What the PISA Foreign Language Assessment means for English language education

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What will we cover in this paper?

Cambridge has partnered with OECD to develop the English language tests being used in the first PISA Foreign Language Assessment (FLA).

The global survey of thousands of students in 21 countries and economies will give the world unprecedented insights into what makes English language teaching and learning effective.

There is currently no extensive international data on how English is taught and learned in school systems worldwide. The results of the first PISA FLA will change that.

In our new paper, Cambridge and the OECD reveal more about the study, the global expertise behind it and the impact the results will have on teachers, students, policy-makers and educators in the field of foreign language learning.

Here are your top three takeaways:

1 **The PISA FLA highlights the importance of learning languages**

The PISA FLA emphasises the fundamental importance of learning another language in our increasingly globalised world. Learning a language, such as English, can have a positive impact on employability, improve critical thinking skills, and boost cultural awareness – essential skills in today's interconnected world.

2 **It creates an international benchmark of English language proficiency**

The survey will assess and report English language proficiency against the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Reporting against the CEFR ensures that the results provide a meaningful international benchmark of English language proficiency for teachers, educators and policy-makers. This is because these levels are widely recognised and used in language teaching, course planning and assessment worldwide.

3 **The results will shape how English is taught around the world**

Along with testing language proficiency, the PISA FLA will also collect and analyse key information about what makes successful language learning. The insights will give policy-makers, educators, and teachers clear guidance on how to improve English language education globally.

Contents

Some key questions in foreign language learning

Foreign language learning is often described as a complex, dynamic process (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2017), shaped by continuous interactions among multiple factors. Beyond the student and their cognitive abilities, numerous other influences come into play, such as their attitude and motivation, their teacher and the teaching methods employed, their school and family environment, educational policies, and more. Imagine how beneficial it would be to have reliable information to address some key questions in this area:

- What constitutes best practice for teaching English as a foreign language in various contexts?
- How do students' behaviours, practices, school and family factors influence their learning outcomes?
- What is the impact of curriculum and language policy decisions on learning outcomes?

These are the type of questions that the PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment (FLA) is designed to answer in order to provide insights on how to help students learn languages better, teachers to teach better, and school systems to operate more effectively.

In this paper, we explain what the PISA 2025 FLA is all about; the need for such an assessment; the key factors influencing success in foreign language learning; how the PISA 2025 FLA will assess these factors; and, critically, how the results will address the above key questions and benefit teachers, students, policymakers and educators in the field of foreign language learning.

What is the PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment (FLA)?

PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment, is an international survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It aims to evaluate educational systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students (OECD, 2025). The results provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of educational policies and practices, helping educators and policymakers to make improvements.

Since 2000, it has been conducted every three years, and starting from 2025, it will be conducted every four years. The survey assesses a sample of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics, science, and an innovative domain, as well as in other optional subjects within a participating country or economy. Over 90 countries and economies participate, making it the world's largest survey of educational outcomes.

Starting in 2025, and every eight years thereafter, an optional PISA Foreign Language Assessment (FLA) will be introduced to evaluate knowledge, skills and policies in foreign language learning. In its first cycle in 2025, FLA will assess **English as a foreign language** in three skills: **reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and spoken production**.[1] Expanding the assessment to other skills and other foreign languages will be explored in future cycles.

The PISA 2025 FLA will measure and report English language ability in alignment with the internationally recognised levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001; 2020) from Pre-A1 to C1 and above. The worldwide use of the CEFR levels in foreign language learning will ensure meaningful comparisons and applicability of the results around the world.

OECD (www.oecd.org)

The **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development** is an international organisation that works to build better policies for better lives. It draws on more than 60 years of experience and insights to shape policies that foster prosperity and opportunity, underpinned by equality and well-being.

[1] Henceforth Reading, Listening, and Speaking for ease of reference.

What is the need for the PISA 2025 FLA?

The introduction of the PISA FLA reflects the growing importance of using another language in an increasingly globalised world. Why is this skill so valued?

In recent decades, the opportunities for interaction with people from other countries has been growing and this is set to continue (OECD, 2018; Gutema et al., 2024). The changes in the way the world works, including through technology, and the opportunities for people to travel, whether as tourists, to study or to migrate, continue to expand as the world becomes more accessible. International trade is also increasing. In order to take advantage of these opportunities, we need to be able to communicate with people from other countries to a good level and the ability to do this in more than one language is essential. Around the world, the benefits of becoming proficient in other languages are recognised and are often built into national educational policies. Whatever the foreign language is, we can consider language learning to have three main benefits, both to students themselves and society in general (Figure 1).

Benefits of foreign language learning		
Intercultural understanding	**Economic benefits**	**Cognitive benefits**
Foreign languages act as a bridge to other people, countries and cultures. In doing so, they help promote respect for diversity and inclusiveness.	Knowing one or more foreign languages is associated with higher chances to access to tertiary education and employability – domestically and globally.	Learning foreign languages increases cognitive abilities, such as flexibility, problem solving, and abstract and creative thinking.

Figure 1: Benefits of foreign language learning (Source: OECD, 2024)

Three main benefits of language learning

As language students, we do more than just learn how to communicate in the language. We also learn about the **culture** associated with that language. We learn about the lives and experiences of the people who speak that language and so widen our knowledge of the cultural complexity of the world. This can be done within the contexts and situations encountered in a language course, or by discovering that not everything that we understand in our first language can be translated into another. From this, we start to realise that people from other countries might understand the world differently (Della Chiesa et al., 2012). This is a positive start to understanding the lives of others around the world and helps us to become global citizens and participate effectively in global life. The results of PISA 2018, for example, indicated that multilingualism is positively associated with greater intercultural understanding and global attitudes. Students who reported speaking two or more languages demonstrated greater respect for people from different cultures compared to those who spoke only one language (OECD, 2020a).

