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The European Survey on Language Competences: School-internal and External Factors in Language Learning

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***THE EUROPEAN SURVEY ON
LANGUAGE COMPETENCES:
SCHOOL-INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL
FACTORS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING***

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	5
Introduction	6
The ESLC Survey	8
Rationale for the secondary analysis	15
Methodology	16
- Participants	16
- Data Analysis	17
- Variables	18
Results	22
Conclusions and Discussion	45
Policy Implications	52
References	53

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this report we used the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) in order to identify factors associated with learning inside and outside school that impact students' foreign language achievement in reading, writing and listening. In particular, we focus on the factors specific to language learning that affect secondary school students' proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) for English as their first foreign language. We considered variables from the school/principal and student questionnaires that contribute to explaining language proficiency. We included a set of variables related to the school in terms of system level policies. From the student questionnaire, we included variables related to students' perception of the nature and quality of their lessons, the usefulness they attach to learning the target language and their exposure to it out of school. We compared students in the Pre-A1 level with the Basic User level (combination of CEFR levels A1 and A2), and the latter with the Independent User level (which includes levels B1 and B2). The methodology adopted was a multinomial regression model. Our model was controlled for socio-economic status and gender. We ran the analysis for 13 adjudicated entities that participated in the ESLC survey and have English as their first foreign language. We found that there is wide variation across countries, but that it is worth considering the contribution of variables related to internal system-level policies and external learning conditions. Likewise, we found that some variables related to classroom methodology and student motivation also contribute to explain achievement. Results indicate that, in general, students' perceived difficulty level of lessons, their perception of the usefulness of language learning for entertainment and the frequency with which they watch movies in the original version explains achievement. In addition, in most countries, students' perceptions of their parents' knowledge of the foreign language have a positive effect in students' achievement. Among the most important school factors that impact students' attainment we found that the earlier the onset of language learning the higher the attained language proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, data on language skills of students in the European Union was not available. To fill this gap, the European Commission decided to launch the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC). The goal of the survey was not only to undertake a survey on language competences but a survey that could provide information about language learning, teaching methods and curricula (European Commission, 2007a). Thus, this survey supplements existing data collection analyzed and published by Eurydice with respect to the students population, by Eurostat and by public opinion polls like the Euro barometer regarding the adult population (Eurydice, 2012).

The data collected in the ESLC survey constitutes a valid assessment of functional foreign language proficiency at the end of compulsory education, and beginning of secondary education, for some countries, and stands as a reliable baseline means to measure future progress. The survey was initiated by the Commission with the aim that the results collected enable the establishment of an European Indicator of Language Competence (European Commission, 2007b) to monitor progress against the March 2002 Barcelona European Council conclusions. These conclusions called for ‘action to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age’ and also for the establishment of linguistic competence indicator (European Commission, 2005). Also, the survey provides ‘strategic information to policy makers, teachers and learners in all surveyed countries’ through the collection of contextual information in background questionnaires (European Commission, 2007b).

In 2005, the European Commission outlined a detailed strategic approach for the ESLC. The contract for the survey was commissioned in 2008 to the SurveyLang Consortium, a group of eight expert organizations in the fields of language assessment, questionnaire design, sampling, translation processes and psychometrics. The main study was carried out in the Spring of 2011. Fourteen European countries took part in the survey: Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, France, Greece, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and UK-England. Belgium’s three linguistic communities participated separately to give a total of 16 educational systems.

The results of the ESLC were published in 2012 (European Commission), and are reported in terms of the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for three language skills: reading, listening and writing. Each educational system tested the two languages most widely taught in that entity. The results are indicative of the proportion of students in each country attaining a given proficiency level, from pre-A1 to B2, in the three skills.

The reported results indicated an overall low level of competences in both first and second foreign languages tested. The level of independent user (B1+B2) is achieved by only 42% of tested students in the first foreign language and by only 25% in the second foreign language. Moreover, a large number of pupils did not even achieve the level of a basic user: 14% for the first and 20% for the second foreign language.

