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# EU's teenagers poor in language skills

By *blade*

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Despite decades of European integration, less than one in two teenagers in the 27-nation bloc speaks a foreign language well enough to hold a conversation, the European Union executive said Thursday.

Tests in 14 countries showed only 42 percent of teenage pupils competent in a first foreign language and just one out of four able to converse in a second foreign language, a European Commission study showed.

"We must do more to improve the teaching and learning of languages," said education commissioner Androulla Vassiliou. "Being able to communicate in a foreign language broadens your horizons and opens doors."

Worst offenders are in Britain, where only nine percent of teenagers are competent in French, followed by France, where just 14 percent of students of English can hold their own in a conversation.

In Malta and Sweden on the other hand, where English is the first foreign tongue, a huge 82 percent speak it well enough for a conversation.

Though 53 percent of Europeans use languages at work and 45 percent believe foreign language skills are key to landing good jobs, the number of Europeans who say they can communicate in another language has dropped slightly in a decade, from 56 to 54 percent, according to a separate survey, by EU pollster Eurobarometer.

But this was partly due to the fact that Russian and German were no longer compulsory in schools in central and eastern Europe.

Countries showing the most notable increases since 2005 in the number of people saying they are able to speak at least one foreign language were Austria, up 16 points to 78 percent, Finland, up six to 75 percent and Ireland, also up six to 40 percent.

The five most widely spoken foreign languages remain English at 38 percent, French at 12 percent, German at 11, Spanish with seven percent and Russian at five percent.

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