of the population) new immigrants arrived from Ukraine and the Russian Federation alone (OECD, 2023<sup>[1]</sup>). Nevertheless, in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018, only 30% of 15-year-olds in Israel reported having contact

with people from other countries in their neighbourhood, compared to 38% on average across the OECD (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>).

Israel has a substantial Russian-speaking community as well as many Georgian and Ukrainian speakers. There are also notable Amharic-speaking and French-speaking communities (Aronin and Yelenevskaya, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). In PISA 2022, 12% of 15-year-olds reported mainly speaking a language other than the language of the test (i.e. Hebrew or Arabic) at home, which was similar to the OECD average (OECD, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>).

English is so widely spoken in Israel that it has been said to have *de facto* official status (Aronin and Yelenevskaya, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). It is often considered a high-status language frequently chosen for business and academic life and used in the public-facing content of state-run institutions. English language proficiency has been identified as a key factor in the large labour market gaps between Israeli Arab citizens and Israeli Jewish citizens, the Israeli Arab citizens typically having lower proficiency in English (OECD, 2023<sup>[1]</sup>).

The Israeli population is also exposed to English and other languages through tourism and tertiary education. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, around 4.9 million tourists visited Israel, with France, the Russian Federation and the United States as the leading countries of provenance. Many Israelis themselves travel internationally: in 2019, inhabitants made 9.2 million international departures from Israel (OECD, 2022<sup>[5]</sup>). In 2021, international or foreign students made up 5% of Israel's tertiary education enrolment, with important shares coming from France and the United States. In the same year, 6% of domestic tertiary students were enrolled abroad (OECD, 2023<sup>[6]</sup>).

Many Israelis are exposed to English on a daily basis. Foreign language television or film is typically subtitled rather than dubbed. Despite an increase in recent years, the Hebrew language film and television market is small, although the same is not true for Arabic language film and television (Reshef, 2020<sup>[7]</sup>). Israelis are also exposed to English through engaging with digital technologies: estimates indicate that 53% of known websites produce content in English, compared to just 0.5% for Hebrew and 0.6% for Arabic (Web Technology Surveys, 2023<sup>[8]</sup>).

### ***All students in Israel are required to study English regardless of stream or school type***

In Israel, compulsory education begins in pre-primary school (typically age 5) and concludes at the end of upper secondary education (typically age 17/18). The modal grade for 15-year-olds is Grade 10, the first year of upper secondary education.

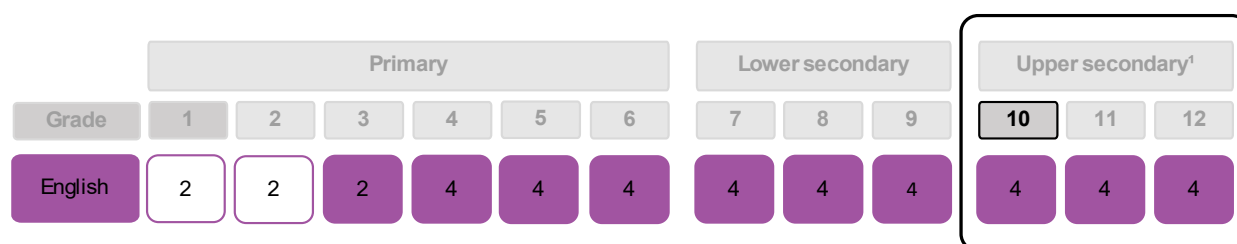
There are four main education streams in Israel. The two state-education streams, one with Hebrew as the language of instruction and the other with Arabic, are managed at the ministry level. The Arabic stream has three sectors (Arab, Bedouin and Druze). There is also a state-religious stream and an ultra-orthodox independent stream, both of which have Hebrew as the language of instruction, and which have their own sub-administration bodies inside the Ministry of Education (OECD, 2016<sup>[9]</sup>). Around 60% of students attend state-education schools, which teach the core curriculum. Around 20% attend state-religious schools, which follow an adapted core curriculum in which religious studies comprise 40% of the teaching hours. Within each sector, different types of upper secondary schools exist, including general academic schools, vocational or technological schools, science schools, schools for at-risk students, boarding schools, agricultural schools, and comprehensive schools that combine general and vocational or technological studies.

English is taught in all Israeli schools and is compulsory in the state-education (Hebrew- and Arabic-medium) and state-religious streams from Grades 3 to 12 (Figure 5.1). Some primary schools also choose to allocate two hours per week to English from Grades 1 or 2, at which point the focus is on spoken language and pre-reading programmes. This tends to be funded privately, so depends on the financial resources of the school or families (Aronin and Yelenevskaya, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).