As well as this level of cultural understanding, being proficient in a foreign language also brings **economic** benefits. There is much evidence that shows that companies are more likely to employ those who speak a foreign language and that these employees are more likely to benefit from better career progression and promotion. In turn, this means that foreign language speakers are more likely to have higher salaries. In countries where there is a high proportion of the population who speak a foreign language, this has been shown to have an impact on the country's economy overall. Being able to speak a common language helps with trade negotiations and with the smooth running of international business. This helps to support innovation as more people work together in developing areas (European Commission, 2012a).

Alongside these benefits, there is now evidence to suggest that language learning helps us in other areas of study as well. The **cognitive** benefits appear to carry over to continuing first language learning as well as supporting the learning of further foreign languages. In addition, research shows that language students develop better problem-solving skills, are stronger at thinking abstractly, and are more creative as they develop the ability to make deductions about language and recognise language patterns as they learn. These cognitive skills can be applied to other subjects, encouraging cross-curricular learning (Rothman et al., 2013).

The need for reliable data on language learning

The benefits of foreign language proficiency described above have led to increased investment of resources in the teaching of foreign languages by many governments around the world. It is important for them to find out how successful their efforts are in order for them to make informed decisions. Governments are always interested in knowing if their young people are achieving their curriculum goals and if they are doing well in comparison to those in other countries. Those in charge of setting educational policy want to make sure that budgets are set to support the most effective learning methods. So, we need to be able to provide data to inform their decisions, and we need to ensure this data is based on reliable and transparent research.

In some situations, other stakeholders might want to know what the 'international standard' is and may make reference to tables and rankings showing the results from free online tests or tests of language proficiency taken by a small proportion of language students. However, these rankings may be biased as they do not give a fully representative picture of language learning for all young people. Over the past decades there have been more systematic efforts to carry out larger-scale studies and international comparisons into language learning, with the largest being the first European survey on language competences (European Commission, 2012b).

The PISA 2025 FLA: an unparalleled opportunity for English language learning research

The PISA 2025 FLA - English survey is designed to provide large-scale and reliable data using a representative sample of students from countries and economies around the world.

It will bring together what students know and can do in English as a foreign language with all the factors known to influence language learning in one single, large-scale, global study. It will assess students' knowledge and skills with a high-quality **proficiency test** and collect information on all the important learning factors through a series of well-researched **questionnaires** administered to students, teachers, parents and school leaders (Figure 2). Background information about the educational system is also collected. The results from the test and the accompanying questionnaires will be combined to provide a comprehensive analysis of language learning to inform those involved in the supply, design, funding, teaching and learning of foreign languages and English language learning, in particular.

In the following sections, we will explain how the PISA 2025 FLA defines foreign language proficiency; how the test will assess and report English language proficiency in a fair and valid manner; and how the questionnaires will capture comprehensive data on background factors that affect outcomes in English language learning. We will conclude by describing the benefits the PISA 2025 FLA will bring in English language education, and key developments to look out for following the survey's completion in 2025.
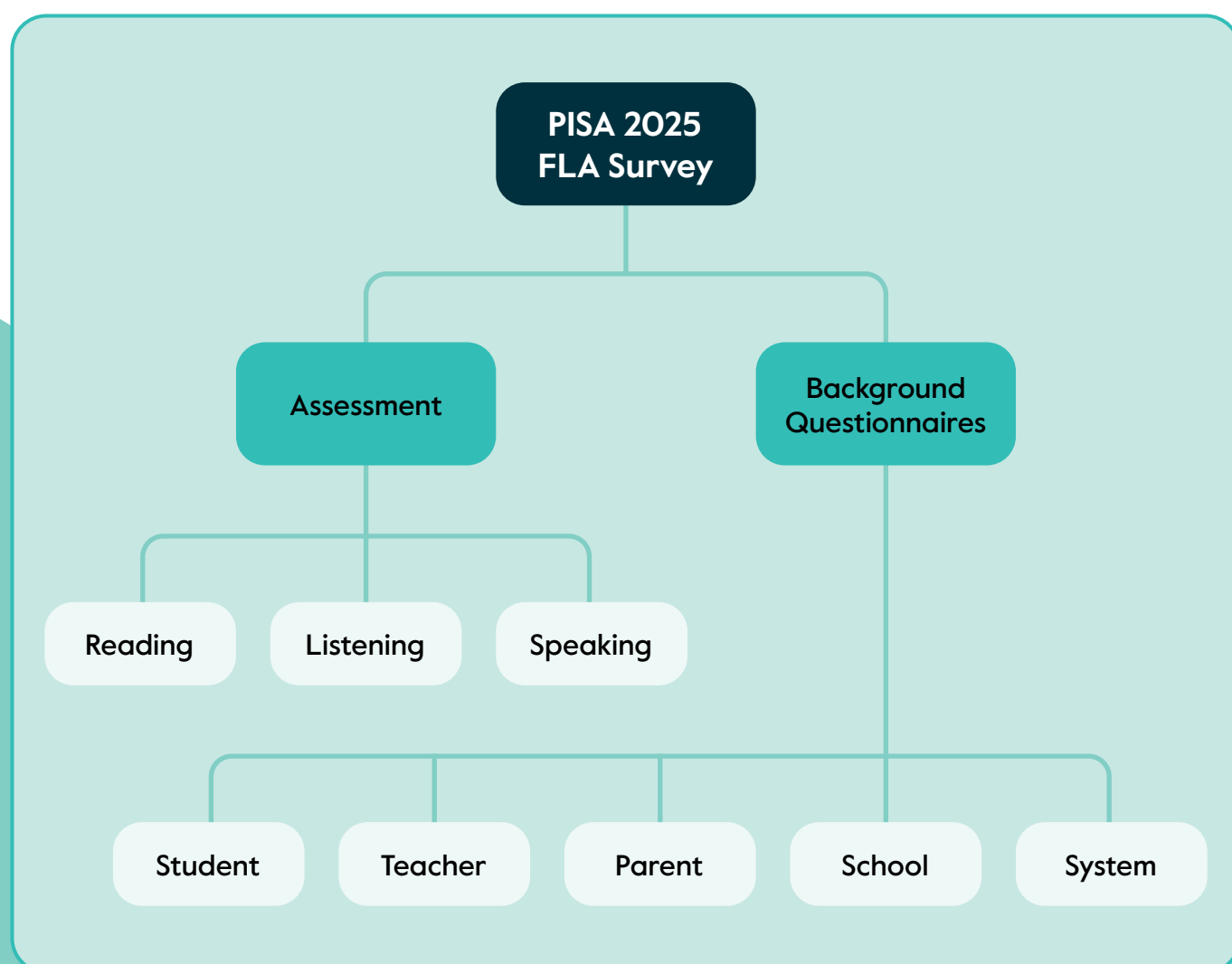

