7 How 15-year-olds learn English in Portugal

In April 2023, the OECD visited three schools in Portugal to interview students, English language teachers and school leaders about how 15-year-olds learn English. This chapter presents the key findings from these visits and further evidence. First, it gives an overview of the linguistic and educational context of Portugal. It then explores the ways in which 15-year-olds in Portugal are exposed to English outside school. Next, the chapter provides insights into how English is taught and learnt in schools and the resources available to support English learning. The chapter also considers the ways in which students with different needs are supported to learn English and how digital technologies influence 15-year-olds' exposure to the language and their learning experiences.

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

- **English is highly valued in Portuguese society.** Students are often enthusiastic about their English lessons, which they describe as engaging compared to other subjects. Nevertheless, some English teachers find that STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are often prioritised in schools and by parents, to the detriment of languages.
- **School leaders, teachers and students strongly value authentic opportunities for students to practice spoken English in contexts beyond the classroom.** This might include international exchanges, school trips or extracurricular activities. English teachers and schools invest considerable time, effort and other resources to provide such opportunities and also make use of European schemes such as Erasmus+.
- **Schools and teachers have several strategies in place to support the needs of different students, particularly those who are underperforming or have low proficiency**. However, they generally agree that more could be done to support these students and to better challenge high-performing students.
- **Portugal has made considerable efforts in recent years to increase the use of digital technologies in education.** Many English teachers use digital tools and resources to support their teaching. Teachers and students generally see the benefits of this, particularly to increase engagement and facilitate classroom management. However, there were fewer examples of using digital technologies to the specific benefit of foreign language pedagogy.

Learning languages in Portugal

Portugal's population is relatively language homogenous

The official language of Portugal is Portuguese, spoken by most of the 10 million inhabitants; it is the fifth most spoken language in the world. Portugal has one official regional language, Mirandese, spoken in the region of Terra de Miranda in the north-east of the country.

In 2022, around 11% of Portugal's population was foreign-born, up from 8% a decade earlier; over one-in-three come from other Portuguese-speaking countries (OECD, 2023[1]). Nevertheless, Portugal has a relatively language-homogeneous population: only 5% of students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 reported mainly speaking a language other than Portuguese at home, compared to the OECD average of 11% (OECD, 2023[2]). Despite this, in 2018, 79% reported speaking two or more languages (including the language they speak at home), and 24% reported having contact with people from other countries in their neighbourhood (OECD, 2020[3]).

Portugal receives a lot of tourists, exposing inhabitants to different languages. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Portugal received nearly 17 million international visitors, with France, Spain and the United Kingdom as the leading countries of provenance. The Portuguese are also exposed to other languages through their own international travel: in 2019, inhabitants made 3.1 million international departures (OECD, 2022[4]).

The workplace provides another form of exposure to other languages. Portugal's main trade partners are France, Germany and Spain (Statistics Portugal, 2022[5]). Meanwhile, English is a highly desired skill on the Portuguese labour market: in 2021, 42% of online job vacancies in Portugal implicitly or explicitly required some level of English, compared to the OECD average of 33% (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023[6]).

People in Portugal are also exposed to English and other languages in their daily lives through film, television, music and digital technologies. The share of Portuguese language web content is estimated to be around 3%. Although this is greater than for many other OECD languages, Internet users are still likely to engage with some English, which is estimated to account for 53% of content (Web Technology Surveys, 2023[7]). Television and films are typically shown in the original language with subtitles in Portuguese.

English is a compulsory subject for all students from age 8 in Portugal

Portugal has made several reforms to schooling decisions in recent years to increase decision making at the local and institutional levels. Almost all schools are now aggregated into multi-school clusters and the Ministry of Education has established autonomy contracts with a growing number of schools to give them greater control over their finances and the curriculum (OECD, 2020[8]).

Compulsory education in Portugal begins at age 6 and ends at age 18. Typically, 15-year-olds are in the first year of upper secondary education when they may opt for either general or vocational programmes. In 2015, Portugal made English a compulsory subject for students from Grade 3 of primary education (age 8) (Figure 7.1). Some schools choose to start from Grade 1. However, compared to other education systems, the share of total instruction time dedicated to foreign language teaching in primary education in Portugal is small at less than 5%.

During lower secondary education, students are required to learn a second foreign language: French is now the most popular, with growing numbers of students choosing it over Spanish (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[9]). In upper secondary education, students in both general and vocational education follow the same language learning requirements to study English and a second foreign language for two years; those selecting study programmes that include languages have more hours, additional language(s) and a further year of language education. In contrast to trends in most other European countries, in Portugal, the share of vocational students learning English is higher than for those learning English in general education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[9]).