In schools in the Hebrew-medium streams, English is taught as a first additional language<sup>1</sup>; in the Arabic-medium schools it is taught as a second additional language as Hebrew is considered the first additional language. Given the diverse linguistic profiles of students in each of the streams, particularly Arabic-speaking students and first-generation immigrants, English can often be a learners' third or fourth language.

There are no national standardised assessments of English proficiency for all students in Israel. While upper secondary education is compulsory, the final matriculation examination, which leads to the certificate required for admission to tertiary education, is not. Only half of students attaining upper secondary education obtain a full matriculation certificate. The ministry supervises matriculation examinations, but obligatory subjects vary according to each school's orientation. Nevertheless, all students choosing to take the matriculation examination must take English, which includes an assessment of all four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing); further foreign languages are optional.

**Figure 5.1. Typical distribution of lesson hours for English in Israel in 2023**



1. In upper secondary education, students typically have four hours of English instruction. However, local school-level decisions may be taken to add an extra hour if it is deemed necessary either pedagogically or as a result of staffing issues.

Notes: The modal grade and education level for 15-year-olds are outlined in black. Compulsory hours are presented in the shaded boxes.

Source: Based on national information reported to the OECD.

The English language matriculation examination exists at three levels: 1) a basic level of three study points equivalent to A2 level of the CEFR; 2) an intermediate level of four study points equivalent to B1; and 3) an advanced level of five study points equivalent to B2. Success in at least the three-point examination is required for achieving a full matriculation certificate. Alongside the examination, students must also present an end-of-year project based on independent work and research, which is discussed during the oral examination. In upper secondary education, as students work towards taking the examination at one of the three levels based on their ability, they are often divided into English classes according to their level of proficiency.

### ***The case study visit to Israel***

In June 2023, the OECD Secretariat joined by Israeli national experts visited three schools in Israel. The schools were selected for their diverse characteristics which include being in different streams with different languages of instruction, locations (urban and semi-urban), and student-cohort characteristics (Table 5.1). However, the schools do not capture the full range of diverse experiences in Israel; case study findings should, therefore, be interpreted as illustrating the experiences of some students and teachers in Israel as opposed to being generalised nationally.

The findings presented in the remainder of this chapter are based on interviews with school leaders, English teachers and 15-year-old students in the case study schools; lesson observations; student activity logs; and short surveys administered to the interview participants. In addition, the analysis is informed by a country background report prepared by national experts from Israel. For further information on the methodology of the case study, see Chapter 1.

**Table 5.1. Key characteristics of the case study schools in Israel**

		School A	School B	School C
Location		Town	Urban	Urban
Education level		Upper secondary	Upper secondary	Lower to upper secondary
School type		General education Arabic medium	General education Hebrew medium Single sex (boys)	General education Hebrew medium
Student cohort	In whole school	772	127	1 416
	In modal grade for 15-year-olds	275	35	248
	% of socio-economically disadvantaged	30%	12%	12%
	% whose first language is not the language of instruction	0%	7%	2%
Teacher cohort	In whole school	86	25	122
	Teaching English	12	4	16
Interviewees		School leader Two English teachers Six 15-year-olds	School leader Three English teachers Four 15-year-olds	School leader Three English teachers Four 15-year-olds

Source: Based on information reported to the OECD by schools.

## How do 15-year-olds in Israel experience English outside school?

### ***Students in Israel believe English will be important for their future lives***

Different factors motivate young people in Israel to learn English. The school system itself promotes the learning of English through the priority it gives to the language in the curriculum and examination system. English is a compulsory subject from Grade 3 onwards and has relatively important weight in the matriculation examination at the end of upper secondary school, which determines students' admission into higher education. Interviewees also reported that parents encourage their children to learn the language – sometimes by stressing its relevance, and sometimes by actively creating opportunities for them to use the language at home.

Perhaps most importantly, the interviewed students themselves were highly aware of the importance the language may have for their future studies and careers. Almost all the students reported that they will need English to pursue higher education – whether in Israel or abroad – or their career goals. These varied from becoming a pharmacist or doctor to becoming an actor or a comic book writer. Israel has a large service sector, led by a growing high-tech industry with high-skilled jobs that require English proficiency (OECD, 2018<sub>[10]</sub>); some students also mentioned this industry as particularly attractive for their future career.

*I know that whatever I choose to study, I will need English for it. (Student, School C)*

However, contrary to their peers in other countries, for a typical upper secondary student in Israel, mandatory military service means that tertiary education and a career that require English may seem somewhat far in the future. Some students and teachers mentioned this as a factor that can reduce students' immediate motivation to learn English. After completing upper secondary school, Israeli men spend around three years in mandatory military service, and Israeli women two years. Israeli-Arab citizens are exempt. A teacher in School B, a Jewish religious boys' school, explained how this could impact the students' motivation to learn:

*The kids here will often go to high-tech jobs, that is their goal. If they want to be successful, they need English for every job. But most kids go three years to the army when they graduate, so they don't have their career in mind yet. It's too far away. University and jobs are very far away. Their future is the army. (Teacher, School B)*

Through the interviews it was clear that it is the role of English as a global lingua franca – rather than the specific countries in which it is spoken – that motivates the students to learn it. All interviewed students referred to English as a tool to communicate with people all over the world, a tool that opens doors and gives them opportunities wherever they go. They said they appreciated learning about the culture of English-speaking countries in school, but found that this is less important than the role English plays as a language to communicate across cultures.

