



EUROPEAN COMMISSION - PRESS RELEASE

European countries need to step up efforts to boost reading skills, study says

Brussels, 11 July 2011 - One in five 15 year olds and many adults in Europe cannot read properly. A new study published by the European Commission today shows what countries are doing to improve reading literacy – and where they are falling short. The study, which covers 31 countries (EU Member States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey), reveals that while most have made progress in developing literacy policies, they often lack focus on the groups most at risk, such as boys, children from disadvantaged households and migrant children. EU Education Ministers have set a target to reduce the share of poor readers from 20% to less than 15% by 2020. Only Belgium (Flemish Community), Denmark, Estonia, Finland and Poland have already achieved this target.

Androulla Vassiliou, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, said: *"It is a totally unacceptable that so many young people still lack basic reading and writing skills in Europe. This puts them at risk of social exclusion, makes it harder for them to find a job and reduces their quality of life. We've seen some progress in the past decade, but not enough. Literacy is the basis of all learning - that is why I recently launched a [literacy campaign](#) aimed at all ages and especially those from deprived backgrounds such as Roma children."*

The study, produced for the Commission by the Eurydice network, focuses on four key topics: teaching approaches, tackling reading difficulties, teacher education and the promotion of reading outside school. It examines each in the light of academic research, the latest results from international surveys and an in-depth review of national policies, programmes and best practices. It reveals that only eight countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Malta, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom) provide reading specialists at schools to support teachers and pupils.

The Eurydice report is an important input to the work of the [High Level Group of experts in the field of literacy](#), set up by Commissioner Vassiliou in January and chaired by Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands. The group is examining how to support literacy at all ages and which policy initiatives and programmes have been successful. The group will make policy proposals by mid-2012.

Background

Teaching reading: right policies exist in most countries

Over recent years, considerable effort has gone into improving national guidelines and promoting the best pedagogical practices. It is now common practice across Europe to focus on building the foundations for learning to read at pre-primary level. Schools increasingly use diversified material for reading instruction such as stories, magazines, comic strips and websites. Reading skills are also addressed through other subjects in the curriculum in order to promote comprehension in different contexts.

However, there is no one-size-fits-all policy approach to guarantee success. Research strongly supports the combined use of several strategies to improve reading comprehension. Collaborative learning and discussion with peers can further improve reading comprehension and benefit weak readers. Whereas most countries have set objectives in relation to reading comprehension, they often lack sufficiently broad strategies in national guidelines, especially in lower secondary education.

Overall though, good national curricular guidelines are in place and attention should now shift to teachers putting them into practice.

Few countries have reading specialists to support teachers and pupils

Reading difficulties can be tackled effectively if problems are identified and addressed as early as possible, if teaching material is adapted to specific needs and teachers are offered continuing professional development.

Intensive and targeted instruction, for individuals or small groups, can be particularly effective. However, few teachers have the opportunity to specialise in this area and reading specialists who support teachers in the classroom are on hand only in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Malta, and the five Nordic countries.

Lengthy procedures for organising additional support can also be a barrier to providing early and effective help to pupils.

Promotion should focus more on groups at risk

The promotion of reading is widely supported by national policies and initiatives. However, these initiatives tend to address general audiences and not necessarily those more likely to experience reading difficulties, such as boys, young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or whose mother tongue is different from the language of instruction. In addition, materials used in such initiatives should be as varied as possible and include multimedia.

Eurydice

The [Eurydice Network](#) provides information on and analyses of European education systems and policies. As of 2011, it consists of 37 national units based in all 33 countries participating in the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme (EU Member States, Croatia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey). It is co-ordinated and managed by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency in Brussels, which drafts its studies and provides a range of online resources.

For more information:

The full study [in English] [Teaching Reading in Europe: Contexts, Policies and Practices](#) [printed copies of the study in English are available from July 2011, in French and German shortly afterwards].