Figure 7.1. Typical distribution of lesson hours for languages in Portugal in 2023
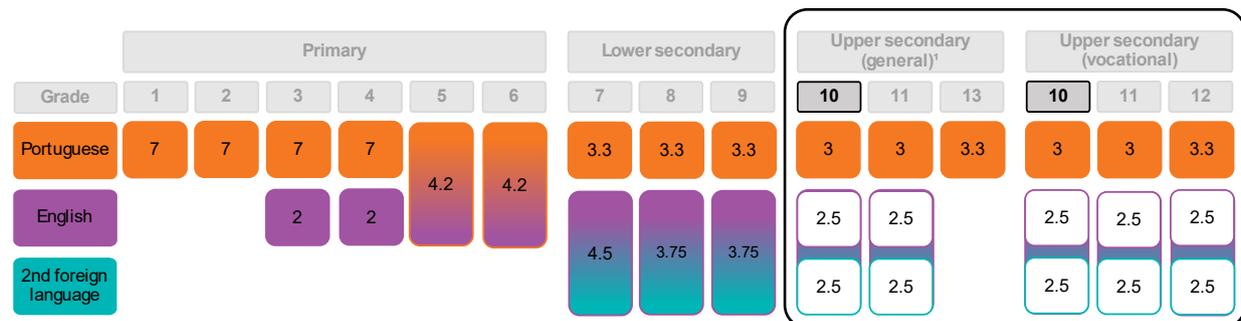
1. In upper secondary education (general and vocational), the hours shown are those for compulsory courses; students can choose pathways which may include additional hours for languages. It is compulsory to study one foreign language at this level.
Notes: The modal grade and education level for 15-year-olds is outlined in black. Compulsory hours are presented in shaded boxes. For boxes that cover multiple subjects, the total time allocation must reach the number indicated in the relevant grade.
Source: European Commission (2023[10]); national information reported to the OECD.

Portugal has set expected levels of attainment for first and second foreign languages that are aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). At the end of lower secondary education, students are expected to have a B1 level in English and an A2 level in their second foreign language unless it is Spanish, in which case the target is B1 for reading and listening and A2 for speaking and writing. At the end of compulsory education, students are expected to have a B2 level in English and a B1 level in the

second foreign language, with similar exceptions for Spanish (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[9]).

In Portugal, some students take a final national standardised examination in English and/or another foreign language at the end of upper secondary education as a requirement of successful completion of this stage of education. However, this depends on their study choices. The examination assesses all four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing), although the speaking component is assessed internally by the school.

The case study visit to Portugal

In April 2023, the OECD Secretariat visited three schools in Portugal. The schools were selected for their diverse characteristics, which include different locations (urban and rural) and different sizes and student characteristics (Table 7.1). Nevertheless, they are not representative of schools across the country and the findings in this case study should be interpreted as illustrating the experiences of some students and teachers in Portugal as opposed to being generalised nationally.

Table 7.1. Key characteristics of the case study schools in Portugal

		School A	School B	School C
Location		Urban	Urban	Rural
Education level		Primary to upper secondary	Primary to upper secondary	Upper secondary
School type		Public, general and vocational	Public, general and vocational	Public, general and vocational
Student cohort	**In whole school**	1 020	1 127	1 685
	In modal grade for 15-year-olds	169	180	397
	% of socio-economically disadvantaged	16%	18%	15%
Teacher cohort	**In whole school**	121	133	182
	Teaching English	11	9	13
Interviewees		Head of English Two English teachers Five 15-year-olds	School leader Three English teachers Five 15-year-olds	School leader Three English teachers Six 15-year-olds

Note: Schools A and B are each part of a multi-school cluster, as is typical in Portugal. The responses correspond to the cluster.
Source: Based on information reported to the case study team by schools.

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 three case study schools; lesson observations; student activity logs; and short surveys administered to the interview participants. The analysis is also informed by desk-based research and background interviews with the Portuguese Association of English Teachers and representatives from the Directorate-General of Education within the Ministry of Education. For further information on the methodology of the case study, see Chapter 1.

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

Students regularly encounter English outside school and believe this supports learning

The students participating in the case study in Portugal are regularly exposed to English outside school. In the interviews, 15-year-olds reported engaging in a range of activities in English including gaming, watching videos, listening to music and communicating with friends (Figure 7.2). Studying English outside

school through private tutoring or language education does not seem to be common in Portugal; only one student reported attending English classes outside school.

