Education First

EF EPI-s

EF English Proficiency Index for Schools

2017

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The EF English Proficiency Index for Students (EF EPI-s) examines the acquisition of English skills by secondary and tertiary students. This second edition of the EF EPI-s measures the English reading and listening proficiency levels of 260,000 students enrolled at hundreds of partner schools and universities in 26 countries.

Although most school systems in the world teach English, assessment tools vary widely from country to country. As a result, there is no standardized way to compare English skill acquisition at the secondary and tertiary levels. The EF EPI-s research aims to bridge this gap by providing a free English assessment platform and this biennial report, which contains benchmarks and international comparisons of student English acquisition.

The EF EPI-s report is a companion to our annual EF EPI report, which evaluates adult English proficiency levels around the world based on a separate set of test data.

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KEY FINDINGS

The EF EPI-s does not rank countries by English proficiency, as the primary EF EPI report does. Instead, we have collected the most compelling findings from our testing in schools and analyzed how they may be useful to policymakers and educators.

Some of our key findings include:

- Throughout secondary and tertiary school, listening skills develop more quickly than reading skills. As students mature, this gap usually narrows, although not in all countries.
- English listening skills vary more widely from student to student than reading skills, perhaps because students have more exposure to spoken English than written English outside the classroom.
- Students do not improve their English at a steady rate. In some countries, students improve enormously in lower secondary school but make little progress in later years. In other countries, learning is steady all the way through university.
- English abilities vary between peers in different cities, between public and private school students, and between university students in different fields. Although some variation is expected, the size of the skill gap between one population and another is sometimes surprisingly large and would require considerable public effort to close.

LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT IN SCHOOLS

Standardized English language assessment tools can help educators improve learning outcomes. But, to date, internationally recognized standardized English tests have been too expensive for regular use in schools.

Also, these tests have not been designed to track progress over time. Individuals take standardized English tests as one-off evaluations to certify competency for a third party, such as an overseas university or immigration authority, but school systems rarely use them.

The English test we used for our research is different. The EF Standard English Test (EF SET) was designed to the same exacting standards as the TOEFL or IELTS, but this test is free, scalable, and built to track students' English skill acquisition over time.

Because the EF SET is free and available online, an entire city, region, or country can evaluate all of its students every year using this test, for only the cost of coordinating the effort. With the data from that testing effort, educators will be able to understand how their students' English skills evolve over time, how changes in the curriculum affect outcomes, which schools need extra resources, and how their students compare to similarly aged students across the country and around the world.

METHODOLOGY

As with the main EF EPI report, our sampling was gathered on a voluntary basis. Any school wishing to participate in this research was allowed to do so. Some schools tested all their students; others only a single class.

In some countries, we had participating institutions from lower secondary through tertiary education, while in others we only tested students at a single level of instruction.

This report does not claim to be representative of any country's overall English proficiency among students of a particular age.

ABOUT EF EDUCATION FIRST

EF Education First (www.ef.com) is an international education company that focuses on language, academics, and cultural experience. Founded in 1965, EF's mission is "opening the world through education." With more than 500 schools and offices in 54 countries, EF is the Official Education Services Sponsor for the PyeongChang 2018 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. The EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) and the EF English Proficiency Index for Schools (EF EPI-s) are published by EF Learning Labs, the research and innovation division of EF Education First.

ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH SKILLS

The English skills of students around the world do not progress steadily throughout lower secondary, upper secondary, and university education.

Looking at the English teaching curriculum in most countries, we would expect to see students' English skills improving steadily from year to year. After all, students receive similar amounts of instruction each year, they are taught by teachers with the same types of qualifications, and they follow a curriculum that is structured around steady progress.

However, progress tends to be uneven: on average worldwide, students experience disproportionately large gains between ages 13 and 14, and then again between ages 18 and 19. And while rates of progress vary widely from country to country, they are rarely steady. For example, students in Spain develop English skills much more quickly in lower secondary school than in upper secondary school. Students in China show strong gains in upper secondary school, but none at all in college. And, unusually, students in Poland acquire English steadily from year to year.

Why is progress so erratic? And why do these patterns vary so much from country to country?