Figure 2: The PISA 2025 FLA English survey: An overview of the data collection instruments

Who participates in the PISA 2025 FLA - English?

Twenty one countries and economies take part in the PISA 2025 FLA - English:

Belgium (Flemish community)	Dominican Republic	Peru
Bulgaria	Finland	Portugal
Chinese Taipei	France	Qatar
Colombia	Germany	Romania
Croatia	Greece	Spain
Czechia	Israel	Sweden
Denmark	Italy	Ukraine

However, not every 15-year-old student or every school in these countries and economies will participate. The PISA 2025 FLA - English will be taken by a representative sample of schools and students within each country/economy following the PISA 2025 FLA - English sampling design. No individual results or certificates will be issued either. This is because PISA assesses the overall performance of 15-year-olds in participating countries and economies, and provides group data at national levels. The results are used to describe the performance of education systems and inform policy decisions – not to evaluate individual students.

The PISA 2025 FLA - English survey: A collaborative effort

Many actors have been involved in the development and implementation of the FLA, including representatives from governments of countries and economies participating in PISA, researchers, national and international experts, partners, and the OECD Secretariat.

- **Government representatives** actively participated in the design of the assessment and framework, in the choice of the policy questions they expect the assessment to answer, and in the design of the questionnaires through workshops, written feedback, and online meetings.
- **Researchers and experts** are providing inputs, advice and guidance throughout all the stages of the assessment design and development.
- The **European Commission** (EC) follows the development of the test closely, assisting with expertise built on previous work at EU level and the European Framework of Reference for Language Competences. The EC is also co-funding the development of the framework and the contextual questionnaires, the pilot of speaking and listening, country engagement, the preparation of the implementation, the preparation of a case studies publication in five countries, and the analysis and dissemination of results.
- The test is being developed in partnership with **Cambridge University Press & Assessment**.
- The **OECD Secretariat** has a coordinating role of all the above actors as well as with the PISA Technical Advisory Group (TAG) and the contractors for the PISA 2025 FLA - English who will be in charge of implementing the assessment.

This collaborative approach has ensured the tests and the overall survey have been developed to the highest standards.

What shapes foreign language proficiency?

The PISA 2025 FLA builds on other international experience in assessing foreign languages, in particular:

- The CEFR descriptive scheme for foreign language proficiency that is used across the world. It identifies six key levels of proficiency (from A1 to C2), which can be expanded to a seventh (pre A1), for a number of distinct language activities.
- A socio-cognitive model of language use (Weir, 2005) which sees language as an interplay of cognitive and social factors. Its skill-specific models show how the use of reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills vary along the beginner-expert continuum.

The PISA 2025 FLA definition of foreign language proficiency

The PISA definition of foreign language proficiency draws on the CEFR description of language use (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 9-10; Council of Europe, 2020, pp. 31-33):

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> **Foreign language proficiency is the ability to use a foreign language to communicate effectively.** It requires a combination of communicative language competences and general competences that allow the foreign language student to perform communicative language activities (reception, production, interaction and mediation), which involve one or a combination of the following skills: reading, listening, speaking or writing. It also requires the activation of appropriate language strategies.
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> **OECD, 2021, p. 27**
>
> **99**

In other words, foreign language proficiency is the ability to combine a range of knowledge, skills and strategies which collectively enable effective foreign language use. These include:

- **communicative language knowledge** about the linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic features of the foreign language (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, politeness conventions, structuring a message or text, etc.);
- **general knowledge** such as knowledge about the world or ability to learn;
- **language skills** such as reading, listening, spoken and written production and interaction, and mediation (e.g. translating, summarising);
- **appropriate language strategies** such as monitoring and repairing our speech or writing; knowing how to take turns to speak during an oral conversation, etc.

The PISA 2025 FLA model of foreign language proficiency

The theoretical framework on which the PISA 2025 FLA is based (OECD, 2021) views foreign language proficiency as the joint outcome of two combined sources of influence: the **student** and the **task** (or language activity). These, in turn, determine the cognitive processes that the student employs when using a foreign language. Student and task dimensions interact within a broad **socio-cultural context**, which can be thought of as the diverse range of situations in which foreign language learning and use take place.