Figure 7.2. Examples of engagement with English during a 15-year-old's school day in Portugal
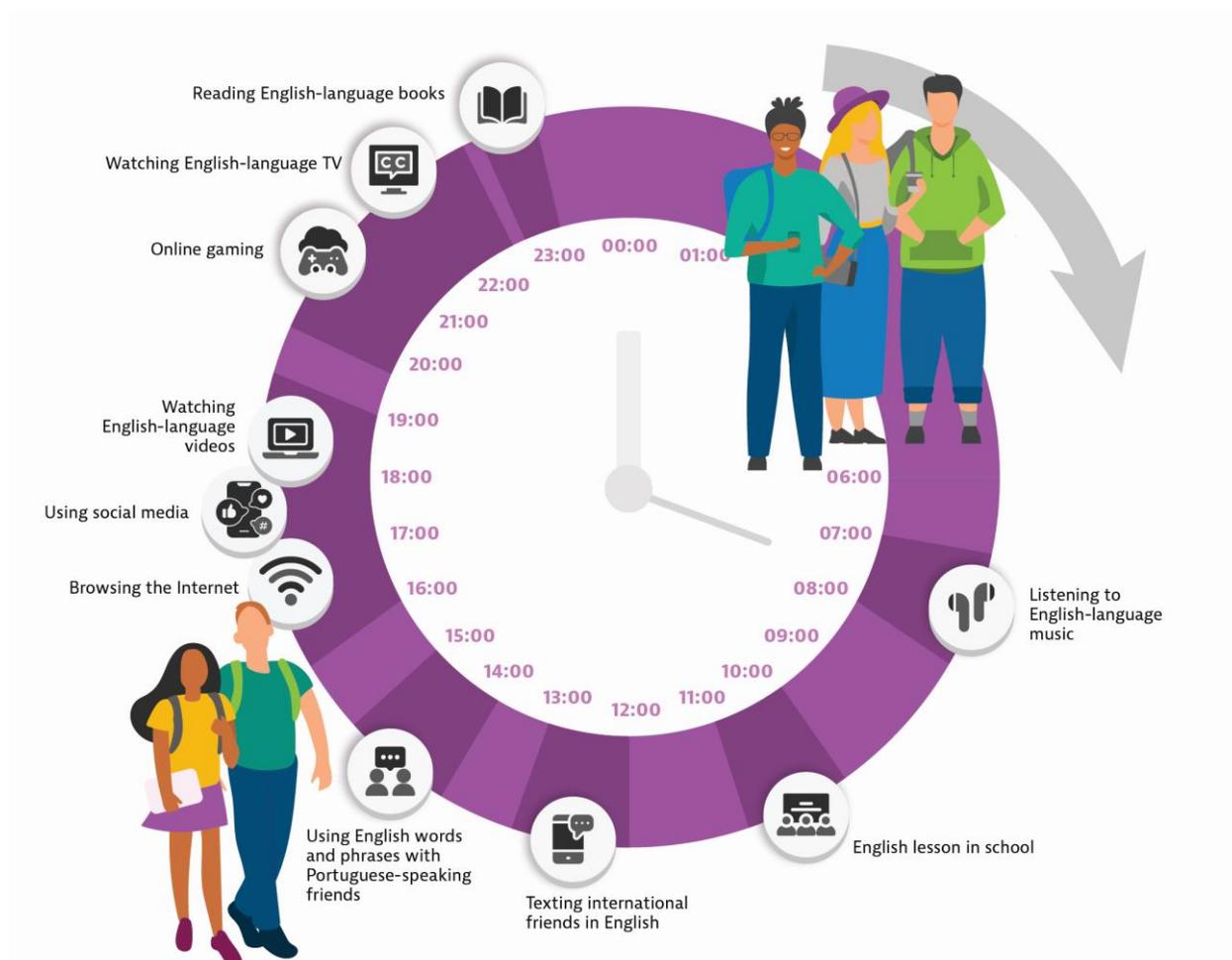
Notes: The activities in this figure are taken from activity logs voluntarily completed by 12 students participating in the case study in Portugal. The figure depicts a selected combination of activities as reported by different students to portray the wide range of activities in English that students engage in.
Source: Based on case study research conducted in three schools in Portugal.

English is used with friends and family that are not Portuguese-speaking and often on line through virtual communities or video games. Even among Portuguese-speakers, students revealed that they typically use some words and expressions in English. Teachers from School A shared that a few shy students communicate with each other in English as they are more comfortable socially using a non-native language.

> *[There are] two students that talk to each other in class and outside always in English. I find it interesting because I find that students who are shy use a foreign language […] It's as if they have a mask and they are…role playing someone else. (Teacher, School A)*

Some students reported watching English language films and series with Portuguese or English subtitles and, when possible, without them. However, a few teachers mentioned that this may change, as dubbing

seems increasingly common in Portugal, particularly in series for children and young people. Students generally feel that engaging with English language media helps improve their language proficiency and many teachers agree.

> *Films and gaming sometimes teach them many different words. They gain a lot, they profit a lot from that input of language because it consumes all their free time. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *When you're listening to a conversation in a film [in English] and if you have access to the Portuguese translation, you can learn how to say specific things and use specific words. (Student, School B)*

Tourism is a key driver of the Portuguese economy, particularly in the areas where the case study schools are located. In all schools, 15-year-olds and teachers shared experiences of students using English to interact with tourists. As explained by one teacher in School C, a school located near a much-frequented part of the Portuguese coast, these interactions are unavoidable. Their impact on students' English language proficiency is particularly notable when older students get part-time jobs while finishing their upper secondary education. The teacher pointed out that these jobs are often in the service industry where a basic knowledge of English is an advantage and interaction is constant.

> *Some of our students already have part-time jobs and since this is a tourist area, they are almost compelled to [speak English]… They have to manage how to communicate because communication skills are important for the employer as well. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *My mum has an Airbnb. She is not very good with English… so she asks me to help with the bookings. (Student, School C)*

In the interviews, students generally perceived using English outside school to be very useful, helping them realise the importance of knowing the language, providing a friendlier and more relaxed environment to practice in, and creating real-life opportunities to interact with native speakers.

> *It helps you expand your vocabulary range and gives you the possibility to use English much more informally whereas school English tends to be very formal and not very useful. (Student, School A)*
>
> *It helps you put into practice what's in the textbook and it also helps you realise that what's in the textbook ends up being useful. (Student, School A)*

Teachers also saw benefits. In one school, teachers felt that any contact with English is a good thing, particularly for speaking and listening, as it helps students become familiar with the language. Another teacher explained that students get a clear sense of pride from interacting with foreigners in English outside of school which helps them value learning the language. However, some teachers also had reservations: one teacher explained how mere exposure does not lead to learning to use English appropriately, particularly in speaking and writing. Another was concerned about the quality of English students encounter outside school.

