



**Schola Europaea**

Office of the Secretary-General

**Pedagogical Development Unit**

Ref.: 2024-09-D-47-en-3

Orig.: EN

## **Information for Parents on Determination of the Dominant Language<sup>1</sup>**

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Approved by the Joint Teaching Committee by means of the Written Procedure Nr. 2024/39 on 29 October 2024

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<sup>1</sup> This document has been revised by the OSG Legal Department

## Introduction

Following the mandate given to the working group Task Force Dominant Language in the meeting of the Board of Inspectors N/P in February 2024 a document for parents has been created to help the parents asking for admission of their children the European Schools to better understand the need, purpose, organisation of assessment and consequences of the final admission of a child to certain language section.

The document consists of

- rationale for dominant language testing which is informed by research,
- answers on FAQ section focusing on family and pupil language contexts where the dominant language is not immediately obvious
- annexe: references

### I. Rationale:

#### CHOOSING THE RIGHT LANGUAGE SECTION FOR YOUR CHILD

One of the founding principles of the European Schools is that, as far as possible, children are enabled to learn in their mother tongue/dominant language (L1) and that at the same time, they are offered a multilingual curriculum that allows them to develop a high level of proficiency in two (and sometimes more) additional languages (L2, L3 etc.). This makes it unique and characteristically different to the system of international schools and most other education systems.

For some families this is a relatively clear choice as the language the child uses at home with their parents corresponds to one of the language sections on offer. However, not all family language profiles neatly correspond to a language section. For example, perhaps a child uses a different language with each parent, who may themselves use a different language together. SWALS pupils (Students Without a Language Section) by definition use a different language to that of the section they will enrol in. Additionally, some pupils may have had a multilingual educational trajectory i.e. they have been educated in one language elsewhere, and then have moved to a European School and will potentially join a section using another language.

In order to place a child in the language section that best corresponds to their language profile and thus provide them with the best learning experience it is sometimes necessary to first identify their dominant language.

#### What does dominant language mean?

In the European School Language Policy (Ref.: 2019-01-D-35-en), the term 'dominant language' refers to "the language in which bi- or multilingual children have the highest level of proficiency in especially education-related domains of language use, and which they use most often (or is likely to use most often)" (p.4). 'Language proficiency' refers to how well a language is known. It includes a person's receptive skills (what they can understand when reading or listening), and their productive skills (what they can say or write). 'Language use' refers to how frequently a person uses their different languages and how this is divided across the different domains of their life e.g. home, work, and school. When identifying the 'dominant language' of a child, the European Schools also take into consideration how a child's 'language use' is likely to evolve over time.

Traditional conceptualisations of bilingualism relied on the idea that a bilingual had equal competences across both or all of their languages. However, this idea has now been updated to recognise the fact that bilinguals do not generally have exactly the same competencies or skills in their two languages. Although ‘balanced bilingualism’ does exist, it is far more common for ‘plurilingual’ people to be ‘dominant’ in one language (this also depends on the context in which the language is being used and can change over time).

**Principle:** The European School’s commitment to education in a child’s first or dominant language is what makes it stand out from other education systems.

### Why is it important for your child to be enrolled in the section of their dominant language?

Quite apart from the principle of recognising and supporting the national languages of the member states of the European Union, the importance of enrolling a child in the section of their dominant language is based on decades of research about how a solid language foundation constitutes an essential key to effective learning and academic success.

What is important here is the fact that the stronger a child’s first language, the more likely it is they will do well when learning other languages, and when acquiring academic content and skills. For example, longitudinal research in the USA (Thomas & Collier 2002, Collier & Thomas, 2017) looked at the learning outcomes for Spanish speakers when they followed different models of language education. When the home language was nurtured and studied in school (i.e., children learned through Spanish *and* English), the pupils performed above average compared to the global school population by the time they finished secondary school. However, when they *only* learned through their second language i.e. English, their results were significantly below average. This is partly because the successful pupils were given a maximum of opportunities to build on their existing knowledge and skills (in Spanish), but also because they were able to exploit in a productive way the rich language resources at home and in their local community.

Research also underlines the importance of developing or supporting literacy skills (i.e. reading and writing) in the first language, or in the case of children growing up bilingually, the benefits of dual-literacy in both languages. This is partly because children are able to transfer their knowledge and skills across the languages they know (i.e., if a child can read in one language, they will use these skills to learn to read in another; if they understand what a ‘metaphor’ is in one language, they can transfer it to another). So, whilst a parent might be able to keep up oral language at home, it is much harder for them to develop the cognitive and academic language that is associated with school and learning.

