1 Overview

In many countries, school students have more lesson hours for English language than ever before. At the same time, English's position as a global *lingua franca* means young people across the world encounter English in the digital and physical world on an almost daily basis. In this context, how do today's 15-year-olds learn English? To explore this question and as part of the introduction of the Programme for International Student Assessment's (PISA) Foreign Language Assessment in 2025, the OECD analysed the situation in five countries: Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal. This chapter provides an overview of this research, including rationale, key objectives and methodology. It also summarises key findings for each country and comparative insights.

Snapshot of this report

- **In 2025, the first PISA Foreign Language Assessment will generate comparable data on students' English language proficiency** and related factors in over 20 countries and economies. It will assess proficiency in three skills: reading, listening and spoken production.
- **As part of this work, in 2023, the OECD conducted case study research in five countries** to explore 15-year-old students' experiences of English outside school, their learning of English in school and schools' resources to support their learning. The research also investigates ways in which digital technologies are used to support English learning as well as how students with different needs and profiles learn English.
- **The OECD visited schools in Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal,** interviewing 15-year-olds, English teachers and school leaders, and observing English lessons. This report presents the key findings from those visits and wider research for each country.

Mastering a foreign language is hugely rewarding. Apart from the obvious communication benefits, it can lead to better job opportunities and higher salaries, facilitate international mobility and improve intercultural understanding. Learning additional languages even enhances first-language literacy, creativity and complex problem solving (OECD, 2021[1]; 2020[2]). At the same time, globalisation, technological innovation and human migration flows have made interactions with people from different countries and cultures almost inevitable. For today's 15-year-olds, some level of foreign language proficiency is now a necessity.

Universally accepted as the language of international commerce, English is among the most highly sought after languages in the world. Governments are investing considerable resources in ensuring young people leave school with at least the basic language skills required to communicate successfully in their personal lives and careers. In addition to learning it at school, English now enters the lives of many young people through television, computers and mobile phones from an early age.

However, despite the growing importance of English on education policy agendas worldwide, relatively little is known about how it is learnt and taught in different parts of the globe. As part of ongoing work by the OECD to address this knowledge gap, this report, co-financed by the European Commission, presents case studies exploring how 15-year-olds learn English in five countries: Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal.

Background to this report

The OECD's PISA assesses the extent to which 15-year-old students have acquired the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in modern societies as they near the end of their compulsory education. The assessment, now in its ninth cycle, focuses on three core domains: reading, mathematics and science. PISA also includes optional assessments of additional competences including financial literacy (since 2012). Since PISA 2012, each cycle also includes an optional innovative domain (e.g. global competence, creative thinking).

The PISA 2025 cycle will include, for the first time, an optional Foreign Language Assessment generating comparable data on students' foreign language proficiency and on the factors related to it (Box 1.1). The assessment will be complemented by background questionnaires allowing policy makers to gain insights into the best practices and policies for teaching and learning a foreign language. In its first cycle, the Foreign Language Assessment will focus on English language proficiency.

To complement and support the analysis of the data that will be generated by the Foreign Language Assessment, the OECD has conducted case study research into the teaching and learning of English in five countries. The case studies seek to provide in-depth descriptions of the ways in which 15-year-olds in different countries experience, learn and use English in and out of school. They offer a snapshot of the various practices that exist within and across education systems. This report presents findings from this research as follows:

- **Chapter 1** provides an overview of the case study methodology and key findings
- **Chapter 2** explores the ways in which today's digital technologies can be used to enhance foreign language teaching
- **Chapters 3-7** present the separate case studies for each of the participating countries: Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal
- **Chapter 8** explores the key similarities and differences in the case study findings across countries.

Box 1.1. The PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment

In 2025, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) will include an optional computer-based test that will assess 15-year-old students' foreign language proficiency. Following input from countries and economies participating in PISA, the first cycle will assess English language proficiency in three skills: reading, listening and spoken production. Each skill area will be reported on a separate scale aligned with the reference levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, originally developed by the Council of Europe.

In addition to the assessment, the PISA Foreign Language Assessment will include sets of questions to be added to the PISA teacher, student, school and parent questionnaires as well as a system-level questionnaire asking for information on foreign language teaching and learning from policy officials. These background questionnaires will cover four policy domains: 1) government and school policies; 2) students and learning; 3) teachers' training and profile; and 4) teaching practices. They also cover two transversal topics: 1) information and communication technologies (ICT); and 2) use of the target language for instruction in other subjects.

