

Example data commentaries for Tables 2 and 3, p.12

Table 2 is from the 2012 Special Barometer survey on multilingualism published by the European Commission. The table illustrates the number of languages that EU citizens speak well enough in order to have a conversation, comparing data for the EU27 to data for the UK. Just over half of EU27 citizens (54%) are able to hold a conversation in at least one additional language to their mother tongue. A quarter (25%) are able to speak at least two and one in ten (10%) are conversant in at least three. All these percentages are noticeably higher than those for the UK. In fact, only 39% state they can hold a conversation in at least one additional language. Slightly over one in ten (14%) are conversant in two and only one in twenty people in the UK (5%) are able to converse in at least three languages.

Surprisingly, just under half of those living in the EU27 (46%) state they are unable to speak any foreign language well enough to have a conversation. In the UK, however, the figure is much higher (61%). This may be due to the dominance of English as the most common foreign language in the other EU countries which might lead people in the UK to make less of an effort to learn foreign languages.

(220 words)

Table 3 contains statistics from the 2012 Special Barometer survey on multilingualism in the European Union published by the European Commission. It illustrates the five most spoken foreign languages, namely English, French, German, Spanish and Russian, that EU citizens speak well enough in order to have a conversation, comparing data for the EU27 to data for the UK.

French is the only foreign language in which speakers are more numerous in the UK compared to those in the EU27. In fact, almost one in five (19%) declare they can converse in French whereas this drops to just over one in ten (12%) for those in the EU27. This noticeable difference might be due to the fact that French has always been the first foreign language taught in British schools.

As regards English, 38% of EU27 citizens are comfortable having a conversation in English. One in ten people (10%) in the UK declare they know it well enough in order to have a conversation. This statistic reflects those residents who are not mother-tongue speakers.

Despite being the language with the highest number of native speakers, German is used in conversations by just over one in ten (11%) of those living in the EU27. This figure is much lower for those in the UK, however, where only 6% of the population have a good enough knowledge for conversations.

Spanish and Russian have the fewest speakers. Data regarding conversational ability in the former show a difference of only one point with 7% of EU citizens and 6% of UK residents declaring they can use it successfully to converse. Predictably, Russian is the language that is least known in both the EU27 and the UK (5% vs. 2% respectively). This can be explained by the fact that three former Soviet independent states, namely Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, where Russian is spoken, only joined the EU in 2004.

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