One possible explanation is that education systems focus more on speaking and writing during certain portions of the curriculum, leaving aside listening and reading, which are the two skills measured by the EF SET. It is also possible that the amount of English instruction changes from grade to grade in particular cases, although in general, within a single cycle of an education system, hours of instruction in English do not vary dramatically.

Selection pressures are the most likely cause of the disproportionately large gains measured between ages 18 and 19. Less qualified students may not continue on to university and are thus eliminated from our test-taking population. Keep in mind that our data set does not contain students who took the EF SET multiple times. In all graphs comparing students by age, we are comparing, for example, a group of 15-year-olds to a different group of 16-year-olds, rather than comparing the same students at different ages.

Unfortunately, there is not enough data in our sample to determine which, if any, of these explanations is the most valid in each education system, or if perhaps there are other factors at play. In order to better understand these puzzling results, we would like to see more standardized, continuous assessment of English at both the national and international levels, as well as more open data sharing. A more comprehensive and standardized data set would allow researchers and policymakers to analyze the English levels of large student populations in different countries, as well as to track individual students over multiple years.

If students are attending English classes but not improving their English skills, reform is urgent, but without a system of monitoring that is comparable from school to school, country to country, and year to year, it is impossible to undertake a data-driven approach to reform.

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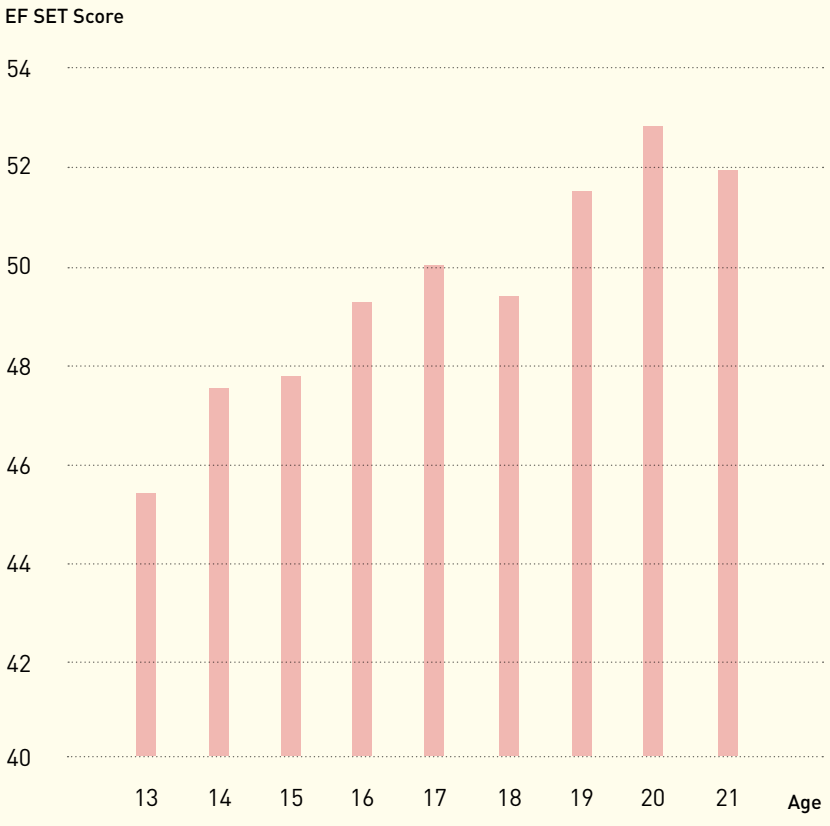
AVERAGE EF SET SCORE BY AGE



This graph shows the composite reading and listening EF SET score for students of each age group across all 26 countries surveyed. It illustrates a variable rate of English acquisition. Keep in mind that it is easier for students in the beginner levels to improve than for students in the more advanced levels; therefore, a slower rate of acquisition at higher skill levels is to be expected.