Information from the assessment and the questionnaires will be analysed together to provide a comprehensive picture of the factors that influence foreign language learning inside and outside school.

From 2025, the Foreign Language Assessment will be offered every two PISA cycles (i.e. every eight years) with scope to expand the assessment to determine proficiency in other foreign languages and/or other skill areas in the future. As of 2023, 21 countries and economies have signed up to participate in the PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment. They are, in alphabetical order: the Flemish Community (Belgium), Bulgaria, Colombia, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, the Dominican Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Peru, Portugal Qatar, Romania, Spain, Sweden and Chinese Taipei.

For more information about the Foreign Language Assessment, see OECD (2021[1]).
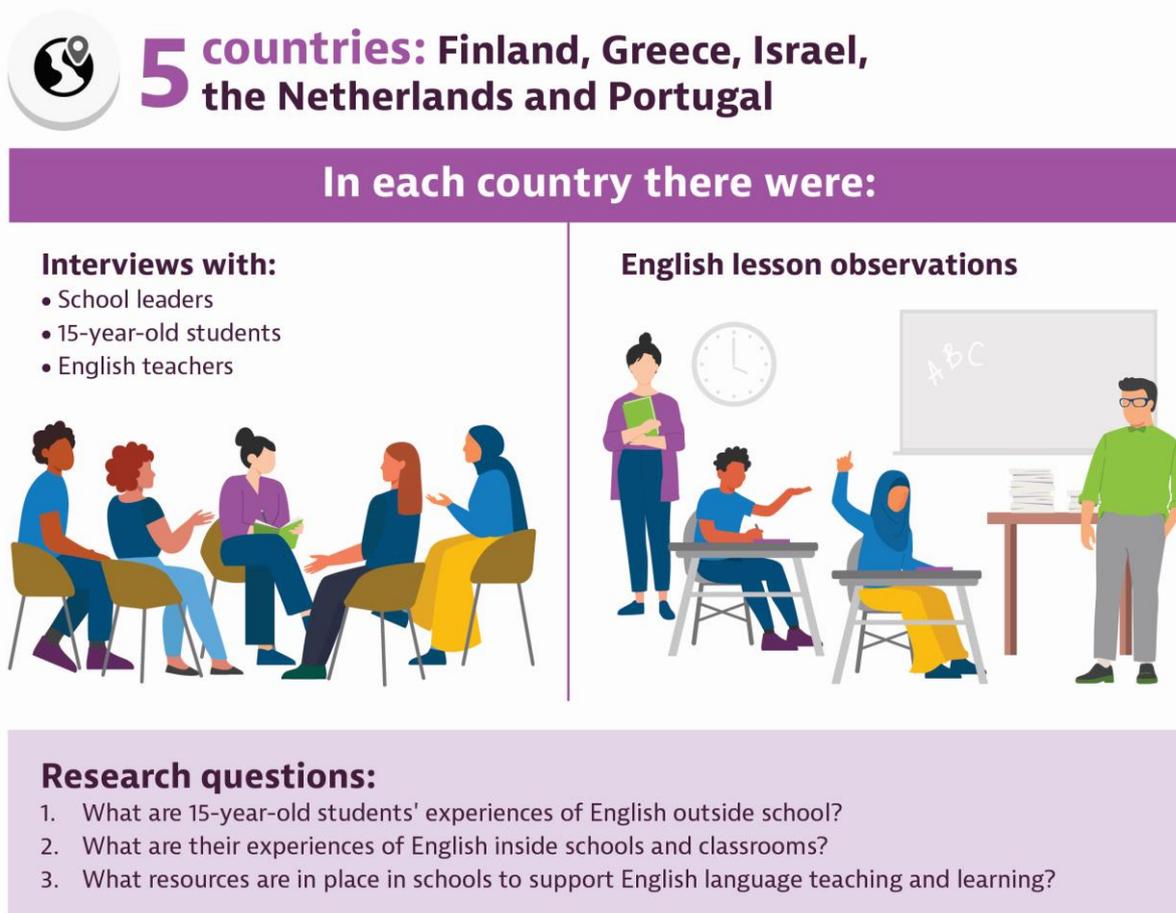

Case study methodology

Research design

The case studies presented in this report are based on data collected in 2023. Figure 1.1 presents an overview of the methodology. The case studies address three key research questions which align closely with the framework prepared for the PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment background questionnaires to ensure the complementarity of the data collected (OECD, 2021[1]).