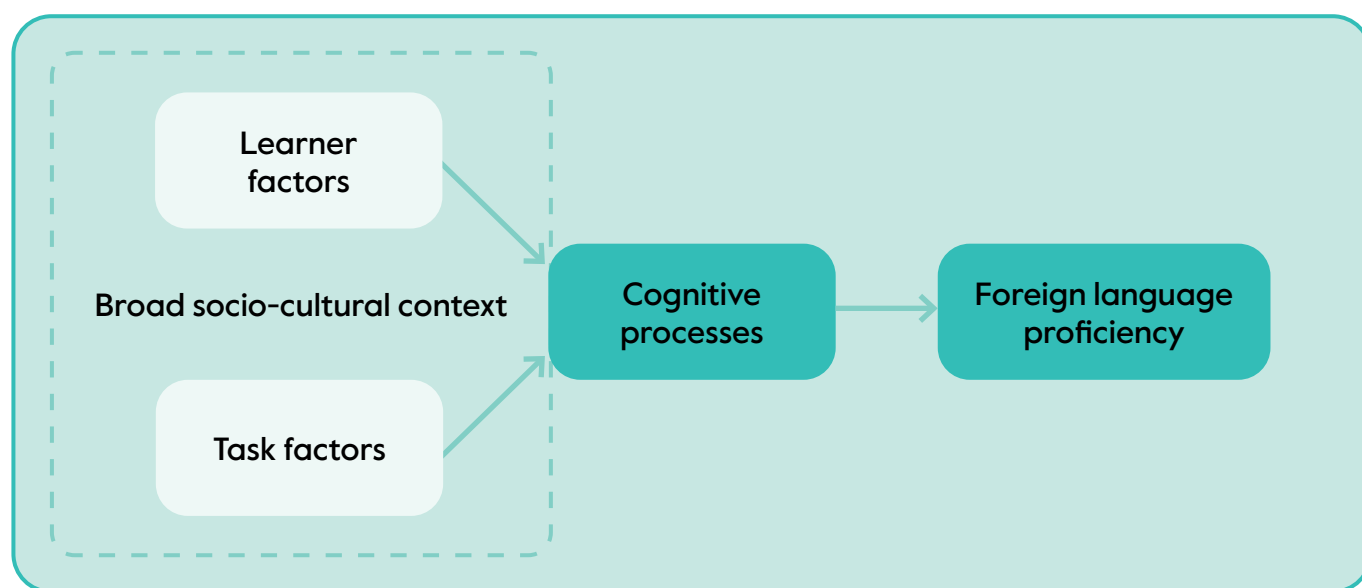Figure 3 below illustrates the factors that contribute to foreign language proficiency.

Figure 3: Factors contributing to foreign language proficiency (Source: Fig. 3.1, OECD, 2021, p. 40).

The *learner factors* are the characteristics of individual students which are known to have an impact on language learning. They include elements like motivation, prior foreign language exposure and belief in their language learning capabilities. The learner factors along with *educational and socio-cultural factors*, which include teacher, parental, school and policy influences, are captured in the PISA FLA questionnaires, and discussed in detail in the section 'What influences successful language learning?' in this paper.

The *task factors* relate to the features of the activity a student performs. In the case of the PISA 2025 FLA, they relate to the features of the tasks included in the assessment and the type of activity the student is required to do for each language skill. They typically include task purpose, complexity, time constraints and linguistic demands. Depending on task demands, students may apply different cognitive processes to carry out the tasks which have been set. Some

of these factors will be general, e.g. reasoning or decision making, and others will be specific to language learning, e.g. deducing the meaning of unknown words or paraphrasing.

The task factors are controlled as part of the test design. For example, in the PISA 2025 FLA, a broad range of activities has been considered with the aim of ensuring that tasks are typical of those a foreign language student carries out in their study and real life. In addition, assessment experts have considered the CEFR levels and the typical grammar, vocabulary and language functions that students can manage at the different levels when planning the test content. More details about the test are discussed in the next section.

Analysis of the test results, alongside the results of the questionnaires, will provide a rich source of evidence to inform best practice in language teaching and learning in the future.

How will PISA assess foreign language proficiency?

The PISA 2025 FLA - English test

As mentioned previously, the PISA 2025 FLA - English includes tests of reading, listening, and speaking in English as a foreign language. It will measure and report ability at CEFR Levels pre-A1 to C1 and above. In addition to the CEFR, the tests have been designed with reference to the socio-cognitive model of test development and validation (Weir, 2005). The latter complements the CEFR level-based descriptions of foreign language ability by offering an organised way to consider contextual, cognitive and measurement factors while developing a test.

In addition to these three tests, the PISA 2025 FLA - English also includes the PISA Reading test, which is administered in the student's main language of instruction. Students participating in the FLA will take different combinations of the PISA Reading, FLA Reading, FLA Speaking plus FLA Listening tests.

The sections below explain how each of the three tests have been created specifically for the PISA 2025 FLA - English to be relevant, fair and accessible for 15-year-old students worldwide.

Reading and Listening

The Reading and Listening parts of the test are computer-delivered, and students are provided with practice opportunities to become familiar with the computer interface and how to record their answers. This preparation helps to ensure that the technical aspects do not interfere with the language focus during the test.

In addition, the Reading and Listening are adaptive tests, where the content is divided into 'testlets' with different levels of language difficulty. All students start with a testlet of medium difficulty. The following testlets are then chosen among easier or harder ones, with probabilities that vary according to the student's responses in the previous ones (harder testlets are more likely to be chosen for students who showed stronger performance on previous items, and vice versa). This ensures that, compared to a non-adaptive test, fewer students spend time on content which is either far too easy or far too difficult for them. By matching the content of the test more closely to what each student can do, adaptive tests yield more accurate descriptions of the distribution of language proficiency in each country.

Multiple-choice and multiple-matching tasks have been selected for reading and listening to increase the range of content the tests will cover.