SKILL SNAPSHOTS AT AGES 15 AND 20

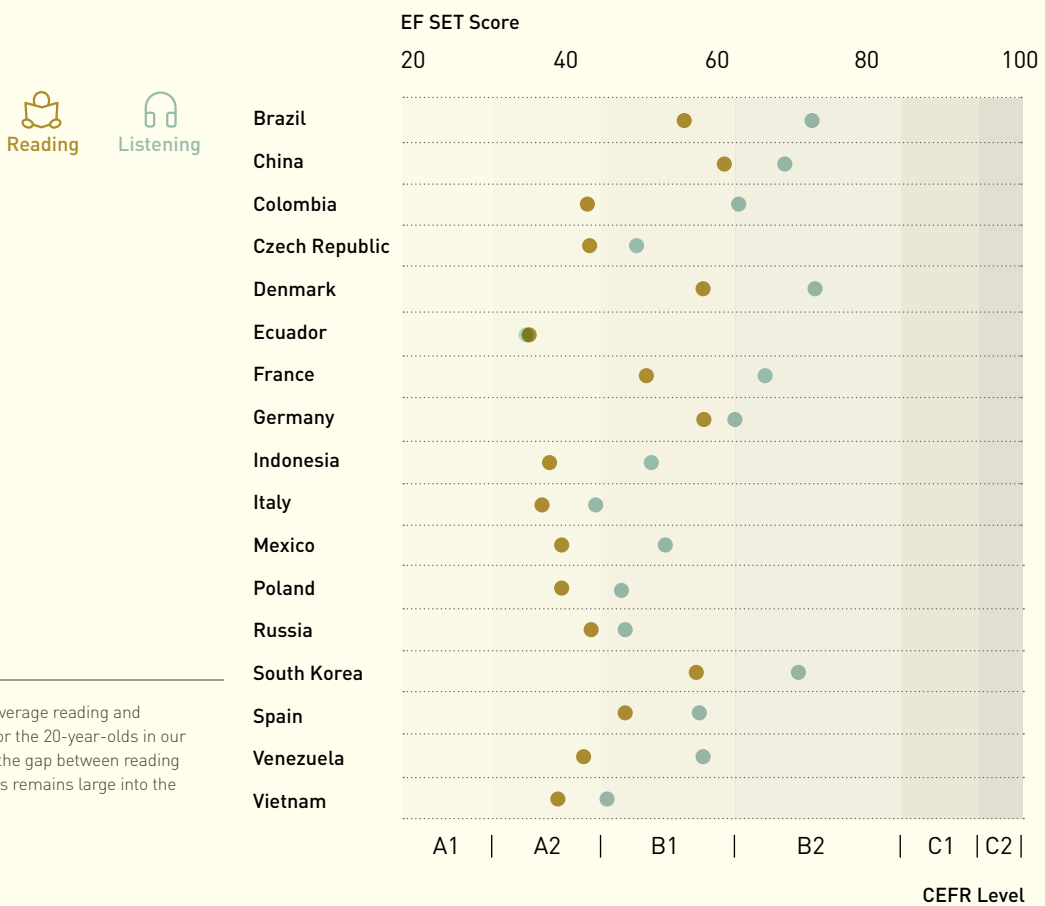
In all 26 countries included in this report, English instruction has begun by the end of primary school. In some countries, though, instruction begins several years earlier. By the end of lower secondary school, after five or more years of English instruction, students are on average at the B1 or B2 level in English listening skills and the A2 or B1 level in English reading skills.

AVERAGE EF SET SCORE AT AGE 15

This graph plots the average reading and listening scores for all 15-year-old students in our data set. One trend is apparent: students' listening skills develop more quickly than their reading skills.

By the time they reach university, students have improved their English considerably. However, even in the highest-performing countries in this study, average listening skills are still below the C1 level. Because entrance into a university is selective, and English skill evaluation is often part of the selection process, we would expect to find that English proficiency among 20-year-old university students to be higher than that among all 20-year-olds.