1. **What are 15-year-old students' experiences of English outside school?** Regular exposure to and use of a foreign language in daily, real-life settings is an important way of developing foreign language proficiency. This research question refers to students' exposure to and uses of English outside the formal learning context of school. It includes the different activities in which students engage with English in both digital and physical environments and the perceived impact this has on language proficiency. It also considers attitudes towards learning English among students, their peers and their families and how this influences their learning.

2. **What are students' experiences of English inside schools and classrooms?** The ways in which school systems organise the teaching and learning of English differs both at country and school levels. This research question considers the different opportunities for English language learning provided within schools. It also explores the teaching practices employed in language classrooms and the content and skills covered. This includes perceptions about key strengths and challenges for English language teachers and learners in formal learning environments.

3. **What resources do schools have to support English language teaching and learning?** As the number of hours and years for which students learn English at school increases, education systems must ensure that schools and teachers have adequate resources to do their jobs well. This research question explores some characteristics of the English-language teaching workforce and their experiences. It also considers the different material resources typically used in English-language classrooms to support students' learning.

In addition, two cross-cutting themes run throughout the case-study research. First, there is a focus on **the role of digital technologies in learning English**. Various technological resources with the potential to support foreign language teaching and learning have been developed in the past decades and policy makers across education systems have been working to promote their use. At the same time, as students increasingly engage with digital technologies in their lives outside school, their experiences of English language change – and multiply. The case studies explore the opportunities and challenges posed by digital technologies with regards to English language learning, both in and out of school, and the current state-of-play.

Second, the research considers **how students with different needs and profiles experience English language learning**. Students come to learn English with very different experiences of and attitudes towards it. As well as exploring these differences, the research considers how teachers and schools adapt the organisation, structure and content of English lessons to meet the needs of students with different proficiency levels or backgrounds.

Figure 1.1. Overview of the research design for case studies of how 15-year-olds learn English

5 countries: Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal

In each country there were:

Interviews with:
- School leaders
- 15-year-old students
- English teachers

English lesson observations

Research questions:
1. What are 15-year-old students' experiences of English outside school?
2. What are their experiences of English inside schools and classrooms?
3. What resources are in place in schools to support English language teaching and learning?

To respond to these questions, the OECD conducted primary and secondary research. **Primary research data** were collected through country visits to each case-study country[1]. Each country visit included three school visits during which the team carried out the following activities:

- Semi-structured interviews with:
  - s*chool leader or a member of the school leadership team*: individual interviews of around 45 minutes conducted in the school's language of instruction with live consecutive interpretation in English
  - *English language teachers*: small group interviews with two to three English teachers for around an hour, conducted in English with interpretation available as required
  - *students*: small group interviews with around six 15-year-old students for around an hour, conducted in the school's language of instruction with live consecutive interpretation in English.
- Classroom observations of 30-60 minutes of an English language lesson for students in the modal grade for 15-year-olds.
- Short questionnaires administered to the interviewees and completed at the beginning or end of the interviews. These provided key background information about participants (e.g., first language, additional languages, use of English outside school, etc.).

- Student activity logs administered to participating students prior to the school visit and completed on an optional basis. Students used these logs to record their exposure to and use of English on a chosen day in the week prior to the school visit.

In some countries, where relevant, additional background interviews were held with key system-level actors, such as policy makers or teacher associations.

Secondary research data were collected for each case study country and on the broader international context through the following methods:

- country background reports prepared by national experts for each case study country providing contextual background and system-level characteristics of English language teaching and learning in the country
- desk-based research providing wider insights into English language learning in the case study countries to complement key findings from the school visits
- background paper on the use of digital technologies in foreign language teaching and learning.

Country, school and participant selection

All countries and economies participating in the PISA Foreign Language Assessment were invited to take part in the case studies. From those that expressed interest, five countries were selected to participate with the aim of having a diverse range of linguistic and educational contexts within practical constraints such as school calendars. The five countries are Finland, Greece, Israel, the Netherlands and Portugal. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the case study visits conducted in each country.

The respective national governments were responsible for identifying and recruiting schools, with guidance from the OECD. Governments were asked to identify schools that could help illustrate the diversity of English language learning experiences in the country. This included, for example, schools with different types of governance arrangements, schools of different sizes or in different types of locations, schools with different student cohort characteristics, and schools with different training profiles (e.g. vocational schools or schools with other specialisms).

Each school was responsible for identifying and recruiting case study participants, with guidance from the OECD. Schools were asked to identify the school principal or a member of the school leadership team with responsibility for the teaching and learning of English. They were asked to involve English teachers with diverse levels of experience, training backgrounds and qualifications and who teach different types of students or programmes, where possible. They were encouraged to invite 15-year-olds with different characteristics and English language proficiencies and/or those studying different programmes. Nevertheless, most of the students taking part in the case study rated themselves as having average or above average proficiency in English in comparison to their classmates.