Also, the findings of the survey indicated that the proportion of pupils reaching each level varies greatly among educational systems, for all languages (both first and second foreign language) and skills. For instance, for the first foreign language, the proportion of pupils reaching the level of independent user varies from 82% in Malta and Sweden (English) to only 14% in France (English) and 9% in England (French). For the second foreign language (not English), the level of independent user is reached by 4% in Sweden (Spanish) and 6% in Poland (German) compared to 48% in the Netherlands (German) (European Commission, 2012).

This secondary analysis of the ESLC contributes to a better understanding of the wide variation found across countries in students' achievement in English as foreign language. More specifically, it examines the contribution of variables related to internal system-level policies and external learning conditions, to understand the relationship between school variables (system level policies), students' perception of the nature and quality of their lessons and the usefulness of learning the target language and their exposure to it outside of school and language achievement. As such, it constitutes a basis for evidence-based policy.

THE ESLC SURVEY

As previously indicated, the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) was launched by the European Commission in 2008 and carried out by the SurveyLang consortium. The survey provides participating countries with comparative data on foreign language competence and insights into good practice in language learning. Comparability is an important issue because the survey is supposed to help countries align to the CEFR; what one country thinks is a B2 level in its national exams, may not be equivalent to the perceived B2 level in another country. Thus, this survey brought comparability that did not exist before and that was encouraged by the European Council in its decision "... to develop a European Indicator of Language Competence that will relate learner performance to the levels of the CEFR. This decision [...] enhances the CEFR status in relation to systems of schooling and is likely to ensure that Member States will increasingly take account of the CEFR and its common reference levels when developing language education policy and determining how it should be implemented" (Little, 2007, p. 647).


Given that each of the 16 adjudicated entities tested the two languages most widely taught in that entity (so-called first and second foreign languages) the survey tested five languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. There were two separate samples within each adjudicated entity, one for the first test language, and one for the second. From the three language skills - Reading, Listening and Writing –tested in each language, each student was assessed in only two of the three skills. The results of the survey are reported in terms of the levels of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). The framework defines six levels of functional competence from A1 (the lowest level) to C2. The ESLC focused on levels A1 to B2. It was also necessary to define a pre-A1 level in order to identify an A1 threshold. Students whose performance was below this threshold can do virtually nothing with the language they are learning in school. Also in accord with the CEFR, the terms "basic user" and "independent user" designate the broad A and B levels, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of ESLC and CEFR levels

ESLC level		CEFR level	Definition
Independent user	Advanced independent user	B2	An independent language user who can express herself clearly and effectively
	Independent user	B1	An independent language user who can deal with straightforward, familiar matters
Basic user	Advanced basic user	A2	A basic user who can use simple language to communicate on everyday topics
	Basic user	A1	A basic user who can use very simple language, with support
Beginner		Pre-A1	A learner who has not achieved the level of competence described by A1

Functional competence can be understood as the ability of the learner to use the language to achieve communicational needs. As North (2007) states, the CEFR endorses this language learning approach by “... focusing on relevant content and experiences, systematically including holistic activity so that learners can develop strategic competence” (North, 2007, p. 656). Importantly, and according to the CEFR descriptors of performance, test items in the different languages include functional tasks (Bonnet, 2007). For English as the first foreign language, we present some examples¹ of the tasks used to measure writing, listening and reading skills. The following item is an example of an A1 writing task.

Example 1: A1 Writing task: “holiday photo”

EN - Holiday photo	
	<p>You are on holiday. Send an email to an English friend with this photo of your holiday. Tell your friend about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the hotel • the weather • what the people are doing <p>Write 20–30 words.</p>

¹ Examples from the Final Report of the First European Survey on Languages Competences (European Commission, 2012).

Regarding listening, an illustration of an A2 CEFR level task is presented as well as the transcription of the text the students listened to. The task is composed of 5 items.

Example 2: A2 Listening task

You will hear a boy and girl talking about what they did at the weekend with their friends. What did each friend do at the weekend?
For the next 5 questions, choose the answer (A–G). Use each letter once only.