*The point of learning English is so I can speak it and use it wherever I am in the world. (Student, School C)*

### **There is large variation in opportunities to practice productive skills outside school**

The interviews conducted for this case study indicate that there are large variations in the extent to which young people in Israel can practice or improve their English in their daily lives outside school. While some Israelis grow up in families where English is used at home or use the language during study trips or holidays abroad, others are restricted to a more passive use, with particularly few opportunities to speak or write the language outside school.

The variation in exposure to English reflects cultural and socio-economic differences in Israel. A student at School A reported that she had been to English language summer schools in Paris and London, where she had met and established friendships with young people from different European countries. She felt that this experience and continued communication with these friends had helped her become almost fluent in English. However, this type of opportunity to practice English is limited to students whose parents have the financial means to send them abroad.

Other disparities are more related to cultural or linguistic background. In a country with a large immigrant population, it is not uncommon that students from across different socio-economic backgrounds live with one or more parents that are native English speakers or have relatives abroad that are. Several interviewed students gave examples of this type of opportunity. However, even for students who do not have native English-speaking relatives, the family can be an important source of exposure to English. Students reported different examples of family members who encourage the use of English at home, driven by awareness of its importance for future life opportunities. A student from School A reported that her mother encourages her to read in English, including by subscribing to the Jerusalem Post, Israel's largest English language newspaper, which has a "light" version in English for learners. Another student, from School B, reported that his older brother had introduced the use of English in the family to improve their language skills:

*With my big brother I only speak English. He only communicates to me in English because he wants me to learn it, even though he speaks Hebrew. He also speaks English with the rest of the family. He knows how important it is to be able to communicate, to go abroad and live elsewhere. It has improved my English a lot. I speak Hebrew with my parents and English with my brother. But if my brother is around, we all speak in English. (Student, School B)*

Many students, however, have no one to practice their spoken English with outside school. Their exposure to English is restricted to films, television or social media posts and with very infrequent opportunities to use their productive skills in English. For these students, random encounters with tourists or other people who do not speak the same language can serve as a rare opportunity to practice their spoken English. Students highlight these encounters, although only brief and occasional, as indicating the importance of English as a tool to communicate with people from across the world.

For young people with an Arabic background, English can also serve to communicate with the Jewish majority population. While Arabic students learn Hebrew in school and need the language for many daily purposes, the staff at School A explained that some are better at English than at Hebrew and that English has a high social status. A student at this school explained that she watches movies in Hebrew with English

subtitles, to better understand what is being said. She also explained that she and her friends sometimes use English in the shopping centre to speak with Hebrew-speaking shop assistants:

*When we go to the mall, sometimes we can't use Hebrew because we forget the words, so we use English instead. Sometimes the saleswomen think that we are foreigners. (Student, School A)*

At the same time, given that for many children and young people in Israel, whether in Arabic-medium education or with an immigrant background, English is a second or third additional language, increasing English exposure outside school may not always be considered a priority among students and their families. For example, School B encourages students to focus on practising their Hebrew more than their English outside of school, as not all students are considered to have the necessary level of Hebrew.

### **Private tutoring is used by some students in Israel but is not encouraged by teachers**

Based on the interviews with students and teachers, there appear to be wide differences in the extent to which Israeli students use private tutoring outside school to improve their English. Teachers and students explained that private tutoring can be expensive and that parents take different decisions when it comes to prioritising tutoring. None of the teachers actively encourage private tutoring; some explained that they discourage parents from paying for their children to take lessons outside school as the school provides the teaching that is needed.

Of the three case study schools, private tutoring was more common in School A – the Arabic-speaking school – and in School C, a Hebrew-speaking secondary school in an affluent suburb. None of the interviewed students in School B had received private tutoring in English. Students at School C explained that their use of private tutoring was motivated by an interest in advancing their English rather than specific learning issues. A teacher at School A explained that:

*Parents invest a lot of money to send their kids to private schools to improve English. Whenever the kids have a certain exam, most of the kids go. Even parents that don't have money invest in this. A lot of people from this town pay a lot of money to make sure their kid will be an English speaker. It is connected with high status to speak English, and it prepares them for university. Maybe 40-50% of kids receive additional classes outside of school. It is not always in an institution; it can also just be an English teacher in town who offers private tutoring. The private tutoring outside of school is mostly for maths and English because the grades in these exams are important for getting into college or university. (Teacher, School A)*

