

Resource 3.4

Official EU Languages – Teacher's Notes



Frequently Asked Questions

Why does the EU have 23 official languages?

When a state joins the European Union, the state decides which languages will be official. The first regulation that determined official languages was passed in 1958. It identified Dutch, French, German and Italian as the first official and working languages of the EU, as these were the languages of member states at that time. As more countries became part of the EU, the number of official and working languages increased. However, because there are fewer official languages than member states, some states have the same official language. In Belgium, for example, the official languages are Dutch, French and German, and in Cyprus the majority of the population speaks Greek.

Will the number of official languages increase as the EU grows?

Yes, as more countries join the EU the number of official languages will increase.

Are there any other reasons why the number of official languages will increase?

These will increase as minority groups demand to speak their own language. Among the more insistent are the Catalans, a population of nearly 10 million (almost twice as many as the Danes and Finns, four times larger than the Slovenes and 25 times larger than the Maltese).

What qualifies as a minority language?

A language is said to be a minority language when it:

- is spoken by citizens from a region within a state or a cross-border region but is not the most commonly-spoken language in that member state, for example Basque, Breton, Catalan, Frisian, Sardinian, and Welsh;
- is spoken by a minority population in one EU country, but is the official language in another, for example German in southern Denmark, French in the Vallée d'Aoste in northern Italy, and Hungarian in Slovakia; and
- is spoken by a minority of citizens in a state but is not confined to a particular region of that state, for example the languages of the Roma (Romani) or Jewish (Yiddish) communities.

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Are there any national languages that are not official languages of the EU?

Not all national languages have the status of official EU languages. For example, Luxembourgish is an official language of Luxembourg since 1984 and Turkish is an official language of Cyprus, yet neither are listed as official languages in the EU.

Languages Spoken in the EU

Country	Official and national languages spoken
Austria	German, Slovene, Croatian, Hungarian
Belgium	Dutch, French, German
Bulgaria	Bulgarian
Cyprus	Greek, English, Turkish
Czech Republic	Czech
Denmark	Danish
Estonian	Estonian
Finland	Finnish, Swedish
France	French
Germany	German
Greece	Greek
Hungary	Hungarian
Ireland	English, Irish
Italy	Italian
Latvia	Latvian
Lithuania	Lithuanian
Luxembourg	French, German, Luxembourgish
Malta	Maltese, English
The Netherlands	Dutch
Poland	Polish
Portugal	Portuguese
Romania	Romanian
Slovakia	Slovak
Slovenia	Slovenian
Spain	Spanish, Catalan, Basque, Galician
Sweden	Swedish
United Kingdom	English