> *In terms of fluency and sensitivity to language and sounds and rhythm yes, that helps them. In terms of accuracy, I wonder. (Teacher, School B)*

Students identified differences between the English learnt at school and that practiced outside school, which can create a challenge. First, while students mostly learn British English in schools in Portugal, the English material they are exposed to outside school is mostly in North American English. The registers also differ: the English used outside school is mostly informal, often using slang that would not be appropriate for writing or more formal settings. Most students understand the differences between both registers. Although some teachers reported trying to make connections between the English students use outside school and the English they are taught in school to increase student engagement, some students did not recognise these efforts and conceptualised the two uses of English as clearly distinct from one another.

I find myself being a lot friendlier and just being different and more informal outside the classroom than inside the classroom. (Student, School C)

I don't think teachers really make any connections between what happens inside and outside the classroom. (Student, School A)

Students' engagement with English outside school varies

Among the case study participants, there was a clear disparity in the extent to which different students engage with English outside school; some appear to have many opportunities to use English in a typical day while others have very few. This was reflected in the activity logs: while one student reported being exposed to English 13 different times in a day, mostly through music and television, two said they had no exposure apart from their English lesson and homework.

Some teachers suggested that there may be an association between the students' proficiency in English, their enjoyment of the language and the extent to which they use English outside school. According to interviewees, disparities may also be related to socio-economic background, as less affluent families may not be able to provide as many opportunities to practice English or receive extracurricular support if needed. Finally, geographical location can influence exposure: students from areas with a lower number of international visitors may have fewer opportunities for real-life practice.

There is limited access to social and economic opportunities [among families in this school] which in turn means students' skills and abilities in English language learning also tend to be limited. (School leader, School B)

I have students with a higher [level of] English. They watch films with subtitles, they like to read in English, they like to speak English (…). The ones that have more vocabulary, do more. (Teacher, School C)

Disparities were also present in the English skills students tend to use outside school. Despite some of the interviewed students actively communicating orally or via online messaging, productive skills (speaking and writing) are not frequently used by all students beyond the language classroom. Most activities that involve English outside school only involve listening and reading English. This was also seen in the activity logs: half of the students did not report using any productive skills outside school.

English is highly valued in Portuguese society but this is not always reflected in schools

Participating students find English useful for their present and future lives. Many envision using English to study abroad or for work purposes. In particular, students who are considering completing part of their higher education in English reported finding it essential. Although most bachelor's courses in Portugal are in Portuguese, some courses are offered in English. Meanwhile, student mobility has steadily increased, and English is key for academic success, as most research is published in English (Pinto and Araújo e Sá, 2020[11]; European Commission, 2020[12]). Furthermore, English was a highly desired skill for managerial and professional occupations in Portugal: in 2022, more than 60% of the job postings online for such roles required English language competence, compared to around 40% on average across OECD countries (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023[6]). Indeed, one school leader linked students' command of English to ambition and academic success.

Students who have higher grades, tend to have more future prospects, tend to attach more importance to English. Unlike those who are less ambitious and don't have as many future academic prospects. (School leader, School C)

Beyond studying at home or abroad and for career-related purposes, the participating 15-year-olds also consider English essential for communicating with non-Portuguese speakers, for travelling and accessing information or online content which is not available in Portuguese.

English is very important because it is the most widely spoken language in the world. (Student, School B)

Many students reported that their parents are also enthusiastic about them reaching a high level of English language proficiency. While most recognised this support positively, one student commented on the pressure she feels from her parents in this regard.

> *My parents were always very concerned and focused on me learning English, also because the future university degree I'll do in economics will involve many courses in English. In that sense, there has been a bit of pressure from their side. (Student, School A)*

> *Although [my mother] can't speak very well she wants me to have better opportunities than she had so she finds English very important (Student, School B)*

Despite English being considered important in Portuguese society, the English teachers and school leaders interviewed for the case study feel that it is not necessarily a priority in schools. In all schools, teachers reported that science subjects are considered more important than other disciplines. An English teacher described these tensions as a "rivalry" with science teachers, which often leads to English being understood merely as a tool for understanding science.

> *English is important. It's recognised to be very, very important, even for the science world. But again, it is not "the" subject. Science is "the" subject. English is kind of like an accessory to it. It's just helping science learning. (Teacher, School C)*

> *The vast majority of my students are science students and those teachers normally think that their subjects are the ones which matter. So, physics, chemistry, maths, those are the important subjects, biology. All the other [subjects] are just there. (Teacher, School A)*

The mismatch in the value attributed to English in life as opposed to in schools is also present for students. They generally believe English is important and useful, but they admit dedicating little to no independent study time to the subject. This was also observed in the activity logs, where only one student reported studying or completing homework for English. An English teacher provided an explanation: as students are regularly exposed to English outside school they consider that to be sufficient to learn the language and often perceive it as an easy subject at school. Some students corroborated this idea. One teacher, however, noted that this is a false confidence that contributes to the stagnation of students' English proficiency.