For the **Reading** test, multiple-choice items at lower CEFR levels are based on simple sentences, assessing a single piece of stated information. At higher CEFR levels, longer, more complex texts assess such features as implicit meaning, attitude of the writer, and whole-text meaning, for example. Reading multiple-matching tasks at a lower level takes the form of a column of pictures and a column of words to match, typically with additional incorrect choices in one column. At higher levels, the multiple-matching task format remains but is, for example, based on a number of short texts on a related topic along with 10 statements which students need to match to the relevant text within a time limit to elicit the sort of fast and selective (expeditious) reading expected at those higher levels of proficiency. In such an example, a higher level of processing is required. A variation of this is the gapped text, with sentences or paragraphs removed from the base text and presented to students, along with distractors, to match to the correct gap in the text. In summary, matching tasks are included in the PISA 2025 FLA - English at the lower levels to focus on decoding, word recognition and lexis identification. At higher levels, they are used to assess more detailed reading, building a mental model of a text as a whole and its meaning, either explicit or implicit.

In the **Listening** test, all questions are multiple choice. At the lower CEFR levels, items are individual, based on a short situational audio text, and use visuals as options to reduce the reading load. At higher CEFR levels, longer, more dense audio texts are used. At these levels students need to be able to show more advanced cognitive listening skills, such as recognising agreement between speakers, or changes in speaker's opinions over the whole audio recording. At all levels, questions remain on the screen while students listen, and they have two opportunities to listen to each text.

Speaking

The Speaking test is also computer-delivered, is taken individually, and focuses on production of language. This test is not adaptive but the tasks presented to students are designed to elicit production of language across the range of CEFR levels. All Speaking tests will be marked by the same group of trained examiners using a 13-point rating scale. Each point on the scale will later be aligned to CEFR levels by an independent panel, based on portfolios of actual candidate responses. This process will be managed centrally by Cambridge University Press & Assessment to ensure high consistency and reliability of results.

Tasks are designed to give learners the opportunity to show their speaking ability in a range of different functional areas which are relevant to their age group and context, e.g., giving an opinion or speculating. Tasks are varied and include students giving information about themselves, telling a story based on a series of pictures, comparing and contrasting two photographs, and talking about a given topic. Where possible, tasks include visual input, and all questions and prompts are given in audio and on screen.

This range of task types has been included to elicit different functional language as well as different areas of grammar and vocabulary appropriate to the different CEFR levels. At lower CEFR levels, students focus on giving word or short sentence-level responses using key information provided. At higher CEFR levels, students are able to demonstrate that they can organise their spoken language to a more sophisticated level, making use of more complex structures and vocabulary with shades of meaning.

The Speaking test has four parts. Each part begins with structured task instructions and, as the part progresses, instructions become more open, allowing a shift to speculative language use. Planning time is included at a number of points for longer prompts or those with visual input which may need more processing time. This has been shown to reduce test-taker anxiety and so supports the fairness and validity of the test.

The production of all three tests followed the ISO-9001-certified quality assurance processes of Cambridge University Press & Assessment. These processes cover the creation, review and trialling of test content and assessment scales; the recruitment, training and monitoring of speaking and writing examiners; the security of exam materials, and more.

Ensuring diversity, inclusivity and accessibility

In developing the tests, content and contexts have been carefully considered to ensure that the relative difficulty of the tasks is not dependent on features such as cultural background or gender. The age and life experience of the PISA students taking the tests has been taken into account when designing individual tasks. The choice and treatment of different topics has been monitored to avoid any bias. To ensure this, the countries and economies participating in the PISA 2025 FLA - English have reviewed the items

to make certain any culturally sensitive content is not included. This will help to ensure that the results of the test are reliable and that all students have an equal opportunity to demonstrate their language skills without interference from other factors.

In addition, consideration has been given to the variety of English used. For lower-level tasks, language will be neutral and unmarked, while at higher levels, texts used in Reading and Listening are based on authentic sources and use British or American English. Tasks for Reading and Listening are based on visual input at a lower level to support students. For example, at the lowest level, this may involve matching pictures with words to identify items. For the Listening and Speaking tests, students are able to both listen to instructions through the audio provided and read the same instructions on screen. This ensures that students are clear about what they need to do for each task.

For sample PISA 2025 FLA - English tasks see OECD (2024).

The accompanying videos for the Listening and Speaking sample tasks can be accessed here:

Listening sample tasks: Clothes shopping, Recycling

Speaking sample tasks: Daily life and famous people, Performing in a contest, Trying something new, Exercise

How will the results of the PISA 2025 FLA be reported?

The plan is to measure and report English as a foreign language in alignment with the internationally recognised CEFR levels, and to report results for each skill on a six-point scale: pre-A1, A1, A2, B1, B2, and C1 and above. The CEFR descriptors that will be used for the different levels are adapted from the series of 'can do' statements for each level, which describe what typical students are able to use the foreign language for. The adaptations have been made to take into account the age group of students.

Using the CEFR to report results ensures that the outcomes are comparable internationally, as it will clearly demonstrate the capabilities of students from diverse educational systems at equivalent language levels. It also enhances the relevance of the assessment outcomes for teachers, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in language education because these levels are widely recognised and utilised in language teaching, course planning and assessment worldwide. See an example of the PISA 2025 FLA scales in Table 1 for the reading skill.

C1 and above	Can understand in detail lengthy, complex texts, whether or not they relate to their own area of specialty, provided he/she can reread difficult sections. Can understand a wide variety of texts including literary writings, newspaper or magazine articles, provided that there are opportunities for re-reading.
B2	Can read with a large degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes, and using appropriate reference sources selectively. Has a broad active reading vocabulary, but may experience some difficulty with low-frequency idioms.
B1	Can read straightforward factual texts on subjects related to likely fields of interest[1] with a satisfactory level of comprehension.
A2	Can understand short, simple texts containing the highest-frequency vocabulary, including a proportion of shared international vocabulary items.
A1	Can understand very short, simple texts a single phrase at a time, picking up familiar names, words and basic phrases and re-reading as required.
Pre-A1	Can recognise familiar words accompanied by pictures, such as a fast-food restaurant menu illustrated with photos or a picture book using familiar vocabulary.