### **Nearly all students are exposed to English through mass media and social media**

Television, film and other mass media were identified as a common source of English exposure for students from all schools that participated in the case study. Sometimes the content they wish to watch is only available in English; other times they make an active choice to watch in English to improve their language skills, or because their parents encourage them to do so. The teachers notice the impact that students' exposure to films and videos have on their progress in learning English:

*A lot of them watch YouTube or Netflix. This is why they have a good level of English [...] A few weeks ago I asked the students to give me a word that explained something. A student gave a whole expression from Breaking Bad that he had seen outside of school. It was very clever. (Teacher, School B)*

Students also reported that this type of exposure to English helps them learn the language. When asked what activity is most important for learning English, one student responded:

*Movies. Music. Podcasts. Listen and repeat. (Student, School A)*

Social media are another common source of English exposure. However, compared with series and films, students and teachers perceived that the impact of social media on learning English is limited. Rather,



social media seems important as a window into a global world where English is a predominant language, therefore providing motivation to learn the language.

Nevertheless, in some cases, students reported examples of translanguaging on social media where they mix their native Hebrew or Arabic with words in English, and without the need to aim for grammatical accuracy. This also happens in face-to-face interactions. A teacher at School A, the Arabic-medium school, reported that the students' habit of integrating English when communicating among themselves serves to signal sophistication and social status.

Online games are another common source of exposure to English. Some students reported connecting with players abroad and communicating with them in spoken and written English. Others reported playing with friends from their own school where the exposure to English is limited.

*There are games where teenagers from all over the world play together. We meet friends through these games. I have a friend from Spain that I met two years ago through a game. We communicate [in English]. Sometimes we write, sometimes we send voice messages, and sometimes we call each other. (Student, School A)*

*I play video games where the game is in English – the instructions and everything is written in English. But I play with my friends, they are friends here, so I don't talk in English. (Student, School C)*

## How do 15-year-olds in Israel experience English in schools and classrooms?

### **English is mandatory and each student studies towards one of three proficiency levels**

English is part of the core curriculum in Israel. The subject curriculum includes a focus on all four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing), expanding vocabulary and developing conversational skills as well as writing using diverse syntactic structures and reading exposure to works of different genres. The goals are to enable students to use English throughout their adult lives, and to encourage active and meaningful learning in their fields of interest.

Each upper secondary student in Israel studies towards a certain level for the matriculation examination. Students, teachers and school leaders participating in the case study made frequent references to this level system, as it impacts and structures the teaching of English for 15-year-olds. Students can increase their level as their proficiency progresses. Participants reported that this system provides a structure for targeting support to students and for motivating them to progress. Students are typically grouped by ability according to these levels, with different schools using different systems to conduct this grouping, according to the available resources.

*When the students arrive in Grade 7, we have a test to see what level they have. They can jump up whenever they want. There is a test every year at the beginning of the year. If someone has moved to a higher level, they will move to that class. We want everyone to reach 5 points [i.e. the highest level]. (School leader, School B)*

*Some time into the year we divide the students into 3, 4 or 5 points. And all the time they have the opportunity to move from one to another. (Teacher, School A)*

This assigned level also determines the course content and learning goals, with the teaching focusing on preparing students for the final examination.

*One class is considered "four-pointers". The entire class is prepared for the same exam. (Teacher, School A)*

*Much of what we teach is dictated by the Ministry of Education. I need to get my students to pass the exam. I follow the instructions. (Teacher, School C)*



### **Students find speaking and writing English more challenging than reading and listening**

Most of the interviewed students found that the receptive skills (reading and listening) are easier to learn and use. Some students practice reading in their daily lives with books or movies subtitled in English; others prefer to listen to English. In addition, teachers give some prioritisation to reading due to the emphasis on reading comprehension in the matriculation examinations. One teacher felt that there is less need to focus specifically on teaching listening skills due to students' exposure to English outside school.

*They listen to music and video clips, and they understand what is being said. So we don't need to teach listening comprehension anymore. It is integrated into a more natural part of the communication we teach. (Teacher, School C)*

Students reported that the productive skills (speaking and writing) are more difficult, and teachers often reported spending the most time on these skills. The challenge with writing could be related to different grammar, syntax and spelling in English compared with Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Arabic. A teacher explained that it can be difficult for students to write a single paragraph due to the considerable differences between the languages. A student echoed:

*Writing is the most difficult for me. I need to know which word to choose, and the spelling and grammar can be confusing. Most of the writing I see in my everyday life is in Hebrew or Arabic. I don't see so much how English is written, other than on my phone. (Student, School A)*

Speaking is perceived to be equally difficult due to the lack of opportunities to practice spoken language in some students' everyday life. Students who have English-speaking relatives or those following specific programmes that offer more speaking opportunities, such as the *Diplomacy and International Communication in English* programme (Box 5.1), are an exception to this. Nevertheless, when asked to identify something that they wish to change about the way they teach or learn English, teachers and students had very clear ideas, most of which related to supporting more spoken interaction (Figure 5.2).