> *[Learning English] is considered to be easy because people have the idea that [students] are exposed to it so it's an automatic process, and it is not. (Teacher, School C)*

> *I don't study English that much or that often. (Student, School C)*

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

English lessons are viewed positively but productive skills may require more attention

Compared to other subjects, students often reported English as being a particularly "fun" and relaxed subject. When untangling this idea further, teachers explained that English teaching allows for flexibility in teaching methods, for a wide range of activities, for the discussion of different topics, and for extensive interaction with students.

> *English is my favourite subject despite having chosen a science and technology specialisation. [English lessons] are very easy to follow, very relaxing and not as difficult as other subjects. (Student, School A)*

Students in School C agreed that they generally have a closer relationship with their English teachers compared to teachers of other subjects, and that English lessons are more engaging. The fact that speaking and interactions are an essential part of the lessons may help build these relationships. One teacher from the same school emphasised that English teachers have to adopt an empathetic teaching

approach. Students' shyness and nervousness is sometimes their greatest barrier to improving their English, particularly when practicing speaking; it is, therefore, paramount that teachers focus on encouraging students, incentivising active participation and providing emotional support to those who struggle the most.

> *There is a different relationship with the teacher [in English lessons]. The teacher is very much connected to us and our needs, unlike in other subjects. The power imbalance is not that much there in terms of hierarchy, so things tend to happen in a much calmer, fun, and more natural way. (Student, School C)*

In Portugal, the curriculum for English covers the four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) in a balanced manner from Grades 3 to 11. However, when implementing the curriculum, the four skills do not seem to be equally present in English lessons. According to teachers and students participating in the case study, there is still generally a focus on grammar and listening. Teachers explained that writing is less common, as these activities and the associated marking and feedback are time intensive. Speaking is also practiced less, with teachers citing large classes and students' shyness or lack of confidence as key barriers, as well as a lack of time to ensure all students actively participate in group speaking activities. Some teachers feared that, in small group activities, students switch to Portuguese and disengage.

> *Perhaps, writing [is the most challenging as] it's what they do least in class. [...] We don't tend to practice writing and then sometimes when they have a test, they are asked to write a composition or something and they don't have much practice. Even in Portuguese they don't. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *Writing, we have a problem. Houston, we have a problem. We don't have time. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *It's the most difficult part, to make [students] speak. They understand, but speaking is very difficult. (Head of English, School A)*

Students also considered speaking and writing to be the hardest skills to master, with the exception of three students in School B who highlighted reading as being the most challenging.

In the lesson observations, teachers mostly used English, but students often used Portuguese among themselves. This was supported by the student questionnaires, where most of them reported sometimes speaking Portuguese in their lessons. Some of the teachers reported that more efforts are needed to include speaking activities in the earlier grades to generate a habit of speaking English. These teachers feel that there is a gap between lower and upper secondary education, with some teachers in earlier years focusing mostly on grammar. From Grade 10 onwards, students take a compulsory oral evaluation as part of their school-level assessments, which introduces more of a focus on speaking. Students and teachers mentioned this lack of continuity.

> *Until ninth grade, [students] only learn grammar. Grammar is important if we can use it to speak and to write. But if we spend until ninth grade, lots of years, only learning grammar, how will we learn how to speak and write? (Teacher, School C)*

In addition, one teacher expressed a desire to use more English in the classroom or to make this the sole language spoken but felt that this is impossible given the diverse proficiency levels in each class as it would alienate students with low language proficiency.

Supporting all students to thrive in mixed-ability classes is seen as a challenge

All the teachers and school leaders interviewed strongly expressed their willingness to support low-performing students. For students with special educational needs, there are specific adapted measures such as an individualised curriculum, adapted conditions for assessment, use of specific equipment and tools and support from specialised professionals, sometimes in the classroom (European Commission, 2023[10]). The English teachers participating in the case study found these measures helpful

but were frustrated that they did not reach all the students that would benefit from them. This includes students who may have an undiagnosed special need; those with a weak level of English; and low-performing students who struggle in all subjects, including English.

Within lessons, teachers reported trying to provide differentiated supports for students. As seen in the lesson observations, this includes providing more teacher support or translation for certain students and allowing them to use additional support material. In addition, the schools conduct diagnostic assessments at the start of the school year to measure students' English language proficiency, although teachers acknowledged that the results are not always acted upon due to time and other resource pressures. Furthermore, teachers explained that students do not like teachers to allocate different tasks according to students' language proficiency, as it is perceived as being "unfair". Some teachers added that this approach would also involve more time for lesson preparation, which is not possible, especially in the current context of teacher shortages in Portugal (see below).

In Portugal, students in Grade 10 have a spare hour in their weekly schedule that schools can choose how to organise. In School B, the leadership team and teachers decided to dedicate this hour to English. During this time, students are grouped by ability level and there are more teachers available to provide support than in regular English classes. The English teachers in the school spoke very positively of the impact of this arrangement and wished to implement it in other grades too. However, given that the flexible hour is not available in every grade, this is not possible.

In general, teachers felt that their capacity to adapt instruction to the needs of different students within class is not sufficient given the diversity of English language proficiency levels within each group of students. As such, teachers offer measures outside the classroom. Free, additional English support outside lesson time is available on a voluntary basis in all the case study schools; this is also typically available for Portuguese and mathematics. However, both school leaders and teachers acknowledged the limits of this initiative, as teachers often do not have enough available hours to dedicate to extra support, there are clashes in student and teacher schedules, and the students perceived as having the greatest need for support often lack motivation to attend. Indeed, several teachers noted that it is more common for high-performing students to attend additional sessions than the lowest performing students. To try and overcome this, some teachers mentioned that they also provide support via online platforms, including outside school hours.