**Principle:** The most powerful model for multilingual education is one which favours ‘additive bilingualism’ i.e., the child keeps developing conceptually and academically in their first/dominant language and adds another language to their repertoire. We want to avoid ‘subtractive’ situations i.e. where a new language comes to replace the child’s first language. Dominant language testing aims to identify the most likely scenario to promote ‘additive’ situations.

## Why is the home language so important for my child? What if there is a language section that will have more practical benefits for them?

Beyond the language and learning benefits of maintaining the child’s first language to a high level, it is important to remember that languages are not in competition with one another – and that in additive bilingualism, they are working in co-operation. Furthermore, the language provision in the European Schools has been designed to help ensure that each child’s cultural identity (as a European and in terms of their specific background) is affirmed, respected and enriched.

It is also important to take a long-term view, both in terms of the levels in L2 and L3 that your child might reach, but also how they will maintain a home language that they are not using in school. Research shows that speakers of minority languages which haven’t been maintained can come to regret this later on in life.

**Principle:** When considering your child’s future path, aim to keep their language options open as much as possible, including the possibility of maintaining their L1 to a high level.

## What levels of language proficiency will my child reach in the European School system over the course of their school career?

In the context of the European School, it is important to be aware of the language learning aims for L2, L3 etc. The language policy lays out the minimum proficiency expectations at the end of each sub-cycle of the educational trajectory:

	Nursery	Primary	S3	S5	S7
L2		A2	B1	B2	C1
L3			A1+	A2+	B1+
L4				A1	A2+
L5					A1
ONL	A1.1 oral	A1.2	A2	B1	B2

Many students go beyond these expectations, meaning that you can expect your child to become highly proficient in at least two languages other than their L1. In many cases, pupils attend university in the language of their L2. Indeed, a 2022 “PISA for schools” evaluation of the European Schools showed that pupils level of L2 reading was significantly above European Union (L1) and OECD averages. It is possible that this high level of achievement is in part due to the fact that the European School system specifically ensures that its pupils’ are enabled to learn in their dominant language, thus creating a sound foundation for learning new languages.

**Principle:** New languages can be added progressively to your child’s repertoire and they will still achieve a high level of proficiency, whilst ideally maintaining their dominant language.

## How do the schools test for dominant language?

The determination of the child's dominant language is the responsibility of the Director of each school and is based on information provided by the legal representatives of the child and an evaluation carried out by the school.

- The Director decides whether or not to conduct tests on the basis of the information provided on the school's enrolment form. The tests are comparative and aim to determine the dominant language.
- Parents are notified by e-mail about the languages to be tested, the time and the location. The tests take place exclusively 'in situ' at the school where the language section is present.
- All tests take place on the same day with an appropriate break (approximately 15 minutes) in between. Exceptionally, the tests may be held on different days i.e., if the languages that need to be tested are not taught in the same school.
- The tests are carried out by native speaker teachers of the school where the test takes place. For children in the nursery and P1 the test is oral, for older children, there are also written and reading tasks.
- Parents are not allowed to be present during the test. The only exception is that parents can stay for 10 minutes in the case of children to be enrolled to N1.
- One test lasts between 20 and 30 minutes in the nursery and P1, and between 40 and 45 minutes for P2 - P5.
- The parents do not receive any feedback immediately after the test. Afterwards, the teacher prepares a report which is sent to the Director of the first-choice school. On the basis of the reports of all the tests, the Director makes a decision and determines the dominant language. Parents receive this information electronically, together with the teachers' reports. The procedure for appeal against the decision is described in this e-mail.

## Background Documents

- Language Policy of the European Schools Ref.: 2019-01-D-35-en (published on the [www.eurasc.eu](http://www.eurasc.eu))
- Establishment of a harmonised procedure for the organisation of language tests (Article 47(e) of the General Rules of the European Schools) + Guidelines for testing dominant language in N1, N2 on entry to P1, P2 - P5 Ref.: 2018-09-D-23-en including
  - Regulations for the Organisation of Language tests
  - Assessment Report to determine the dominant language
  - Guidelines for testing dominant language

## II. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ):

1. Can the dominant language be identical as the mother tongue/home language/family language...?

Yes.

2. Can the dominant language be different from the mother tongue/home language/family language...?

Yes.