AVERAGE EF SET SCORE AT AGE 20



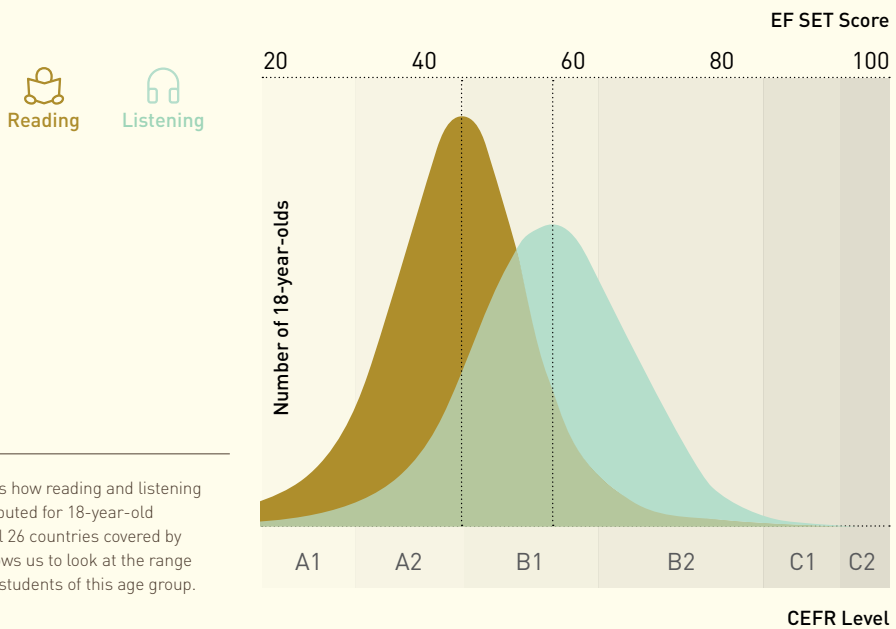
As this graph of average reading and listening scores for the 20-year-olds in our study illustrates, the gap between reading and listening skills remains large into the tertiary level.

SKILL DIFFERENCES IN READING AND LISTENING

In almost all of the 26 countries studied, listening skills develop more quickly than reading skills for students in all age groups. Comparing the distribution of reading and listening skills among 18-year-olds in all countries surveyed, we find that the range of variability in listening scores is broader. One explanation for this pattern is that some students, because of international travel or high levels of media consumption, have much more exposure to spoken English than others, while exposure to large amounts of written English outside the classroom is less common.

The graph below compares the average reading and listening scores that would be expected from an 18-year-old, based upon a linear growth model. There is a wide range of variability in both expected reading and listening scores across the 26 countries studied, as shown by the overlapping graphs. The corresponding bell curves model the distribution of scores across countries. The global average listening score is 11.8 points higher than the global average reading score.

DISTRIBUTION OF READING AND LISTENING SCORES AT AGE 18



This graph shows how reading and listening scores are distributed for 18-year-old students from all 26 countries covered by the survey. It allows us to look at the range of ability among students of this age group.

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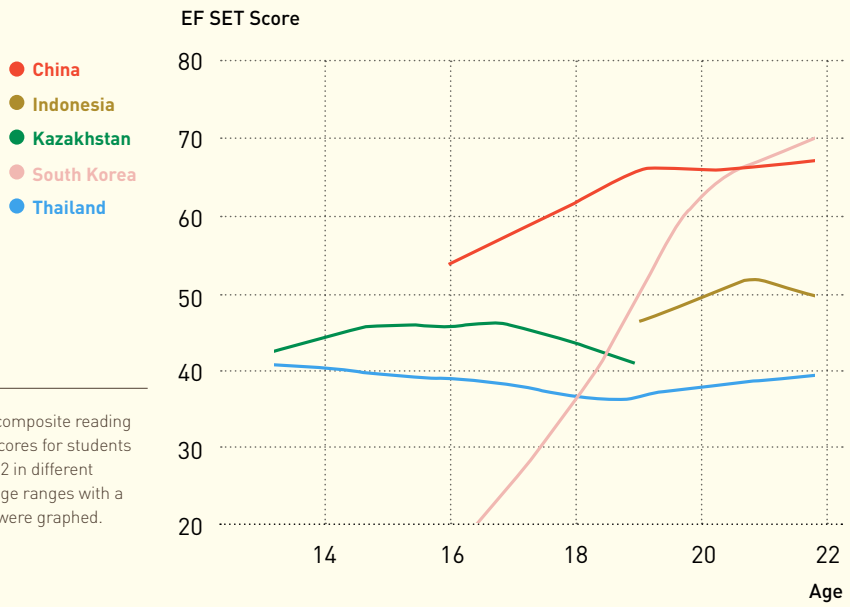
ASIA

We have much less data for Asia than we do for Europe and Latin America, but from what we can see, the region has highly divergent educational trends. In South Korea, the rate of English acquisition is faster than in any other country surveyed, starting from one of the lowest surveyed levels at age 16 and rising to one of the highest by age 22. Kazakhstan and Thailand are the opposite, with almost no measurable English learning taking place in secondary school. We hope that more schools in Asia will participate in this research in 2017 and 2018 so that we can form a more complete picture of English language acquisition trends in the region.