> *It's like a cat and mouse situation where we try and convince underperformers to stay after school but it's very difficult to make them do so. (School leader, School B)*

Another key strategy implemented across schools is peer mentoring and peer support. Through this strategy, the school or teacher pairs a high-performing student with a low-performing one. The "buddies" often sit together in class but are also expected to support each other outside class. As well as supporting struggling students, some educators described these initiatives as helping to challenge high-performers further and promoting a sense of collaboration among peers. These initiatives are voluntary in each school and, again, some students decide not to participate.

Participating teachers generally felt that given the diverse levels of proficiency in English in each class, they cannot always adequately support all students. All lessons observed were with mixed-ability classes covering a wide spectrum of English proficiency, sometimes from A1 to C1. When asked what could help them better support students' individual needs, teachers had several different suggestions with little consensus among them. Some felt that ability grouping would be helpful while others suggested having more than one teacher in a class. Some believed that it would be better to improve the structures already in place, in particular the extracurricular support. Nevertheless, teachers across the three schools agreed that smaller classes would increase their capacity to offer individualised support to students. In 2019, there were 22 students per class in lower secondary education, on average, in Portugal, compared to the OECD average of 23 (OECD, 2019[13]).

The school tried grouping classes by ability before but in my opinion it doesn't work. (School leader, School B)

I wouldn't mind having another English teacher in class. I wouldn't mind at all. That would be very helpful. […] It would be a dream come true. (Teacher, School C)

If we [English teachers] have 15 students, more likely they'll be able to engage with each other than 28 or 30, because there is always a group lost in the crowd doing something else or talking to each other in Portuguese. (Teacher, School C)

Teachers also felt that schools should provide more support to students who arrive in the middle of the school year, many of whom have an immigrant background and may have little experience of English instruction or formal schooling. The teachers felt that they do not have sufficient time to provide these students with the individualised support they need. One teacher also noted that it is sometimes school policy to provide incoming students whose first language is not Portuguese with additional Portuguese lessons instead of English lessons. This exacerbates the challenge for English teachers.

Even yesterday, there was a new student in my class! And that's a problem that we also have, is that almost every week we receive students. […] We have that situation almost every day, it's ridiculous. (Teacher, School A)

Specific supports and programmes to challenge high-performing students were less common across the case study schools. Some schools referred to having exchange programmes or extracurricular activities which usually attract students with a high proficiency in English. However, as one school leader explained, given resource constraints, schools typically take the decision to focus on the students who are struggling the most.

[The school] has to cater for different needs and of course, we try to focus on high-performing students [too]. We'd like to do more, but it's not possible. What we do essentially is try to attract them to the mentorship programme, where they can offer what they do best. (School leader, School C)

Schools seek opportunities for students to practice their English outside lessons

The English teachers and school leaders in all three schools are motivated to organise opportunities for students to engage with English through extracurricular enrichment activities. Examples include field trips to plays in English or to a local film festival with English language films, an annual whole-school Spelling Bee, an annual creative writing contest in English and a reading scheme in which students are encouraged to read books in their own time, including in English.

Teachers and students consider these activities beneficial for students' English and enjoyable. However, due to time requirements, financial cost and the need to co-ordinate with other school subjects, extracurricular activities of this nature are not easy to co-ordinate and are not as common as the educators would like. Several teachers reported that they are not able to organise many of these activities due to a lack of dedicated resources and a heavy teaching workload. In addition, some teachers noted that the voluntary nature of such activities means that they typically attract students with greater proficiency in English and not necessarily those who could benefit the most.

I would suggest more school trips and more study visits. A while ago we visited an interactive theatre [in English] and that was very good. I hope we could do more of that. (Student, School A)

The [teacher] shortage means that most of our teachers have to do extra [teaching or support] hours which really limits opportunities to do extracurricular hours. (School leader, School B)

We are always on the lookout for [extracurricular] activities and that's something that still has to be developed. We don't have that many opportunities where English is a must. (Head of English, School A)

Participating students are also eager to increase their use of English outside lessons. In particular, they expressed wanting to participate in international exchanges, typically highlighting the importance of interaction with native speakers and of "experiencing" a culture and a language instead of just "studying" them. Teachers also stressed the importance of exchanges for providing students with opportunities to use English in a practical, authentic context, where students experience the advantages of knowing the language first-hand. Other benefits such as learning about other cultures, becoming comfortable with speaking the language and gaining an international perspective were also mentioned. A school leader claimed that exchanges allow students to develop an open mindset and a European sense of citizenship.