Recent changes to the design of the matriculation examination may help teachers to include more speaking activities, as the oral assessment has become more rigorous. This module used to be conducted by teachers from another school for which students would prepare something in advance. The school leader in School B reported that the introduction of a digitised oral examination for which students cannot predict the specific content has strengthened the students' focus on developing their speaking skills.

*With the computerised listening and speaking test, the students cannot memorise stuff in advance because they don't know what they will be asked. It has forced them to work differently. It has increased their level of speaking. (School leader, School B)*

Participants identified several ways in which they are already trying to promote speaking. Teachers explained that they make efforts to encourage the students to use the language actively by conducting the lessons entirely in English. In School A, an Arabic-speaking school with high ambitions for the students' English language proficiency, students reported that they learn the art of debate in English and participate in local and national competitions. A student also explained that they develop speaking skills through drama in English lessons.

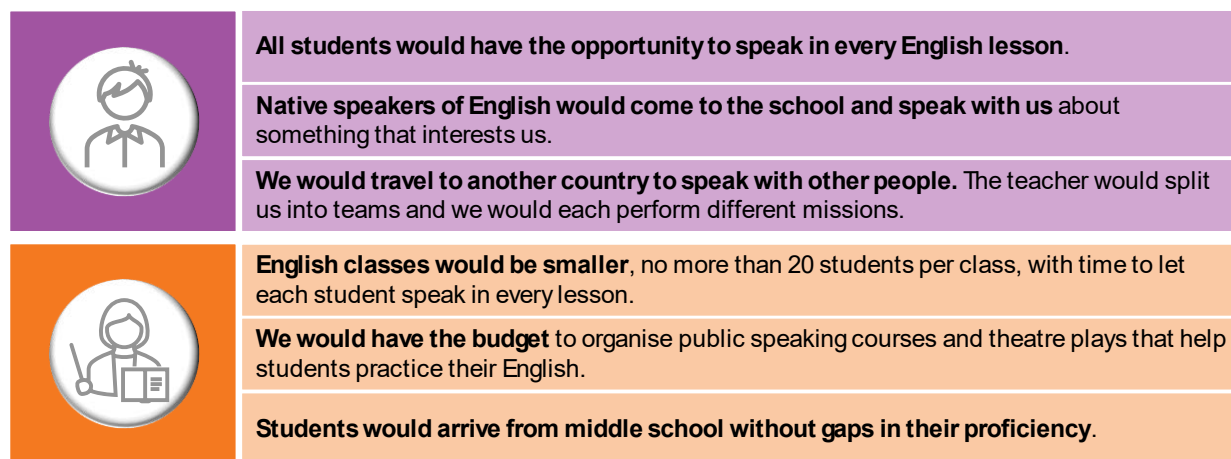
*When we study a certain play, we really act it, and this way we understand it very well. (Student, School A)*

However, teachers in School C reported that making students speak English can be difficult because many are shy to do so in front of other students. Sometimes this causes teachers to choose to focus on other skills.

*Speaking is the skill we spend less time on because the students are too shy to speak. In junior high school we try to get them to talk. But most prefer to answer in Hebrew. They are afraid of what the other students will think. We just did a book report with the 9th graders. It had to be done one-on-one because the students were too shy to speak in front of others. (Teacher, School C)*

School B has developed a programme to strengthen students' speaking skills outside lesson time using native English speakers from the neighbourhood. These are retired people without a teaching background, who come and speak with the students to practice communication skills and make learning more engaging. Some of these volunteers do not speak Hebrew, so students are forced to communicate with them in English. Before COVID-19, the school had a group of native English speakers dedicated to supporting students with high proficiency levels, but this was no longer in place at the time of the school visit.

**Figure 5.2. Students and teachers in Israel share their ideas about the perfect English lesson**



Note: The figure presents a selection of combined statements in response to the question: "In a dream world where everything is possible, what would you change about the way you teach/ learn English at school?".

Source: Based on case study research conducted in three schools in Israel.

### ***Some teachers feel large class sizes restrict their capacity to meet students' needs***

Israel has large disparities in academic performances, as shown in PISA 2022, where both the variation between and within schools in 15-year-olds' performance in mathematics are above the OECD average (OECD, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>). The interviews with school staff about English teaching reflected these data, as teachers reported having to cover a wide range of English proficiencies and individual student needs.