People

- 10 Sue
- 11 Laura
- 12 Jamie
- 13 Charlie
- 14 Ricky

Answers

- 10 ☐
- 11 ☐
- 12 ☐
- 13 ☐
- 14 ☐

Activities



Transcription

Andrew: Hi Cathy, how are you?

Cathy: Fine.

Andrew: What did you do on Saturday?

Cathy: Well, first, I met Sue. We went shopping in town together. We bought some jeans and some shoes. And, later, about seven o'clock, we met Laura.

Andrew: Didn't Laura go shopping with you?

Cathy: No – on Saturday afternoons she always goes to the gym. After that she waits for her boyfriend Jamie, who plays volleyball. We always see each other later. And what did you do yesterday? Did you go out on your mountain bike?

Andrew: No – actually my friend Charlie wanted to go to a disco, but when we got there, we found it closed on Sunday evening.

Cathy: So, what happened?

Andrew: Well, Charlie had some tickets to see a new band. I really enjoyed it - the music was great!

Cathy: And didn't Ricky go with you all?

Andrew: No, he went skiing in the mountains with his parents this weekend.

Cathy: Lucky thing!

Finally, we present an example of a reading task, composed of 5 items, for the B1 level.

Example 3: B1 Reading task

You will read an email about a school exchange visit. For the next 5 questions, answer A, B or C.

Hi Chloe

There was a talk at school yesterday about the exchange visit and everyone taking part was there. The teachers gave us a programme and, of course, lots of instructions! It won't be long until you're here and I can't wait to finally meet you.

When you're here, we'll go into school together each day. Most days you'll come to my lessons but there are a few organised trips like a city tour and a river trip. Anyway, I expect your teachers have told you all about those.

I live some way from school and usually get a train about eight in the morning. I cycle to the station because it's about twenty minutes' walk. Do you mind cycling? We have a spare bike you can borrow if you want. If not, we can both walk to the station.

Most evenings I have to do homework but on Friday we can meet up with some of my friends and their exchange partners. It'll be fun – my friend Tash has asked everyone round to a party!

If you're tired at the weekend, you can have a rest or we can do something with my family. Or if you prefer, we can go into town and do some shopping. Anyway, you don't have to decide now.

See you soon.

Sara

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>1 In the first paragraph, Sara says she wishes that Chloe was visiting for longer.
 A is surprised at how many students are taking part.
 B is looking forward to seeing Chloe.</p> <p>2 What does Sara say about the trips that will be available?
 They will be more enjoyable than the lessons.
 A Chloe may already have some information about them.
 B A different trip is planned for each day.
 C</p> <p>3 In the third paragraph, Sara offers to
 A lend Chloe a bike.
 B get Chloe's train ticket.
 C walk with Chloe to school.</p> | <p>4 What is Sara doing in the fourth paragraph?
 A telling Chloe about an invitation
 B asking for Chloe's opinion
 comparing possible activities she and Chloe can do
 C</p> <p>5 What does Sara say about the weekend?
 A It is the best time to go shopping.
 B Chloe can choose later what to do.
 C Her family have organised a day out.</p> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

The same type of tasks was used for each of the 5 languages, thus enabling the comparability of the tasks across languages.

The Survey, completed to international education survey standards similar to PISA², PIRLS³ and TIMSS⁴, provided comparable data of foreign language competences across skills, languages and countries of almost 54000 students. The main study was carried out in the Spring of 2011. Along with the language skills assessment, contextual information was collected through questionnaires filled in by all tested pupils, more than 5000 foreign language teachers and more than 2200 school principals. Furthermore, information on the education systems was collected through National Research Coordinators.

