

**Cindy Tereba:**  
**Learning Languages – Learning from Luxembourg**

In today's world, being able to communicate with one another is one of the most important assets in order to encourage mutual respect and understanding. Therefore, it should be the focus of the European Union, to promote language skills and foster multilingualism from an early age. Luxembourg's history and its location have given the country a special linguistic situation and experience from which Europe could learn.



Three official languages are recognized and practiced in everyday life simultaneously: French, German and Luxembourgish. While French is the preferred language for governmental affairs, German is very present in the media, although national newspapers are trilingual. Lëtzbueresch is considered the national language and is very important for the national identity of the country. Consequently, the education system is trilingual as well.

Why do people in Luxembourg naturally practice multilingualism switching at least between three languages in their day to day life?

Admittedly, Luxembourg is a very small country and out of the 562.958 inhabitants, 49,5% are foreigners who have immigrated to the country. 16% of those are Portuguese, 7% are French, 3,5% are Italian, 3% are Belgian and 2% come from Germany. Furthermore, Luxembourgish is a language spoken by no one else in the world, thus to ensure the continuing success of Luxembourg's thriving economy, it is necessary to rely on other tongues. Another side effect of Luxembourg's economic prosperity are the approximately 160.000 commuters who live in the regions bordering Luxembourg. They contribute for 44% percent of the national workforce.

Therefore, Luxembourgers are required to adapt and learn a multitude of languages. To ensure that this endeavour can succeed, the education system starts teaching languages from a very early age. Starting in preschool at the ages of 4 to 6, all children are taught Luxembourgish, which is especially to the benefit of immigrant children, who speak another or even two different languages at home. Alphabetisation is done in German in the first year of primary school and French is introduced as a mandatory class in the second year. In addition, English language classes are being introduced in the second year in secondary school when children

are about 13 years old. Alternatively they can chose to study Latin, in which case English language classes start one year later.

The language of instruction changes from German to French in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of secondary school. In the fifth year, Luxembourg secondary school students have the option of adding either Spanish, Italian or Portuguese to their curriculum. Taken together, language learning accounts for 50% of the curriculum over the entire school career and students graduate in a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 5 languages.

The advantages of this education system are obvious: The early start facilitates the learning of foreign languages and Luxembourg's linguistic situation enables the everyday practice of what has been taught at school. Additionally, multilingualism makes it possible for Luxembourgish students to continue their higher education in foreign countries and gain first work experience abroad.

Nevertheless, this multilingual environment does provide difficulties for the school system. Immigrant children, who originate from countries with non-Germanic languages are particularly disadvantaged due to the early focus on German. Statistics prove that a deficiency in any of Luxembourg's languages is reducing the educational prospects of a student. The Luxembourg government is taking this problem very seriously and therefore current debate is dealing with the issue of Alphabetisation and whether it should be in German and French, an how schooling conditions can be improved for immigrants.