*The level of English here varies because there are students that are not on the same level – socially and economically. We do our best to raise the level of the students, so the level becomes more than good. We encourage them to be ambitious to do a higher level [of the matriculation exam]. (School leader, School A)*

This challenge is amplified where classes are large, and the availability of English teachers is limited. The average class size in lower secondary education in Israel is among the highest in the OECD at 28 students (OECD, 2021<sup>[11]</sup>). In the upper secondary schools visited as part of this study, the number of students was reported to reach 35-40 per class. Students and teachers alike referred to large class sizes as a hindrance to learning English and smaller classes was one of the most common responses when students and teachers were asked what they feel could improve English learning.

*One of the worst things in Israel is that the classes are too big. The teachers were happy during COVID when the lessons were in smaller groups. The shy girls and the unpolite boys started speaking and behaving well because they felt they were getting attention. (School leader, School C)*

### ***English teachers in Israel support students who are underachieving in various ways***

In Israel, one of the most common ways to support students that are falling behind is to give them extra lessons in small groups or one-to-one. Teachers in upper secondary schools are required to devote six

lessons a week to individual instruction. In some schools this is particularly targeted at students who are almost eligible to move from Level 4 to Level 5. The teachers map the students by ability and provide specialised lessons for those that need help. However, the extent of this practice depends on the resources available and can be difficult to organise where there is a shortage of English teachers.

*I used to teach in another school with fewer students in a group. Here we have up to 40 students in the classroom. It is a problem to reach out to the students. We test them and map them, so we can see exactly where they stand. We offer them hours where they can work with a teacher in a small group, but there are not many hours like that, and we cannot take the students out of other classes to do that. (Teacher, School C)*

English teachers in Israel generally reported a high level of involvement in their students' progress, especially for underperforming students. They gave examples of offering virtual meetings after school if there is something the students do not understand, or offering extra one-to-one or small-group support outside of regular school hours.

*I tell my students that what matters to me is that they work and that they care. If they work, then there will be progress. I don't care about the grade, but I care about them progressing. That motivates them. Whenever a student doesn't understand something, I will explain it again and again and again. At the end of the lesson, the kids will come and ask for further practice. Sometimes I will have a Zoom meeting with them after school about a topic that they don't understand. (Teacher, School B)*

In some schools, teachers take advantage of students' different proficiency levels to promote peer learning. They divide students into heterogenous groups where the advanced students help the less advanced. A student in School A reported that this practice works well both for understanding the content and for reducing discipline problems. The school leader of School B reported that peer learning among students was used to support those that are almost reaching Level 5 to move up. School A, which is the only school in this study without severe problems recruiting English teachers, also organised for a second teacher to attend certain lessons to provide differentiated teaching in support of low-performing students.

### **High-performing students advance through special programmes where available**

The teachers in all the schools visited for this study explained that they also provide attention and support to students who are outperforming their classmates in English. Teachers gave examples of giving extra activities and challenges to ensure that the highest performing students continue to develop. Some schools use occasional ability grouping based on the level that students aim for in the matriculation examination. Other schools provide more comprehensive programmes that give the highest performing students a space to further develop their communicative skills. The most notable example is the *Diplomacy and International Communication in English* major offered at School A. This is an ambitious three-year course for upper secondary education, which is taught entirely in English and attracts high-performing students (Box 5.1).

*The advanced students have the Diplomacy programme where everything is more challenging. (Student, School A)*

*In Diplomacy we use English for many different topics, the economy, etc. Everyone who wants to progress and be a 5-pointer [in the matriculation examination] goes to the Diplomacy course. (Student, School A)*

However, in some schools, teachers reported that the possibility to offer ability grouping or individually targeted activities for high-performing students is limited by a lack of teachers and large classes. In School C, a school in an affluent suburb, the school leader reported that there has been an increase in students seeking private tutoring outside school, from around 50% to around 70% because an acute shortage of English teachers had impacted the quality of teaching in school. Private tutoring offers smaller classes and is, therefore, often perceived as better supporting the low-performing students and those who wish to progress to the highest levels.

### Box 5.1. Supporting advanced English language learning through an elective course in Israel

Schools in Israel can offer students in upper secondary education a three-year elective course: *Diplomacy and International Communication in English*. The course prepares them to study and work in a global world. It aims to give them practical leadership skills, the mastery of consensus building and a high level of open-mindedness. It is offered mostly in Hebrew-medium schools, but also in some Arabic-medium schools.

The course is taught in English to reflect that English is the predominant language for international communication, both in diplomacy and in day-to-day interactions with people from different nations and cultures. The course is not specifically related to the anglophone world but focuses on English due to its role as a global lingua franca.

The course builds on the content and language integrated learning approach, which aims to enable learners to encounter language in context and use it for authentic communication. But the course also goes beyond traditional content and language integrated learning programmes which seek to develop students' language skills through teaching other school subjects such as mathematics or history in a foreign language. In *Diplomacy and International Communication*, English is both the language of instruction and an essential component of the learning content, as it is the dominant language of international relations.