Table 1: The PISA scale for reading comprehension in a foreign language. Adapted from the CEFR overall reading comprehension scale (Source: Table 6.1 in OECD (2021, p. 180). Adapted from Council of Europe (2020, p.54).)

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[1] This refers to topics empirically established to be typical fields of interest for this cohort age.

What influences successful language learning?

The PISA 2025 FLA background questionnaires

Given the importance of speaking a foreign language and the benefits it brings for individuals, societies and economies, research has long strived to find the factors and conditions that make language learning as efficient and successful as possible. To answer this question, the relevant academic literature was reviewed and language education experts were consulted. This section summarises the findings, which offer a comprehensive overview of what makes language learning successful; for a detailed account of the factors, please see OECD (2021, pp.124-177).

There are a number of factors which contribute to successful language learning. Of course, there is the student and their own views on learning languages along with their teachers and their classroom practice, but there are other influences. A student's parents and their school, as well as the language learning policy which relates to the particular context, may influence language learning success. All of these need to be investigated to inform best practice.

The PISA 2025 FLA will collect information on these factors for English as a foreign language by administering background questionnaires to students, teachers, parents and school leaders. There are four main themes explored through the questionnaires: **government and school policies, students and learning, teacher training and profiles** and **teaching practices**. The questionnaires will provide a context to use when interpreting the results of the assessment, both within and between education systems in different parts of the world.

Themes covered in the PISA 2025 FLA background questionnaires

Figure 4 provides an overview of the important factors that influence success in foreign language learning and are investigated in the PISA 2025 FLA background questionnaires. These factors are discussed in greater detail in the rest of this section. (Note that when we refer to *the foreign language* in this section we mean English which is the foreign language assessed in the PISA 2025 session. Moreover, this section outlines the overall framework used to guide the development of the questionnaires. This does not necessarily mean that all elements within the framework were included in the final questionnaires.)

Government and school policies

The setting for foreign language learning at school

e.g. How many hours are allocated to the teaching of the foreign language?

The school environment

e.g. Does the school support language learning with extra-curricular activities?

Students and learning

Student background, environment and family support

e.g. How much exposure to the foreign language does the student have outside school?

Student's attitudes, motivations and behaviours

e.g. How good does the student believe they are in the foreign language?

Intercultural and multilingual environments for language learning

e.g. How varied is the student's community in terms of different cultures and languages spoken?

Teachers' profile and training

Teacher experience and training

e.g. What training does the teacher receive on the job to improve their practice?

Teacher attitudes and beliefs

e.g. How much does the teacher enjoy teaching the foreign language?

Teaching practices

Teaching approaches and methods

e.g. How much practice do the students get in the foreign language and how do teachers use it in the classroom?

Assessment practices

e.g. Do teachers use Learning Oriented Assessment[2] as a tool to formatively improve student proficiency?

Overarching factors

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

e.g. How is ICT used in the language learning environment?

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

e.g. Is the foreign language used to teach other school subjects?

(For a more detailed overview of these factors see chapter 5 and Figure 5.1, OECD, 2021, p. 127)

Figure 4: PISA 2025 FLA background questionnaires: The student, teacher and contextual factors that influence success in foreign language learning
(modified from Figure 5.1 (OECD, 2021, p. 127))

[2] Learning Oriented Assessment refers to forms of assessment that provide information on both student ability and ways to improve.

Government and school policies

The first part of this theme focuses on the **general setting for foreign language learning**. This includes four areas:

- how old students are when they start learning a foreign language;
- how many hours are allocated to teaching it;
- how many students are in each foreign language class;
- what language the foreign language is taught in and whether students have been taught any other languages.

These areas are likely to be strongly guided, or controlled, by government policy and so the results of this section alongside the results of the tests themselves will be of great importance to policy-makers and those with the power to make decisions that could impact the foundations of foreign language teaching and learning. They will allow for comparisons to be made internationally about language learning policy and for investigations into the impact on students' language learning careers. Areas of research may include, for example, attempting to identify the best age to start learning a foreign language (Murphy, 2014), or the number of foreign languages students learn and whether this appears to have an impact on proficiency (European Commission, 2012b).

The second part of this theme looks at **the school environment** and in particular how the school aims to implement the language policy which has been set. The following areas are included here:

- the choice of foreign languages available within the school;
- how the school supports language learning with extra-curricular activities such as language exchanges, debate and conversation clubs;
- support for students who find learning the foreign language challenging to ensure they do not fall behind their classmates;
- the resources the school provides for foreign language learning, indicating how much money is spent on, for example books, ICT tools and software.

These areas will provide insight into how the school supports language learning in practice, while implementing any government guidance. The results of this part will be used to identify trends in schools and to support school managers in making decisions about how to fund this area of the curriculum. Previous results of PISA have, for example, found that schools which have established science clubs and competitions tend to produce students who perform well in science assessments (OECD, 2016). The PISA 2025 FLA will look to establish if the same trend can be identified for English language learning.

Students and learning

This is a broad theme, as might be expected, as it focuses on the language students themselves. It includes considerations of student background, motivation and attitudes to the foreign language itself and language learning in general. The focus in this theme is divided into three parts.

The first part focuses on **student background, environment and family support** and includes:

- the language background of the student, including the language(s) spoken at home, which could be a different language from that used in the school, or perhaps even the foreign language being studied;
- how well the parents of the student speak the foreign language;
- the support available to the student from family members, possibly immediate such as brothers and sisters, but also extended family who may have knowledge of the foreign language;
- the attitudes towards the foreign language from family and classmates, including their ideas of how difficult the language is to learn and how useful proficiency in the language is likely to be for the student;
- how much the foreign language is used on media, including more traditional forms of such as television, movies, magazines, and 'new media': social media, web platforms, computer games etc.;
- opportunities for students to visit places where the foreign language is spoken to experience the language in use and to put what they have learnt into practice;
- exposure to the foreign language outside of the school environment, for example, hearing and talking to tourists using the language.