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY ACQUISITION (ASIA)

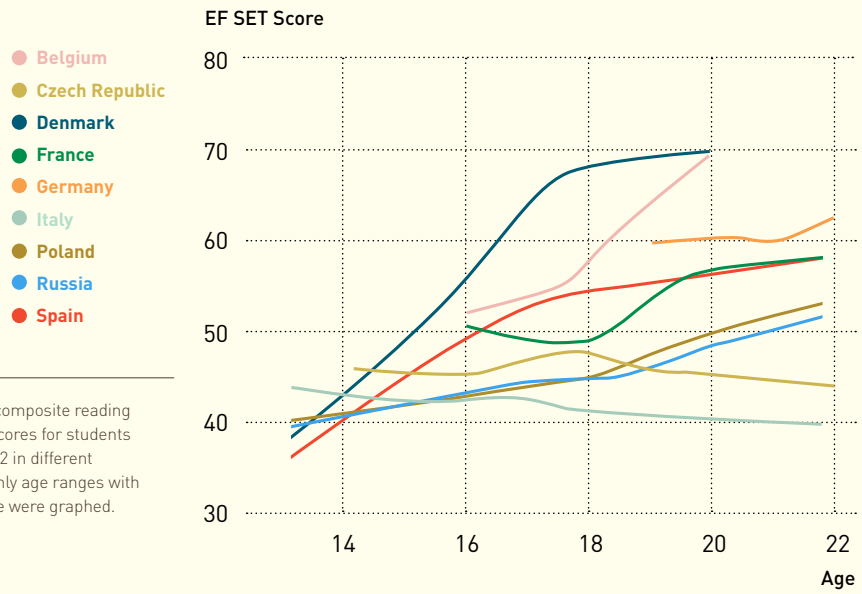


This graph shows the composite reading and listening EF SET scores for students between ages 13 and 22 in different Asian countries. Only age ranges with a sufficient sample size were graphed.

EUROPE

On the whole, European adults speak English better than non-native English speakers in any other region. Our European student data allows us to look closely at how this proficiency develops, and to understand when learning stalls in some Moderate Proficiency countries. Looking at the example of Denmark (Very High Proficiency) and Spain (Moderate Proficiency), we can observe that 13-year-old students in both countries have a similar level of English, but in upper secondary school, the two countries diverge sharply. Similarly, French and Belgian students have comparable levels of English at age 16, but their subsequent trajectories could not be more different.

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY ACQUISITION (EUROPE)



This graph shows the composite reading and listening EF SET scores for students between ages 13 and 22 in different European countries. Only age ranges with a sufficient sample size were graphed.

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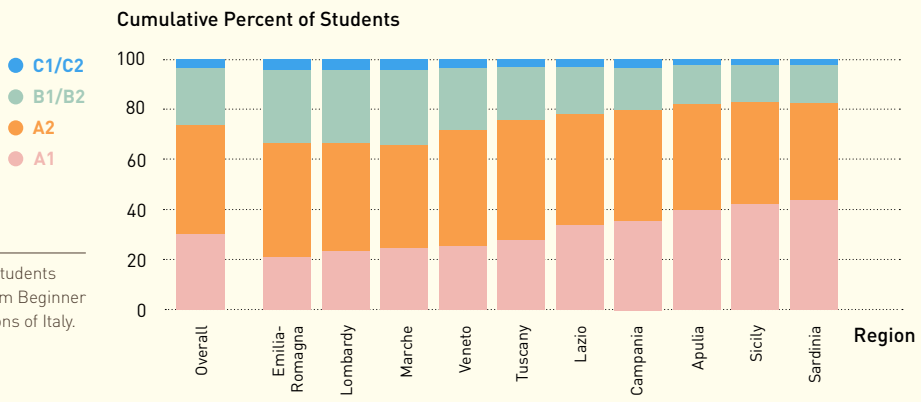
IN FOCUS: ITALY