The course covers up to 450 lesson hours over three years. *International Communication* is the core subject, taking up three hours per week and aiming to develop students' interpersonal and intercultural abilities. Teachers can adapt the course curriculum as necessary given that it centres on current events and the use of authentic materials. This may include, for example, Socratic seminars in which students reflect on a current affair in depth and uncover its embedded cultural assumptions.

Students choose one of two elective extension subjects with an additional three hours per week in Grades 11 and 12. These are *Conflict Management and Resolution*, in which students learn to work through conflicts at all levels, both interpersonal and between communities and nations, and *Translation Skills*, which strengthens students' advanced language skills and their understanding of socio-cultural context during translation.

The *Diplomacy and International Communication* major culminates with an examination that is generally considered challenging and requires schools to provide extensive preparation. All students taking the course sit the matriculation examination for the International Communication component, and within each extension, students complete internally assessed summative tasks.

Source: Ministry of Education (2020<sub>[12]</sub>).

While the students in need of extra challenge appreciate the activities their schools offer, some explained that they would like to be challenged further. At School C, a student reported that she would like more ability grouping or specific programmes for students who are highly proficient and/or motivated. Another explained that he would like the teachers to only speak English in class and to require the students to only answer in English. Yet another student – who had a non-Hebrew speaking family member and would thus often speak English with family members at home – explained a challenge that may be common to other native or almost native speakers of English in Israel:

I slept through a lot of English lessons throughout the schooling. I was better than the rest of the class, like many other students, so there was little to learn in class. (Student, School C)

## What resources support English teaching and learning in schools in Israel?

### ***English teachers in Israel are generally happy with their training***

All eight English teachers interviewed for the case study had received the national teacher certification and all except one was specifically qualified to be an English teacher. The teachers at School A had Arabic as their mother tongue while the teachers at Schools B and C had Hebrew as their mother tongue, except one teacher who had emigrated to Israel around 18 years earlier and speaks Hebrew fluently. Two of the teachers had studied or worked in an English-speaking country for more than a month during their life.

The participating English teachers were generally satisfied with their initial training, which provided a combination of theory and practical learning. But they also reported that some of the essential classroom skills (e.g. how to deliver material to the class, how to establish respectful relationships with students) are only learnt in practice during the first years in the profession. The English teachers reported they have had to continue learning throughout their careers as the subject evolves, including with the increased availability of digital tools. A teacher at School B summarised some of the challenges of being an English teacher, but also the rewards:

*Reinventing yourself keeps you on your toes. You have to keep up with the latest developments and inventions. In the six years from 7th grade to graduation, you see how the children grow. It's challenging – you have to do something that caters to them pedagogically and emotionally. You can see them evolve. It's very rewarding. (Teacher, School B)*

One of the teachers also reported that students' increased exposure to English outside of school has had an impact on what is expected from him as a teacher. Students are becoming more motivated to learn and expect more from their English teachers.

*Today, if you come to class and you are not well prepared as a teacher, you will have a difficult time. Today, the kids use English a lot on social media, and everything you say, you should be careful not to say something wrong, the students are more critical. (Teacher, School A)*

### ***Some schools are heavily impacted by a shortage of English teachers***

Israel has a significant problem with teacher shortages, including for English. Data from PISA 2022 reveal that nearly half (46%) of principals in Israel find that their school's capacity to provide instruction is hindered at least to some extent by a lack of teaching staff (OECD, 2023<sup>[13]</sup>). The school leader of School B referred to the current situation as “a catastrophe”; the school leader of School C similarly referred to it as “a disaster”.

Educators at these two schools gave examples of the impact that teacher shortages have on English teaching and learning. Shortages result in increased class sizes, as schools need to fit more students to each available teacher. This means fewer opportunities to target teaching to students' individual needs, and a higher turnover of teachers, which impacts students' learning and motivation.

*A classic example is last year we had to take on a new English teacher. It was not a successful year. The students lost their motivation. Now the teachers have to remotivate the students and make up for the loss of learning. (School leader, School B)*

The impact of teacher shortages depends on different factors, including the school location and specialisation. At School A, an Arabic-speaking school, the principal reported only minimal problems with teacher shortages. The school has, with some success, encouraged high-performing students to pursue a university degree in English and then return to the school as teachers. At School C, on the other hand, staff reported the most substantial problems with recruiting and retaining English teachers due to the high cost of living in the local area and the availability of higher paid jobs for proficient English speakers in the

high-tech industry. The principal explained that the school can only attract either native English speakers without teacher training, or trained teachers with low English language proficiency.

### **Digital technologies are predominantly used to increase student engagement**

Teachers in the case study schools generally find they have sufficient digital resources available for their teaching. Many classrooms are equipped with a computer and a screen or electronic whiteboard, which the teachers use to show presentations with the agenda and keywords for the lesson, small video clips, or quizzes.