The case studies aim to illustrate the diversity of 15-year-olds' experiences of learning English today. The research has been designed to enable an in-depth exploration of English-language learning for some students within a country and to identify similarities and differences in those experiences both within a single country and internationally. The findings do not purport to be nationally representative and should not be interpreted as such.

In reporting the findings of the case studies, participating schools and interviewees have been anonymised to the extent possible. Selected quotations have been included to help illustrate key findings. These quotations are reproduced verbatim, with some minor adjustments made for clarity. When participants' responses were provided in a language other than English, the quotations reflect the interpreter's translation.

Table 1.1. Overview of the case study visits conducted in each country

Country	Timing		School visits		Background interviews
Finland	May 2023	A	Finnish-medium, lower secondary school with a creative arts specialism located in a socio-economically advantaged, urban area	School principal Two English teachers Six 15-year-old students	Association of Teachers of English in Finland Federation of Foreign Language Teachers in Finland
		B	Finnish-medium, primary to lower secondary school with a sports and arts specialism, located in an urban, multicultural area with a high share of socio-economically disadvantaged students	School principal Two English teachers Three 15-year-old students	
		C	Finnish-medium, primary to lower secondary school offering general and vocational education, located in a rural area	School assistant principal Two English teachers Six 15-year-old students	
Greece	April 2023	A	Small, upper secondary school with general education programmes, located in a semi-urban, industrial area	School deputy principal One English teacher Five 15-year-old students	Panhellenic Association of State School Teachers of English
		B	Large upper secondary Model[1] school with general education programmes in a socio-economically advantaged urban area	School principal Three English teachers Five 15-year-old students	
		C	Upper secondary school with vocational education programmes located in an urban area serving a high share of socio-economically disadvantaged students and students with special needs	School principal Two English teachers Six 15-year-old students	
Israel	June 2023	A	Arabic-medium, upper secondary school located in a semi-urban area serving a diverse student cohort with a high share of socio-economic disadvantage	School principal Two English teachers Six 15-year-old students	
		B	Hebrew-medium, high-performing small upper secondary school for boys in the state-religious stream located in an urban area	School principal Three English teachers Four 15-year-old students	
		C	Hebrew-medium, lower to upper secondary school located in a socio-economically advantaged, urban area	School principal Three English teachers Four 15-year-old students	
Netherlands	June 2023	A	Lower to upper secondary school with a bilingual stream, located in a small town serving students from the wider rural area	School principal Four English teachers Nine 15-year-old students	Nuffic (the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education)
		B	Lower to upper secondary Dalton[2] school located in a socio-economically advantaged urban area	School principal Three English teachers Six 15-year-old students	
		C	Lower to upper secondary school located in an urban area serving a diverse student cohort with a high share of socio-economically disadvantaged students	School principal Two English teachers Four 15-year-old students	
Portugal	April 2023	A	Lower to upper secondary school offering general and vocational education programmes in a cluster of four schools located in a central urban area	Head of English Two English teachers Five 15-year-old students	Portuguese Association of English Teachers Directorate-General of Education in the Ministry of Education
		B	Lower to upper secondary school offering general and vocational education programmes in a cluster of six schools located in an industrial, socio-economically disadvantaged, urban area	School principal Three English teachers Five 15-year-old students	
		C	Large, high-performing upper secondary school offering general and vocational programmes, located in the central town of a rural municipality	School principal Three English teachers Six 15-year-old students	

1. In Greece, Model schools are intended to operate as centres of excellence and innovation; they are academically selective.
2. Dalton schools follow an education philosophy that aims to enable students to work at their own pace and receive individualised support.
Source: Based on information reported to the case study team by schools.

Key findings of the report

Following this overview chapter, the remainder of the report presents insights from the case study research.

Chapter 2 finds that **digital technologies** have the potential to play a major role in foreign language teaching and learning. They offer easy access to a greater range of foreign language material, can enhance the reading, listening, speaking or writing experience, and facilitate collaborative and interactive learning beyond the classroom. Emerging developments in artificial intelligence-powered technologies mean foreign language teaching can also more easily and rapidly respond to individual needs. However, despite their potential, digital technologies are not having a transformative impact in foreign language classrooms. Teachers need greater support to see the added pedagogical value of using digital technologies in their teaching and quality training in how to implement them.