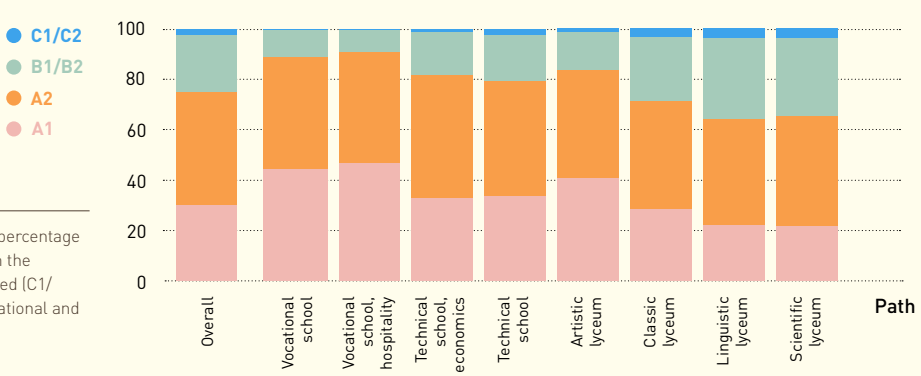
Italy has the lowest adult English proficiency of any country in the European Union. Upper secondary students from over 600 schools in 10 regions of Italy participated in our research in 2015 and 2016, which allows for further analysis of English levels in different types of secondary schools and in different regions. Upper secondary students in Italy attend one of three types of schools—lyceum, technical schools, and vocational schools. Students in vocational schools, who make up more than 50% of Italy's upper secondary students, have the weakest command of English, with over 90% testing at the beginner levels (A1 and A2). Regional differences are also striking, with twice as many students in level A1 in Sardinia as compared to Emilia-Romagna.

ITALIAN UPPER SECONDARY STUDENTS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY BY REGION



This graph shows the portion of students that fall into each CEFR band, from Beginner (A1) to Proficient (C2), for 10 regions of Italy.

ITALIAN UPPER SECONDARY STUDENTS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY BY SCHOOL TYPE

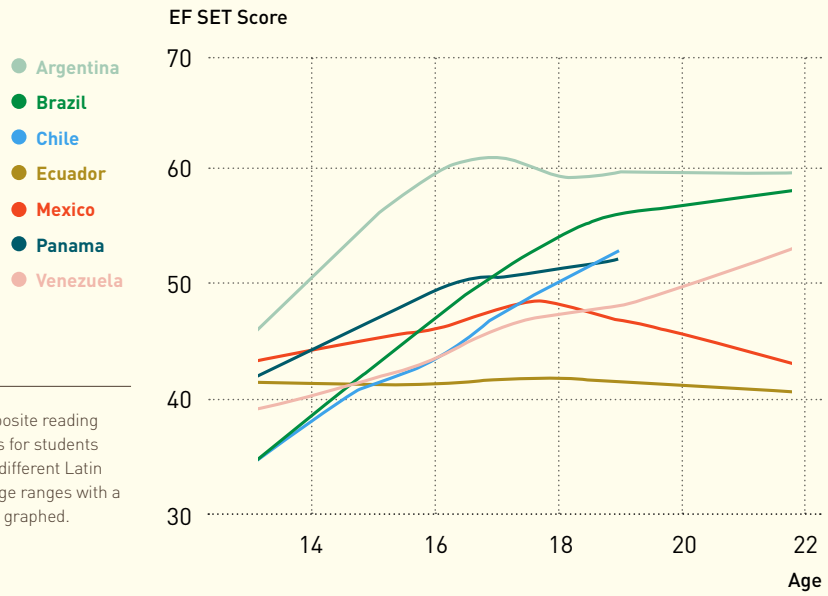


This graph shows that a greater percentage of lyceum students are scoring in the intermediate (B1/B2) and advanced (C1/C2) levels than their peers in vocational and technical schools.