The interviews with teachers demonstrated variation in the use of digital tools and in the perception of how valuable the tools are for the teaching process. Most, but not all, teachers reported using digital tools in their teaching, particularly for showing clips of films or videos connected to the literature pieces they are studying, and to assess learning progress through mobile phone applications, sometimes as homework, sometimes in class. A teacher at School A explained how the use of videos and mobile applications to instantly assess student progress has increased motivation and engagement:

*The first year at the school I taught literature right out of the book without multimedia. The kids were not that excited. They got bored and wanted to finish as fast as possible, and the next week they didn't remember what they had learned. The year after I played a short clip of the film version of the book and followed up with a Quizzly on the phones, where the kids have to answer questions about the literature piece. They were excited and engaged. The same piece of literature – but everything changed because of the digital tools. (Teacher, School A)*

A teacher in School C reported integrating the latest technologies to engage the students. She explained that she would ask students to write an essay with ChatGPT, then calibrate the essay to what was needed in class. When teaching a story, she had asked the students to use an artificial intelligence (AI) text-to-image generator to create a picture of the main character in the story then share it with classmates to stimulate conversation. During the lesson observations, teachers also used different types of technology, including AI tools, to engage students in their learning in class or their independent study at home (Figure 5.3).

On the other hand, a teacher in School B described herself as “old-school” and said that though she would use the Internet as a source to create quizzes, and the homework she gave sometimes required the use of the Internet, she only occasionally uses technology within lessons.

*I believe in old-fashioned teaching, not using digital tools (...) During the pandemic we used digital technologies more – because we had to. But in class I don't see the need for it. Sometimes we watch a movie in class. If we are reading a short story, it can be helpful to watch the movie, but other than that I don't feel it's useful. (Teacher, School B)*

The English textbooks in Israel are available in both print and digital form. The students in one school explained that they can choose which version to use, while in another school the English teacher had decided to only use digital textbooks in class.




*I use digital books in class. It's the textbook available in digital form. All the books we have I put them on the screen. I use listening where the students can hear other voices. I can do it slower so they can see in writing what they are listening to. (Teacher, School B)*

The variation in the extent to which digital tools are used in Israel seemed to reflect that schools and teachers are struggling to find the right balance in the use of new technology. Mobile phones are allowed for certain class activities in one school, but not allowed at all in another school. A teacher in School C explained that she was using digital tools in response to students' relentless phone use.

*They are teenagers, they are addicted to their phones. They are using it all the time. Instead of fighting it, I am trying to embrace it. (Teacher, School C)*



Figure 5.3. The use of digital technologies in case study lessons in Israel

	School A	School B	School C
			
<b>What digital technologies were used?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desktop computer</li> <li>• Projector</li> <li>• Video clips</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AI picture generator</li> <li>• Virtual learning environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desktop computer</li> <li>• Projector</li> <li>• Game-based learning platform</li> <li>• Mobile devices</li> </ul>
<b>How did the teachers use them?</b>	The teacher used the desktop computer and projector to show a video clip which stimulated a class discussion.	The teacher did not use digital tools in the lesson.	The teacher used the desktop computer and projector to show an electronic presentation in the lesson.
<b>How did the students use them?</b>	The students did not use digital tools in the classroom.	For homework, the students will use an AI image generator to create an illustration of an innovative product, then upload it to the virtual learning environment and "sell" it in the next lesson.	At the end of the lesson, students used their mobile phones to complete a quiz on a game-based learning platform. Students' results were displayed in real time and responses discussed.

Note: AI: artificial intelligence.

Source: Based on case study research conducted in three schools in Israel.

At School B, the school leader explained that while the school makes digital tools available, each teacher can determine the pedagogical value of using the tools. The school leader also explained that the use of technologies can go too far.

*One of the conclusions from the COVID-19 period is that the most important resource in learning is the teacher and the connection with the teacher – not the computer. [...] Each classroom is equipped with a computer and a screen, sometimes the teachers use them, sometimes not. [...] We don't see digital tools as something of value in themselves, but if a teacher wants to use them, we want them to be able to do it. We have had some in-school training on the use of digital tools, for all teachers, not just for English teachers. But it's not something we are pushing in particular. (School leader, School B)*

Overall, the main argument for using digital tools appears to be engagement. Teachers and students alike use terms such as "exciting", "a motivation" or – simply – "a change" to describe the use of films, video clips or AI tools. An exception is the mobile phone applications to assess learning progress, which all interviewed students had experience with, and which are seen as valuable in themselves.

*I think these tools are useful because they let me know where I am and where I stand. (Student, School C)*



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 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 term encompasses “foreign languages” (i.e. a language that is not an official language in the learner’s country) and official languages or those with special status in countries which formally recognise more than one language.



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