As can be seen, the factors in this part relate to how the foreign language is perceived and how this impacts on the views held by the student, their wider family and society.

The next part of this theme centres on the **student's attitude, motivation and behaviour**. These factors are known to have an impact on how a student approaches their language learning (Dörnyei, 2010). The following areas are relevant here:

- The student's motivation for learning the foreign language. This could be for intrinsic reasons, such as an interest in countries where the foreign language is spoken, or in the language itself. However, they may be extrinsic or external to the student, and linked to many of the benefits of language proficiency discussed earlier such as gaining a qualification, entry to further study, a stimulating career or for travel abroad.
- The student's idea of how good they are at the foreign language. With training in how to self-assess their level, this is a valuable skill in supporting student independence, as well as providing a useful comparison against the level of proficiency achieved in the assessment.
- The student's attitude to the foreign language, which may be different for the different language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking).
- The amount of time spent on language learning outside of school, including homework, self-study, revising for tests, for example.

Finally, as part of this theme, the questionnaire focuses on **intercultural and multilingual environments and target language learning**. This part aims to investigate the community that students live and study in and the impact this could have on language learning through the following areas

- How varied the student's community is in terms of different cultures and languages spoken. Being exposed to different cultures can change students' attitudes towards language learning.
- How sensitive and open the students are to other cultures and willing to engage with people from different cultures who have different language backgrounds.
- What activities both in society as a whole and within the school encourage an understanding of different cultures and different languages. This could include learning about different traditions and culture groups.

Many of these areas are outside the control of a government and schools but they provide the context where language learning takes place and as such this information can help to establish conditions that encourage successful language learning (OECD, 2019).

Teachers' training and profile

This theme shifts the focus to the profile of teachers and how their training influences language learning. The role of the teacher is important and teacher training is a huge investment for governments to make. This section therefore looks to establish factors that have an impact on successful language learning to ensure that valuable resources are spent well (OECD, 2020b).

The first part of this theme covers **teacher experience and training**. These factors include:

- the experience of teachers in the foreign language being taught, including the number of years taught and the number of years at that age group;
- how available teaching and support staff are to cover teaching load, both planned and unplanned, such as periods of sickness;
- the initial qualifications that teachers hold to become a teacher, which may include a degree, a teaching qualification or postgraduate certificate (this includes their general knowledge about teaching as well as any language-specific content and classroom experience);
- the training that teachers have while in their job to improve their classroom practice (if well designed, such training can be produced to support government policy for language teaching);
- the range of languages or other subjects that the teacher is qualified to teach and how long they have taught them.

The focus in the second part of this theme is **the teacher and their attitudes and beliefs**. These are, of course, not controlled by government or language policy but are important to capture to identify how far they are in line with policy and whether this has an impact on their teaching. The factors investigated are:

- Teachers' opportunities for interaction with the community of the language taught. This may be from visits to the country, collaborating with teachers who work in these countries or exchange study visits. The frequency and the level of interaction are both important to capture to understand the impact on teaching practice.
- Teachers' attitude to teaching the foreign language, which includes how much they enjoy teaching the language as well as how challenging they feel the language is. In addition, the questionnaire will capture their views on different approaches to teaching and how effective they believe these are.
- The level of proficiency of the teacher in the foreign language. It is recognised that teachers need to have a good level of proficiency in the foreign language as it is generally the language of teaching but also need some specialised language necessary for classroom practice.

The qualifications and experience of teachers, along with their attitudes, beliefs and values can have a significant effect on language learning and on student progress. This is therefore an important domain as it captures relevant information which could be impacting on learning.

Teaching practices

The final theme of the questionnaires focuses on classroom practice and how this impacts on learning. Teaching methods and approaches change over time as they are informed by relevant research so this needs to be considered when analysing the responses to this section against assessment results. The use of different approaches and methods varies around the world and analysis of this will be of interest to policy-makers for international comparison (Harmer, 2007).

The main part of this theme looks at **teaching approaches and methods**, with a clear focus on what happens in the classroom and what informs teachers' course and lesson planning. The topics investigated are:

- Teaching of the four communicative skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. As with many assessments, the PISA 2025 FLA will assess the skills in communication and it is expected that classroom teaching will focus on these skills along with linguistic knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Capturing the amount of time spent on each skill and the approach to the teaching of them, could provide valuable evidence to map against assessment outcomes.
- Teaching of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation to ensure that students are able to understand written and spoken discourse, and can also speak and write with the required level of accuracy and fluency.
- Teaching of the culture and literature associated with the foreign language. This has been shown to have a positive impact on language learning as it increases the understanding of the culture.
- How group activities are used in the classroom to allow students to work with classmates to practise the language. Such collaborative activities encourage negotiation and checking of understanding and as such are important skills to use across all subjects. These activities provide

valuable opportunities to communicate in the foreign language, particularly if there are few opportunities outside the classroom.