Chapter 3 reports that in **Finland,** students, educators and parents strongly value learning English. This helps motivate 15-year-olds to do well in English, more so than for other additional languages they may study. Speaking is considered by many students and English teachers to be the most challenging of the four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) and they would like learners to have more authentic opportunities to use English through exchanges or other real-life interactions. Schools are generally well-equipped with digital technologies and most teachers seem comfortable using them to facilitate aspects of instruction. However, it appears that digital technologies are not always used in ways that can specifically enhance foreign language learning. Finland has built up a strong knowledge base of English language teaching and learning nationally which can help inform future policy efforts.

In **Chapter 4**, students in **Greece** have a very clear idea of why they learn English and how it will be useful to them in the future. This results in a desire to do well which, along with a perceived need to certify language proficiency, leads to the vast majority of 15-year-olds in Greece attending private language education outside school from a young age. This is despite English now being a compulsory subject throughout school education. English teachers in Greece are attracted to the profession by the wide variety of job opportunities available and typically find working in public schools favourable to teaching English in other contexts. Nevertheless, they feel that large classes, lack of curricular time and resource challenges – including for digital technologies – inhibit their capacity to fully meet students' needs.

Chapter 5 reveals that students in **Israel** feel highly motivated to learn English and perceive it as a prerequisite for pursuing future careers or academic studies, whether at home or abroad. Nevertheless, opportunities to use English outside school vary; some 15-year-olds have few occasions to practice their productive skills, while others speak or write English outside school daily. Israel has some structures in place to help schools meet the needs of students with different proficiencies: in upper secondary education students work towards different proficiency levels and schools can offer an elective course for advanced students adopting a content and language integrated learning approach. Although there is variation across schools, some teachers are using digital technologies in their lessons, particularly to increase students' engagement.

Chapter 6 finds that, in **the Netherlands** schools and teachers have a lot of curricular and pedagogical freedom and they take advantage of this to differentiate and innovate in the English classroom, and to promote individualised approaches to learning English. Nevertheless, all students must take a national standardised examination at the end of upper secondary education. This means the final years of English instruction are somewhat oriented to preparing the examination, including a focus on reading skills often at the expense of speaking, in particular. Perhaps partly a result of this, and despite the fact that English inhabits the daily lives of many 15-year-olds in the Netherlands, students would like their schools to provide more opportunities for them to develop their speaking skills. School leaders and teachers agree, wishing to provide students with more international exchanges, in particular, for both their linguistic and cultural benefits.

Chapter 7 indicates that students in **Portugal** are often enthusiastic about their English lessons, which they describe as engaging compared to other subjects. They also enjoy using English outside school, although the frequency of these experiences varies between students and typically requires reading and listening to English as opposed to speaking and writing. The participating English teachers in Portugal were highly motivated and proactive, often developing extracurricular initiatives or out-of-class supports to strengthen their students' learning. Many of them use digital technologies to vary their teaching and increase engagement. However, they feel their work is sometimes inhibited by teacher shortages, which are currently affecting many subjects in Portugal.

Finally, **Chapter 8** presents **comparative findings** from the five case studies. It finds that students across countries are regularly exposed to English outside school. They and their teachers recognise several advantages of this exposure but some teachers also identify challenges including tensions between the learning that happens inside and outside school, concerns about the quality of English encountered outside school and the fact that increased exposure can give students an inflated sense of English language proficiency. In school, across countries, the productive skills (speaking and writing) are typically those which students spend the least time practicing and which they find most challenging. Reasons identified include the additional time required to carry out and assess spoken and written English, socio-emotional barriers to students' use of English in the classroom and, except in Israel, the washback effect of high-stakes examinations that do not assess speaking and/or writing skills. Adequately supporting all students to progress in mixed-proficiency settings is seen as a key challenge in all five countries, albeit to different extents. While the use of digital technologies in English language teaching varies both within and across countries the focus tends to be on employing these tools to increase engagement or facilitate classroom management as opposed to taking advantage of the specific added value technology offers foreign language pedagogy.

References

OECD (2021), *PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment Framework*, OECD
Publishing, https://www.oecd.org/pisa/foreign-language/PISA-2025-FLA-Framework.pdf (accessed on 17 September 2023).   [1]

OECD (2020), *How lanugage learning opens doors*, OECD Publications,
https://www.oecd.org/pisa/foreign-language/opens-doors.pdf (accessed on
17 September 2023).   [2]

Notes

[1] Data collection instruments are available on request; please send any enquiries to edu.pisa@oecd.org.