The student questionnaires collected information related to: the student, student family and home; computers at home, languages in student home environment, opinion of the students about foreign languages, school subjects, learning foreign languages in school, student target language lessons, testes and assignments for the subject of target language, studying and doing homework for foreign languages out of

² See: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

³ See: <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2011/index.html>

⁴ See: <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/timss2011/index.html>

school time and student skills in target language. Concerning the teachers' questionnaire, questions were asked in relation to: the teacher, the languages the teacher speaks, stays abroad, initial training of the teacher, qualifications of the teacher, the current employment, in-service training, teaching foreign languages, resources available for the teacher target language classes, target language classes and practices of the teacher in homework and assessment. The school questionnaire collected information on school characteristics, school teaching staff, in-service training for the school teaching staff, school curriculum for foreign languages, teaching time for foreign languages, school policy and practices to encourage language learning and school resources.

The questions of the questionnaires were closed and some of the items were measured using Likert type scales. For instance, in the student questionnaire, the items related to parents' knowledge of the foreign language were the following:

"In your opinion, how well do your parents know target language?"

- *How well does your father know target language?*
- *How well does your mother know target language?"*

The options of the answers to the items were: not at all, a little, quite well and very well.

To ensure anonymity and participation of teachers, the survey was designed in such a way that no direct link can be made between individual teachers and students. As a consequence, there is no direct link between information from the teachers' questionnaires and language proficiency.

The ESLC findings confirmed that English is the most widely adopted first foreign language learned by European students and it is also the one perceived as the most useful and, for the majority of tested pupils, the easiest to learn. Regarding other findings of the survey related to the contextual questionnaires, generally pupils reported a rather early start to foreign language learning (before or during primary education) and most commonly they learn two foreign languages. However, considerable differences were found across educational systems in the exact onset of foreign language learning, the current teaching time and the number of languages offered and learned. Clear differences between educational systems are seen in the informal language learning opportunities available to pupils (such as pupils' perception of their parents' knowledge of the foreign language tested, individual trips abroad, the

use of dubbing or subtitles in the media, and the pupils' exposure to the language through traditional and new media). Better language competences are positively correlated with the use of the foreign language by teachers and pupils in meaningful communication; an early start in foreign language learning; learning more foreign languages; the use of the foreign language through media outside of school; and the perceived usefulness of language learning. In addition, only small differences were observed between educational systems in students' perceived usefulness of the foreign languages, attitudes to their study, its usefulness and difficulty. The amount of foreign language spoken in lessons showed clear differences across educational systems.

The findings presented in the final report of the survey, are based on an univariate regression analysis, which considers the effect of one independent variable at a time on the dependent variable or, in this case, on the continuous scale that measures students' achievement.

RATIONALE FOR THE SECONDARY ANALYSIS

The purpose of international assessments is to collect information on students' achievement in order to provide national governments indications for policy measures. In this case, research can play an important role in the identification of explanatory factors of students' foreign language competences. We aim to investigate how these factors play out in EU participating countries/adjudicated entities. Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

- What is the relationship between English proficiency and background variables related to home and school practices?
- Which factors influence language attainment and what implications for improving students' learning can be drawn from this survey?

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

In this report we considered the adjudicated entities where English was the first target language, namely, French Community of Belgium (BE fr), Bulgaria (BG), Croatia (HR), Estonia (EE), France (FR), Greece (EL), Malta (MT), Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Slovenia (SI), Spain (ES) and Sweden (SE). The distribution of the number of students that participated in the survey is presented in the following table.

Table 2: Number of students per adjudicated entity

Adjudicated Entity	Frequency	Percent
Belgium French speaking community	1501	6.4
Bulgaria	1626	7
Estonia	1660	7.1
Greece	1594	6.8
Spain	4637	19.8
France	1509	6.5
Croatia	1651	7.1
Malta	1197	5.1
Netherlands	1441	6.2
Poland	1764	7.5
Portugal	1603	6.9
Sweden	1579	6.8
Slovenia	1596	6.8
Total	23358	100.0

The minimum number of students that participated in the survey was in Malta (1197) and the maximum, 4637, was in Spain.

Table 3, presents the distribution of the number of schools enrolled in the survey of all the adjudicated entities.