LATIN AMERICA

Latin American school systems are the beneficiaries of significantly more public investment than two decades ago. Many countries have begun to focus on improving English language instruction through initiatives such as teacher retraining, scholarships for international study, and native English teacher exchange programs. Our data shows that secondary school is a time of significant English language acquisition in the region, with students learning relatively steadily until age 17 or 18. In Ecuador, however, secondary students do not make as much progress as their peers in other countries. At the university level, students in Latin America are, on average, no longer improving their English. Latin American universities must do a better job teaching English if they are to prepare their graduates for the global workplace.

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY ACQUISITION (LATIN AMERICA)



This graph shows the composite reading and listening EF SET scores for students between ages 13 and 22 in different Latin American countries. Only age ranges with a sufficient sample size were graphed.

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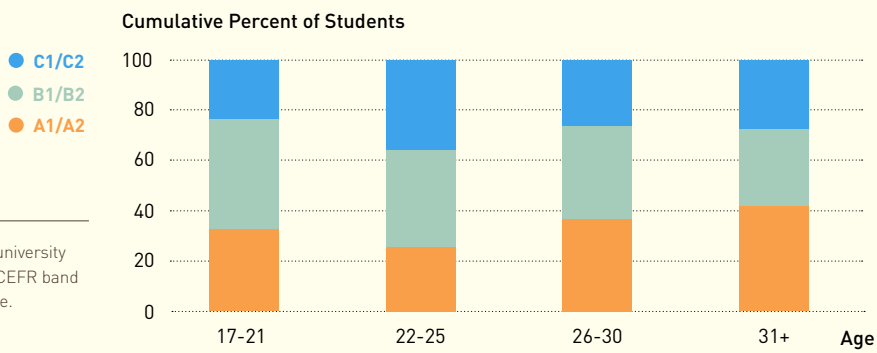
IN FOCUS: BRAZIL

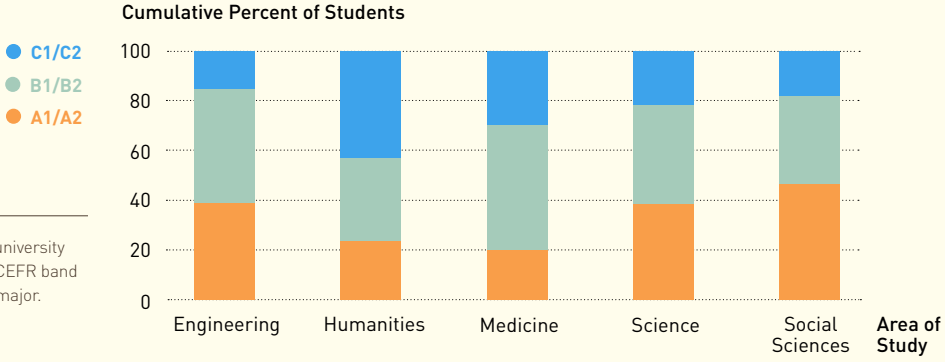
Adults in Brazil have low English proficiency, and, despite moderate improvements over the past several years, the country has been unable to raise average adult English proficiency enough to ensure smooth workplace interactions in English. Among the thousands of Brazilian students who participated in our research, a few hundred students from 10 different universities completed demographic questionnaires in addition to taking the EF SET, allowing us to look more closely at English proficiency in different academic specializations and among students of different ages. Although English is essential for international collaboration on research and development, nearly 40% of science and engineering students surveyed in Brazil fall into the lowest proficiency bands (A1/A2). Students aged 22 to 25 have the best English among university students, but older Brazilian students have a unique linguistic profile, with a lower proportion of intermediate level English speakers than other age groups.

BRAZILIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY BY AGE



This graph shows the portion of university students in Brazil in each broad CEFR band (A, B, or C), divided by student age.

BRAZILIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY BY AREA OF STUDY



This graph shows the portion of university students in Brazil in each broad CEFR band (A, B, or C), divided by university major.