> *Instead of just focusing on the culture, it would be important to experience it. (Student, School A)*
>
> *The Erasmus programme has greatly contributed to this…multiculturalism and an attitude of openness. (School leader, School C)*

The extent to which the case study schools in Portugal are involved in exchanges varies, but they all look to expand such opportunities. This was repeatedly expressed by all three groups of participants when asked to identify things they would wish to improve about English language teaching and learning. However, they identified several challenges, too. First, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted school priorities and disrupted relationships that had been built with partners abroad; this negative impact is still present in School A, which, at the time of the visit, had not yet managed to re-start its former exchange programmes. Furthermore, on an even more intense scale than other extracurricular activities, language exchanges require one or several committed teachers to look for opportunities and funding and organise the country visit and reciprocal hosting. In one school, teacher shortages were, therefore, identified as having a direct impact on the school's capacity to engage in exchanges. School C, which has a major focus on exchanges, has a full-time member of staff working on Erasmus programmes and is in the process of becoming an Erasmus-accredited school to increase and diversify exchange opportunities for students, including vocational and adult learners.

What resources support English teaching and learning in schools in Portugal?

Teachers and students have mixed feelings about the use of textbooks

English teachers in Portugal typically follow a textbook, which is based on the national English curriculum and certified by accredited bodies (Directorate for Education, n.d.[14]). Teachers and schools have the autonomy to decide which of the accredited textbooks to use. Since 2016, Portugal has been phasing in the supply of free textbooks and by 2019 this extended to all students in compulsory education (Office of the Assistant Secretary of State and Education, 2019[15]).

Both teachers and students participating in the case study feel the textbooks are useful in structuring learning and as a self-study guide. They are also seen to be a source of activity ideas for teachers. However, a lot of them also described the textbook content as uninteresting, repetitive and outdated, particularly when dealing with topics related to technology and the environment. English teachers in all schools explained that, when possible, they research on line or elsewhere for complementary material. This allows teachers to tailor the content to their students' interests and learning needs as well as to choose relevant, up-to-date material to increase student engagement. However, as some teachers explained, this is not always possible, as searching for resources or developing their own material takes time.

> *I think textbooks are good for self-study, but classes should be different. (Student, School A)*
>
> *English textbooks are not interesting, the students don't like them. I don't like them, so if I'm bored, they will be bored. (Teacher, School A)*

Because they have the books, we need to use them because we need to justify the fact that they have the book. So we are condemned to using them, in a way. It's very annoying. (Teacher, School A)

The use of digital resources is increasing, bringing both opportunities and challenges

School leaders and English teachers pointed to an increase in the use of digital resources since the COVID-19 pandemic. The Recovery and Resilience Facility (European Union, 2021[16]), a temporary instrument of the European Union to mitigate the social and economic consequences of the pandemic, financed measures for the digitalisation of school education, providing Portugal with a budget of approximately EUR 500 million (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[9]).

In this context, as part of the Digital School programme (2020), the government has been providing laptops to all students and teachers in compulsory education, starting with the socio-economically disadvantaged. The number of students with a personal laptop has increased; however, this does not necessarily translate into them being used regularly in the classroom. In the case study schools, many English teachers explained that parents are often reluctant for their children to bring their laptop to school, as students may lose or damage it. There are also infrastructural barriers, such as the number of available plug sockets in classrooms to charge students' laptops. Nevertheless, teachers notice that students are increasingly familiar with digital equipment for learning and several explained that there has been an increase in the use of digital resources in classroom activities and homework.

Tenth grade [students] are for the first time using the computers in class and so it's much more difficult to manage that type of student. For the eleventh grade [students] it's almost automatic, they know, they come into class, they have their computers, and they do the activities very easily. (Teacher, School A)

Now the students have the digital kit so it's much easier for them to access the Internet and so, of course, my classes are different than last year's. (Teacher, School A)

In the interviews, teachers and students shared three common uses of technology. Teachers often use a projector or screen to guide the lesson and to share online resources with the whole class. These include videos and other material from the Internet, as well as digital activities provided by the textbook publishers. Teachers also use online games and quizzes via platforms such as Kahoot!, which seemed very popular among students. Lastly, teachers reported often using online platforms for students to hand in their work, for them to provide feedback and for other administrative purposes.

I give feedback through Teams. For [students], it's easier. (Teacher, School A)

Beyond these routine uses of technology, the OECD team also observed some more creative activities during the lesson observations. For example, an English teacher in School B had asked students to conduct a research project in small groups. Students had to develop and administer an online survey, analyse the data, participate in their peers' surveys and prepare a presentation to share the results with the class. The activity was fully in English. In School C, the OECD team observed a lesson in which the teacher provided quick-response codes to small groups of students. The codes directed each group to a short video. Students watched the video individually on their mobile phones and with their own headphones and then, as a group, completed a worksheet and prepared a short presentation about the video to deliver to the whole class. At the end of the lesson, each group used what they had learnt from their classmates' presentations to compete in a final online quiz, which included questions on the topics of all the videos.

When asked about their views on the use of digital technologies, teachers and school leaders stressed the importance of understanding digital technologies as a support for learning, not as the focus or the objective of English lessons. They also reported some benefits of using digital technologies for teaching English, including for monitoring students' progress and accessing online resources to help plan more engaging lessons. Having accessible devices also had practical implications, such as the possibility of projecting the

digital textbook to the whole class for group exercises or to support students who may have forgotten the physical book.

> *I even make them have a digital notebook. It's easier for me to check if [students] are working or not, if they are doing what I ask or not. It's actually easier, instead of collecting notebooks I have it in an [online] notebook which I have access to. (Teacher, School A)*

Most students reported liking the use of technologies in English lessons as it makes classes more engaging. The lesson observations in all schools supported this claim, particularly when technology was used for games or quizzes. Teachers explained that maintaining students' attention is increasingly hard and that they use apps, websites or online resources with this objective in mind.