European Commission: [Education and training](#)

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ANNEX: Facts and figures

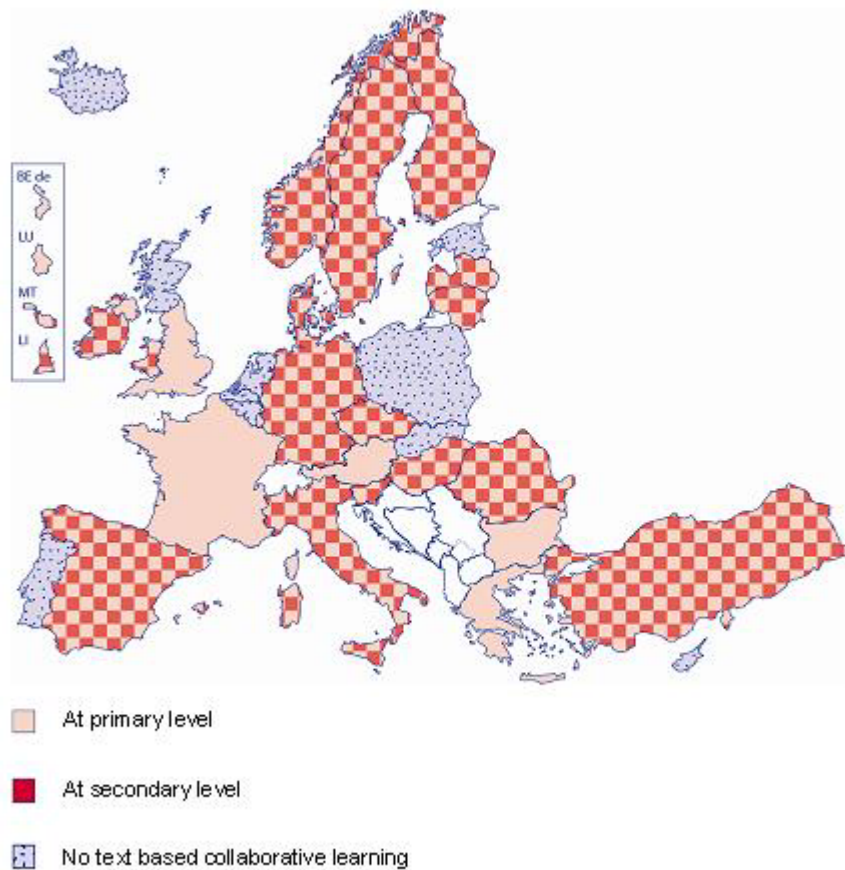
1. Percentages of low-achieving 15 year-old students in reading (2009)



Source: OECD, PISA 2009 database

2.

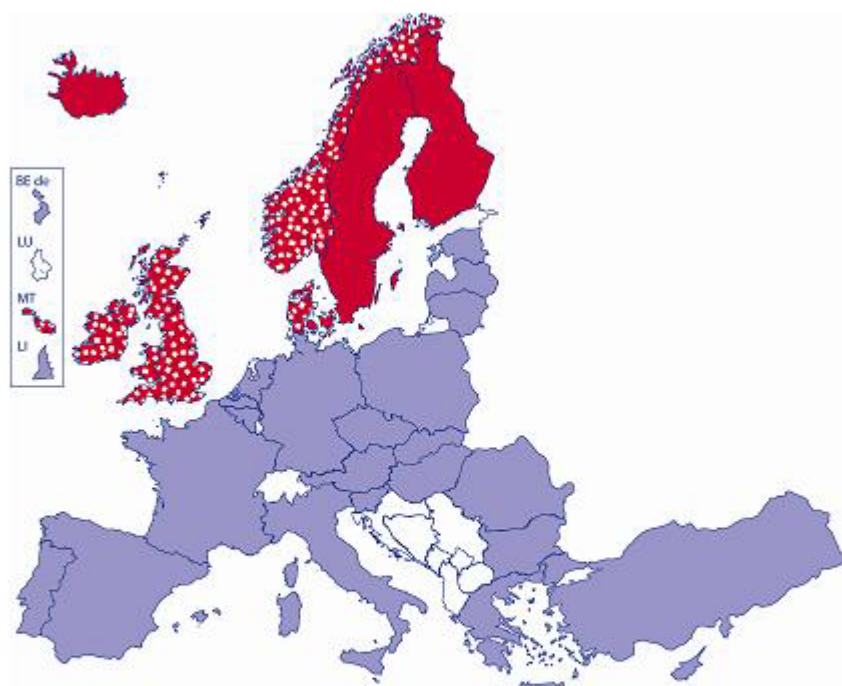
Text-based collaborative learning in national guidelines (Primary and lower secondary levels, 2009-10)







Source: Eurydice.

3.

Availability of specialist reading teachers for helping teachers to tackle pupils' reading difficulties in primary schools (2009-10)



-  Teachers specialised in reading
-  Special educational needs teachers specialised in reading
-  No specialist reading teachers but other professionals (speech therapists, psychologists, etc.)
-  Data not available

Source: Eurydice.