CONCLUSIONS

Teachers, parents, and students all hope that high school graduates are well prepared to enter tertiary education and the workforce. In many cases, that transition now requires effective English communication skills. Teaching those skills has become an explicit goal in many secondary and tertiary curricula around the world.

Although nearly all schools teach English in some form, precise assessment tools are hard to find, and they are often prohibitively expensive. As English proficiency is increasingly linked to developmental targets, professional success, and global knowledge sharing, educators need these assessment tools more than ever.

Tracking how students develop their English skills over time must be a priority. Many education systems already use some form of standardized testing to evaluate performance in English. However, they rarely test individual students over time to understand how language acquisition takes place, and even fewer compare those scores with peers in other countries.

Based on our research, we have the following recommendations:

- **Across grade levels, adopt comparable assessment standards that track English learning progress.** Regular, accessible, standardized assessments help individual students and their parents track progress year by year. These assessments also give educators the data they need to see how students are learning and adjust the curriculum accordingly.
- **Establish English proficiency as a core competency.** When students are required to reach a specific level of English proficiency in order to move to a new phase of formal education, everyone takes English education more seriously. School systems need to make it clear to teachers, students, and parents that English proficiency is an essential component of academic success.
- **Align English instruction to ensure smooth transitions between stages of learning.** Students benefit from a coherent teaching regime that is clear and consistent. At different ages and stages, students need different types of English instruction. From primary schools to universities to professional training and beyond, better coordination helps educators design curricula that promote synergies, build on acquired skills, and avoid repetition.
- **Promote balance between different English skills.** There is a marked disparity between many students' reading and listening proficiency. All-around competence in English is more powerful than skills developed in isolation. A balanced curriculum will build oral English skills early, while children are still developing their own native language proficiency, and then build written English skills and vocabulary to support the academic performance of older students.
- **Teach English after secondary school as well.** At the tertiary and vocational levels, students need to develop English skills for specific professional purposes. The targeted skills and vocabulary acquired during these years are essential to operational readiness when entering the workforce.
- **Compare students to peers in other countries.** Individual school systems have their own strengths and weaknesses. By comparing their students' English proficiency development to peers around the world, school systems can better understand those strengths and shortcomings, and they can evaluate their ability to prepare students for a competitive global workforce. An internationally standardized testing platform makes these kinds of analyses possible.

While this report does not claim to represent the overall English proficiency of students from any country or age group, it explores broad trends in English language acquisition in secondary and tertiary education.

With more data, we could evaluate students' English speaking and writing skills, which this report does not cover. Speaking is the most valuable skill for beginners, while writing is essential for academic and professional contexts. With a broader data set and more demographic information, further research can look more closely at the disparities between genders, ages, cities, public and private schools, disciplines, and skills.

Our research team encourages education authorities and school administrators to leverage the full potential of the English testing suite developed for this research to improve outcomes in English language instruction. We are ready to support countries, regions, and individual schools that would like to use the EF Standard English Test (EF SET) to assess their students.

APPENDIX: CEFR LEVELS AND CAN-DO STATEMENTS

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PROFICIENT USER	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently, and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic, and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors, and cohesive devices.
INDEPENDENT USER	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue, giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise while traveling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
BASIC USER	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to most relevant areas (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate during routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment, and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

QUOTED FROM THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

JOIN OUR RESEARCH

This EF EPI-s report identifies trends we are able to uncover about English language acquisition in secondary and tertiary education. More importantly, it gives an idea of the kinds of analysis that would be possible with an even broader data set collected using the same tools.

Continuous assessment of English language skills using a standard set of assessment tools allows us to pinpoint areas for improvement and reveal successful strategies at the institutional, national, and international levels. We invite all schools, universities, and ministries of education throughout the world to participate in our research.

Participating institutions will have access to the EF Standard English Test (EF SET). Offered at no cost and built to the same standards as other standardized tests, the EF SET rests on a foundation of evidence-based research and analysis. Test items were created by experienced exam writers, carefully reviewed by a panel of experts, and piloted on more than 150,000 learners from 80 countries.

Upon completion of testing, participating schools receive customized reports with their students' EF SET scores and CEFR levels, as well as comparisons between groups of students within a school and across a region or country.

EF SET

EF STANDARD ENGLISH TEST

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