> *Because it's a competition and we want to win it's very motivating, so it ends up having a positive effect because it makes us study in order to be prepared to try to win. (Student, School B)*

Despite these benefits, teachers identified some challenges of using digital technologies. Although all the case study schools had digital equipment in the classrooms, including a projector and screen, a computer or laptop for the teacher, and audio equipment, teachers repeatedly highlighted that the hardware and software can be unreliable, which creates uncertainty. It was partly for this reason that teachers in School A wanted a dedicated classroom for teaching English or other languages (see below). Other challenges relate to financial constraints, which limit the accessibility of certain online resources. As an example, in School C, English teachers have recently had to stop using a digital application through which they were developing assessments because it became subscription-based after the pandemic. As the school has no funds for this resource, one English teacher decided to bear the cost personally. Finally, a small number of teachers also lacked confidence when it comes to using digital technologies in the classroom and would like more dedicated professional development.

> *For me some of the challenge is that I don't feel comfortable with some of the digital materials. I don't master them. I don't really know how to use them. As a teacher, I have to say that because I haven't been trained for that. I have been teaching English for the past 34 years, so obviously at the beginning of my career we didn't have this kind of things and all of a sudden, we are flooded with lots of things. So we don't know which one is best, how am I going to learn this and that. (Teacher, School C)*

Teachers want a dedicated space for leaning languages in school

In all the case study schools, English language lessons take place in ordinary classrooms, shared with other subjects. Teachers and school leaders in two of the schools mentioned the need for a "language lab", which they described as a dedicated space for foreign language teaching and learning. Appropriate arrangements could include, for example, language-related posters on the walls or a seating arrangement that would facilitate small group discussions for speaking activities. Some English teachers felt that always teaching in the same space could also facilitate the use of digital technologies and specialised material such as dictionaries would also be more easily accessible.

> *We don't have a language lab which, although I'm not an English teacher, I think is essential for language learning. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *Having a room where [English teachers] have this kind of audio and visual equipment in place…means they can teach English in a more practical, technical and professional way. (School leader, School B)*

One teacher from School A added that a language lab could also support students with low proficiency in English. Currently, the extracurricular support is provided in the same space and at the same time as support for Portuguese and mathematics. If the school established a language lab, students would be clear on where to go for support if they are struggling with English specifically. School A was in the early stages of developing a language lab; it was at the top of the English teachers' wish list:

> *[The English teachers] are trying to assemble a specific classroom for languages, but we haven't seemed to be able to get that in motion. We are struggling because we have other contingencies, like the working hours of each teacher. We are getting older so we have less time to do those activities. It's a bit complex to explain, it has to do with rules and a lot of bureaucratic details. It's been a bit difficult to get that in motion, but we are trying to get a language lab – that's how we call it. We have the project done, we just need to get it started. A classroom and specific teachers to work there. We need the resources. (Head of English, School A)*

Teacher shortages in Portugal are causing challenges for English teachers

Most of the interviewed teachers were satisfied with their decision to become an English teacher. They explained they particularly enjoy interacting with students and observing their progress. All teachers reported using English outside of their work. Nearly all had completed a university degree on English language, sometimes together with a second specialisation in Portuguese or German. They had then completed a master's programme to become English teachers. Two of the English teachers also teach a second foreign language, in both cases German.

> *I've been teaching English for 30 years and I am happy with my choice. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *[Choosing] the English language was the best choice I've made. I have been teaching for 21 years. I like it a lot. (Teacher, School B)*

However, teacher shortages, across subjects and education levels, are currently a major challenge in Portugal, partly due to large numbers of the current teacher cohort approaching retirement and a reduction in the perceived attractiveness of the profession (European Commission, 2022[17]). In PISA 2022, 62% of students were in schools whose principal reported that a lack of teaching staff hinders the quality of instruction at least to some extent. It is estimated that the country will need around 34 500 newly qualified teachers by 2030 to avoid shortages (Catela Nunes, Balcão Reis and Mesquita Gabriel, 2021[18]).

Although high for several subjects, in the case study schools, teacher shortages for English were seen to be particularly problematic. Interviewed teachers hypothesised that this is because young people with a high proficiency in English and university credentials have a wide choice of possible careers in tourism or other sectors that are seen to be more attractive than teaching. One school leader and several teachers also raised concerns about the level of training that incoming (replacement) teachers receive.

> *In an ideal world, I would like to have better teachers. As a consequence of the shortages of teachers, the criteria to admit teachers have been lowered. This means we have less prepared, less trained teachers. So, I would like to get back to having teachers who are strongly qualified. (School leader, School C)*

Teacher shortages are seen to be having an impact on current teachers' workload. For example, in each of the case study schools, teachers reported having extra teaching hours to cover for human resource gaps. At the time of the visit, School C was waiting for a replacement English teacher to arrive but did not expect this to happen until the following academic year. To fill the gap, another English teacher was regularly teaching nine extra hours a week. Several of the teachers explained that teaching more hours is not necessarily the issue, but rather that this reduces their capacity to provide extra support to students who are underperforming or to organise extracurricular and enrichment activities.

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