Table 3: Number of principals per adjudicated entity

Adjudicated Entity	Frequency	Percent
Belgium French speaking community	70	6.7
Bulgaria	75	7.2
Estonia	79	7.5
Greece	57	5.4
Spain	206	19.7
France	67	6.4
Croatia	75	7.2
Malta	55	5.2
Netherlands	66	6.3
Poland	81	7.7
Portugal	72	6.9
Sweden	73	7
Slovenia	71	6.8
Total	1047	100

In general, between seventy and eighty principals answered the school questionnaire. Malta registered the lowest number of responses to this questionnaire -- 55 principals, while Spain registered the highest response rate - 206 principals answered the questionnaire.

DATA ANALYSIS

For each student, the foreign language test result was interpreted with reference to the proficiency levels defined in the CEFR. In our analysis, we compare students in the Pre-A1 level with the Basic User level (combination of CEFR levels A1 and A2), and the latter with the Independent User level (which includes levels B1 and B2). The methodology adopted is based on multivariate analysis, namely a multinomial regression model (Agresti, 1990). This allows us to evaluate the effect of each variable when other variables are also considered and to estimate the expected amount of change of the variables when students move from one proficiency level to another. Multinomial regression models are used for a categorical dependent variable with more

than two categories. In our case, we have 3 categories (pre-A1, basic user and independent user). The model allows us to estimate the effect of each variable in the probability of students being in the basic level rather than in the pre-A1 level. The same is done for the comparison between the students in the independent user level and the basic user level. The sign of each coefficient indicates whether the correspondent variable increases or decreases the probability that the student is in one level rather than in the other. The multinomial regression model was adjusted using the software SPSS Statistics. The analysis was run for the 13 adjudicated entities described above.

The decisions to include the variables were based on theoretical and empirical constructs about language learning and on the distributions and correlations among variables. We started by selecting variables that have been identified in the final report as important to predict students' foreign language proficiency. Additionally, we considered variables defined in the literature that explain foreign language proficiency. We analyzed the frequencies by category within each variable, the shape of distributions and their differences across countries. In addition, in the preliminary analysis, we constructed cross tabulations between variables and the CEFR levels attained by the students, we calculated correlations between the variables and between each variable and the variable that measures the CEFR level of the students.

We consider variables from the school/principal and student questionnaires that contribute to explaining language proficiency. The variables are classified as internal and external factors that influence language learning. In the internal factors we include variables related to three aspects: the school in terms of system level policies, the methodology adopted in the language classes and students' motivation. The external factors that influence language learning are related to contextual conditions. Additionally, the model was controlled for socio-economic status and gender.

VARIABLES

The following table presents the variables considered in our analysis. The variables reported in the final report of the ESLC survey as explaining students' foreign language/target language (TL) proficiency are in presented in bold in the table 4. All system-level factors, except for the "Onset" of language learning were derived from the

Principal's questionnaire. All other variables, except for "Content-and-language integrated Learning (CLIL), which also came from the principal's questionnaire, were derived from the students' questionnaire.

Table 4: Internal and external factors of language learning.

Internal Factors	
System-level policies	Onset Study many languages Wide choice of languages Classroom size
Methodology	Foreign language lessons are easy Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) Frequency during foreign lessons of learning grammar Students speak the foreign language during group work
Student Motivation	Foreign language lessons are good Foreign language lessons are interesting
External Factors	
Contextual Conditions (Country, students and parents)	Media - frequency of movie watching spoken in foreign language with and without subtitles Language usefulness for entertainment and language usefulness to read books and magazines (Instrumental Motivation) Parental knowledge of TL

Regarding the internal factors, the system level policies include the following variables of the questionnaires:

- Onset of TL education - variable with twelve categories in which the first category is before first international grade and the last one is 11th international grade;

- Study many languages - Measures to encourage language learning: Students can study more languages than is common or required – dichotomous variable with the value 0 for No and 1 for Yes;
- Wide choice of languages - Measures to encourage language learning: A wider choice of languages is offered than is common or required - dichotomous variable with the value 0 for No and 1 for Yes;
- Classroom size - Measures to encourage language learning: The classes for foreign language lessons are smaller than is common or required - dichotomous variable with the value 0 for No and 1 for Yes;