- Translanguaging – the use of multiple languages in the classroom, which is thought to be particularly beneficial for students. It maximises understanding in the classroom and can lead to broader and deeper knowledge of the foreign language and other subjects. It is important to understand if this is a permitted approach to language teaching and if it is encouraged or discouraged.
- Use of the foreign language in the classroom, how much practice the students get in the language, and how teachers use it: as classroom management, for delivering lesson content, and for assessing and feeding back to student.
- What proportion of the lesson is taken up with the teacher talking. In some contexts, teachers are expected to talk for much of the lesson as they deliver the content of the course, but in other situations teachers aim to leave more time for students to talk and communicate.
- Whether the foreign language is used in the teaching of other subjects, in contexts where this is the educational policy.
- The materials used in class, including the use of textbooks, ICT tools, videoed material, interactive whiteboards, and material that the teacher has prepared for a specific context. The questionnaire will aim to identify where these materials are 'authentic,' that is, not prepared specifically for language teaching.
- How teaching materials are used and integrated into other parts of a lesson or course, for example listening to a radio programme and making a group presentation based on this.
- Use of the CEFR. This section investigates teachers' understanding and use of the CEFR to inform teaching, diagnose error and prepare material to the expected level. It also focuses on what training in the use of the CEFR teachers have had.

Over the past few decades teaching in all subjects has commonly become less teacher-centred, with a move to making students more active as part of the process. This is particularly relevant to language learning as this provides opportunities for students to communicate with their classmates and to put into practice what they have learnt. This very much reflects the communicative language teaching approach but it should be recognised that in different contexts different approaches may be more common, and in some situations teachers may have no choice in the approach to adopt.

The final part of this looks at **assessment practices**. Assessment provides information about student strengths and weaknesses and is an important tool to feed into classroom practice for teachers. It also informs learning patterns for students and supports the good design of educational systems for policy-makers and governments (Cheng, 2005). The two areas covered in the questionnaires are:

- The existence of assessments which are used to monitor student proficiency in the foreign language. The questionnaires aim to capture how and at what grades these assessments are administered, whether they are mapped to the CEFR and how the results are reported and used.
- The use of assessment of learning or Learning Oriented Assessment as a tool to formatively improve student proficiency during their course of study (Jones & Saville, 2016).

In addition to these four themes, two overarching topics are also considered as part of the questionnaires. These are topics which cross over between different areas of teaching and learning: Content and Language Integrated Learning (**CLIL**), and information and communication technologies (**ICT**).

It is important to recognise that some areas of language proficiency contribute to learning in other subjects. For example, in some educational settings certain subjects are taught in a foreign language. Some of these programmes are described as bilingual, while others adopt CLIL. While there are a range of different terms and adaptations of such approaches, in all of them it is necessary for students to have a good level of proficiency in the foreign language to be able to access the target subject.

Students use ICT in all subjects in their learning and language learning is no exception. This may include using computers and tablets in class, social media, educational games as well as generally accessing online material in a foreign language. Being proficient in ICT will help them both in the language classroom and in their wider language learning outside (European Commission, 2014).

What benefits will the PISA 2025 FLA bring in English language education?

The PISA 2025 FLA will provide valuable insights that benefit English language education at multiple levels. These advantages fall into three key areas (see also OECD, 2025):

International benchmark of learning outcomes

For **policy-makers**, these assessments will serve as a powerful global comparison tool, with results mapped to the CEFR scale (pre-A1, A1, B1, B2, C1 and above). The CEFR is widely used internationally, and many policy-makers already use the CEFR as a reference when designing curricula, so these results will provide clarity on how their students' language skills compare globally and where improvements are needed.

For **teachers**, the standardised results will help them assess how their students' proficiency aligns with international trends. This will support instructional planning and provide guidance on effective teaching strategies for different levels of learners.

Insights into national diagnostics

For **policy-makers**, the PISA 2025 FLA will offer an in-depth picture of language learning strengths and weaknesses in their country or economy. This will make it easier to spot achievement gaps and variations within the school system.

For **teachers**, the assessment data will provide valuable insights into classroom dynamics, highlighting areas where students struggle and where teaching methods are most effective. The results of the accompanying questionnaire will also help uncover the links between classroom practices and student outcomes, guiding future teacher training and curriculum improvements.

Identification of the most efficient policies and practices

For **policy-makers**, the PISA 2025 FLA will provide strong evidence on what works best in English language education. Instead of relying on assumptions, they will have access to data-driven insights on policies that lead to real improvements in language learning outcomes. This will inform decisions about resource allocation, teacher training, and curriculum development – ultimately shaping fairer, more effective policies that support language students to reach their potential as world citizens.

For **teachers**, the results will enable them to learn from best practices worldwide and refine their approach based on proven successful strategies. This has the potential to transform classroom teaching, making English language instruction more impactful and efficient.

Looking ahead: Potential for transformative educational reforms

In the past, PISA results from other subjects have triggered major educational reforms. They have guided curricula transformation, strengthened national assessments and monitoring systems, and facilitated peer-to-peer review among countries which faced common challenges. In Europe, for example, PISA data helped dispel some myths about education reform such as the idea that higher spending per student always improves educational outcomes (Schleicher, 2023).

The PISA 2025 FLA results have the potential to lead to similar transformative changes and improvements in the English foreign language field. By delivering unprecedented data and insights into what makes effective English language teaching and learning in different school systems, it will give policy-makers, educators and teachers clear guidance on how to improve English language education worldwide.

What to look out for next?

2025 — PISA 2025 FLA – English tests and questionnaires administered in 21 countries and economies.

2026 — Preliminary policy note that will focus on describing system level factors.

2027 and onward —

PISA 2025 FLA – English international report, which will include the results of the tests and questionnaires.

Data available for national analyses and international research.

Further reporting and dissemination.

PISA seminar on best practices in English foreign language learning, teaching and educational policy based on the outcomes of the survey.

Keep an eye on the following websites to discover what works best for English language learning success in the context of specific countries and worldwide:

OECD: https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/foreign-language-learning/pisa-2025-foreign-language-assessment.html

Cambridge English: https://www.cambridge.org/gb/cambridgeenglish/pisa-foreign-language-assessment

For more details on the PISA 2025 FLA and the topics discussed in this paper, see the PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment Framework (OECD, 2021).

Acknowledgements

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