3. How is the dominant language determined?

The schools follow the regulations set up in the documents listed above. There are harmonised procedures and criteria for assessment and the schools complete a uniform report.

There are harmonised assessment tasks (for N1, N2, P1, P2-P5).

Nursery 1, Nursery 2, P1: Listening, Speaking (Fluency, Vocabulary, Grammar)

P2 – P5: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Understanding, Writing (Fluency, Vocabulary, Grammar)

The criteria for evaluation have been established according to the relevant syllabus and age-appropriate expectations.

#### 4. Are the language tests uniform across the European Schools?

The individual Schools have a certain degree of autonomy in organising the language tests. However, the requirements for comparability of the language tests must be met. The language tests must be conducted in such a way that an objective comparison of the results is possible

#### 5. How is the dominant language determined for children who do not read (Nursery, P1), or especially shy children who do not want to talk?

Children entering N1, N2 and P1 are only orally tested in Listening and Speaking. The teachers who lead the tasks are experienced professionals and use a variety of strategies to make children feel comfortable and confident.

#### 6. Are comparative tests necessary when both parents are of the same nationality and/or speak the same language at home and want to enrol their child in their home language section, but where the child attended nursery in another language?

The language tests are not always necessary. However, Language tests are mandatory whenever there is a dispute about the pupil's L1.

#### 7. What happens if there is no section in the school corresponding to a child's dominant language?

The child can be enrolled in one of the three vehicular language sections (EN-FR-DE) or in the Host Country Language section (HCL) they will become a SWALS pupil (**S**tudent **W**ithout **A** Language **S**ection) and will have their dominant language as their L1.

#### 8. Can a parent be present at the test?

For pupils entering N1, the parents may stay for the first 10 minutes of the test. From P1 onwards, parents cannot be present.

#### 9. When and where are the tests carried out? Are they in person or can they be carried out remotely?

The tests are conducted during the second semester of the school year preceding the year in which the pupil intends to start attending the European School. The tests are carried out in person.

#### 10. Who evaluates the child's performance in the language test?

Native speaker teachers from the relevant language section or L1.

11. Who evaluates the test results?

The test results are evaluated by the Director.

12. Who decides whether the test is necessary?

The Director.

13. What happens if the parents don't agree with the school's decision?

The parents can follow the General Rules of the European Schools regarding appeals. The procedure is explained in the email which communicates the schools' decision.

14. If a child speaks several languages at similar level, who determines the section? Can parents choose the language section in this case?

The Director makes final decision based on the tests results and information provided in the enrolment form.

15. What happens if a child needs to be tested in two languages which are not taught in the same school?

This only applies for Brussels and Luxembourg. The child is tested in two different schools. The decision is made by the Director of the first-choice school.

16. Does a child have to take the test if they have a certificate from a language school indicating a certain level?

Yes, if the school Director decides that the testing is needed. Note that no external language proficiency certificates can be taken into consideration.

17. Is it possible to enrol a child in a language section that is different from their nationality? If so, under which conditions?

Yes, depending on their dominant language and the educational history. The decision is made by the Director of the school.

18. Is the test valid for the following academic year if the parents refuse a place in the year of the test?

No.

19. Does a child have to take a language test if their older sibling is already in a particular section? If yes, why?

Yes. Each child is considered individually. The decision is made by the Director of the school.

20. Can you move a child from one language section to another (e.g. after Nursery or after Primary)?

No. The determination of L1 at the time of the child's enrolment is definitive in principle, A change of L1 may only be authorized by the Director for compelling pedagogical reasons, as established by the Class Council and on the initiative of one of its members (Article 47e) of the General Rules).

21. How will the choice of language section influence pupils' future choices regarding options at the secondary cycle?

More information can be found in the Organisation of Studies page of the official website of the ES <https://www.eursc.eu/en/European-Schools/studies/studies-organisation>

22. How do you test children with special educational needs?

It is critical that the parents give the school as much information as possible in advance, regarding the abilities and special educational needs of the child. In this way the school can make the necessary adaptations to the test procedures.



## ANNEX 2: References

### Where you can find more information about raising plurilingual children

<https://onraisingbilingualchildren.com/>

<https://bilingualfamily.eu/resources-for-parents/>

<https://www.childlanguage.org/resources-for-families-and-educators>

### References

Collier, V.P., & Thomas, W.P. (2017). *Validating the power of bilingual schooling: Thirty-two years of large-scale, longitudinal research*. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 37, 1-15

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