With regard to the methodology adopted in the language classes, we enter the following variables:

- TL are easy - Perception of [target language] lessons: My [target language] lessons are easy: variable with four categories corresponding to disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree and agree.
- CLIL - Measures to encourage language learning: {Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)} - dichotomous variable with the value 0 for No and 1 for Yes;
- TL grammar - Reported frequency during lessons of learning: [target language] grammar: variable that includes: Never or hardly ever; A few times a year; About once a month; A few times a month and (Almost) every lesson.
- Students speak the TL during group work - Frequency students [target language] use: When students work in groups and speak together: variable with five categories coded as never; hardly ever; every now and then; usually and always.

The students' motivation is measured by the variables:

- TL are good - Perception of [target language] lessons: My [target language] lessons are good: variable with four categories corresponding to disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree and agree.
- TL are interesting - Perception of [target language] lessons: My [target language] lessons are interesting: variable that includes: disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree and agree.

For the external factors that influence language learning, related to contextual conditions we consider:

- Media - Frequency of movie watching spoken in TL without subtitles - [target language] exposure through media: frequency watch movies spoken in [target language] without subtitles. The possible answers are: never, a few times a year, about once every month, a few times a month, a few times a week.
- Media - Frequency of movie watching spoken in TL with subtitles - [target language] exposure through media: frequency watch movies spoken in [target language] with subtitles - variable with five categories: never, a few times a year, about once every month, a few times a month, a few times a week.
- Instrumental Motivation - Language usefulness for entertainment: Usefulness of [target language] for: entertainment (movies, television programmes, music, games) - variable that includes the following possibilities of answers: not useful at all; hardly useful; quite useful and very useful.
- Instrumental Motivation - Language usefulness to read books and magazines: Usefulness of [target language] for: entertainment (movies, television programs, music, games) – variable with four categories coded as not useful at all; hardly useful; quite useful and very useful.
- Parental knowledge of TL: Parents target language knowledge – variable that varies between zero and three with the range of 0.5 in each category, constructed by Surveylang.

Additionally, the model controls for the following three variables:

- Gender: dichotomous variable with the value of zero for female and 1 for male.
- ISEI_M: International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status of the mother.
- ISEI_F: International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status of the farther.

RESULTS

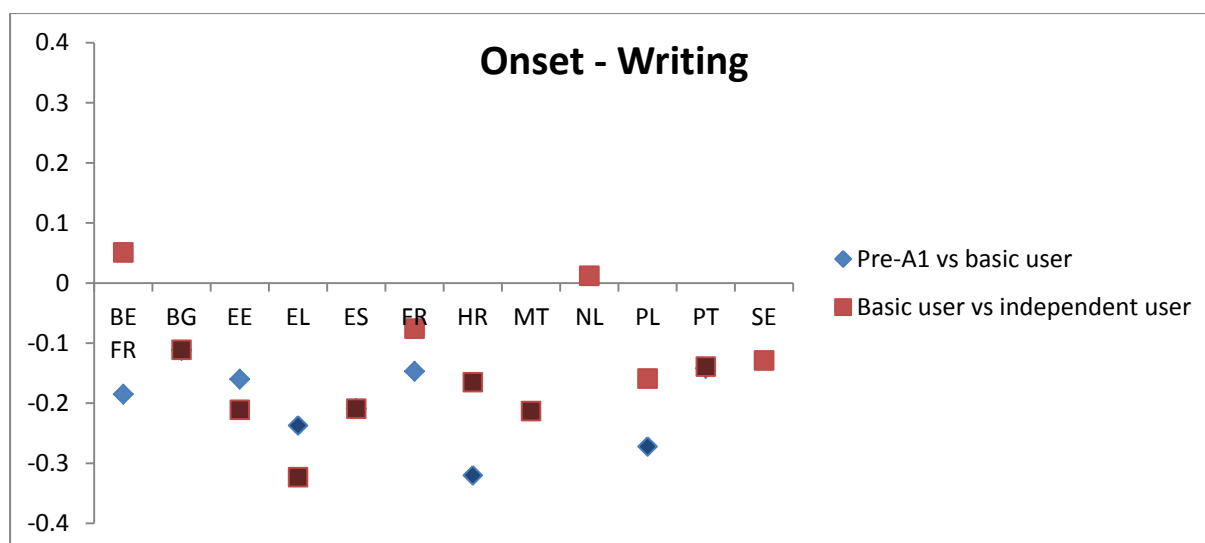
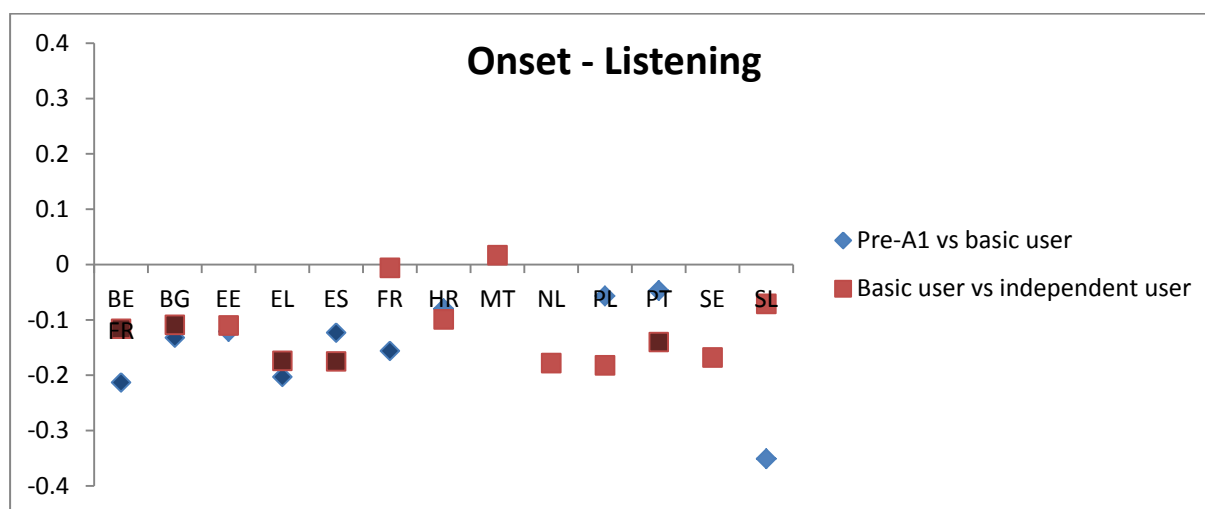
The model indicates that, for all adjudicated entities and skills, the probability of the model chi-square is less than the level of significance of 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis that there is no difference between the model without independent variables and the model with independent variables was rejected. In this sense, the existence of a relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable is supported and the model is statistically significant for all the adjudicated entities. Additionally, multicollinearity was checked for all adjudicated entities in order to guarantee that variables highly correlated were not part of the model and to make sure that we identified the unique contribution of each variable in predicting the dependent variable.

Below we present graphs containing the beta coefficients of the multinomial regression model for each variable for reading, listening and writing skills. The multinomial regression coefficients are presented in blue for the comparison between the pre-A1 user and the basic user and in brick color for the establishment of the relation between basic user and independent user. Additionally, darker colors are used to represent coefficients statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Due to the assumption of the minimum number of cases per independent variable, in some adjudicated entities we excluded some of the variables of the model. Moreover, in Malta, Netherlands and Sweden we do not have the sufficient number of students in the pre-A1 level in order to compare it with the basic user level.

First, we present the results for each of the variables related to system-level policies. Second, we present the results for the variables related to methodology and students' motivation. Thirdly, we show the results for the variables related to learning conditions external to the school. After each graphically depicted result for a given independent variable, we offer an interpretation of the findings. Next, we summarize all findings by cluster – system-level, methodology and motivation, and external context and present the results for the effect of socio-economic status and gender. Lastly, in the conclusions and discussion section, we discuss the results in light of their implications for policy.

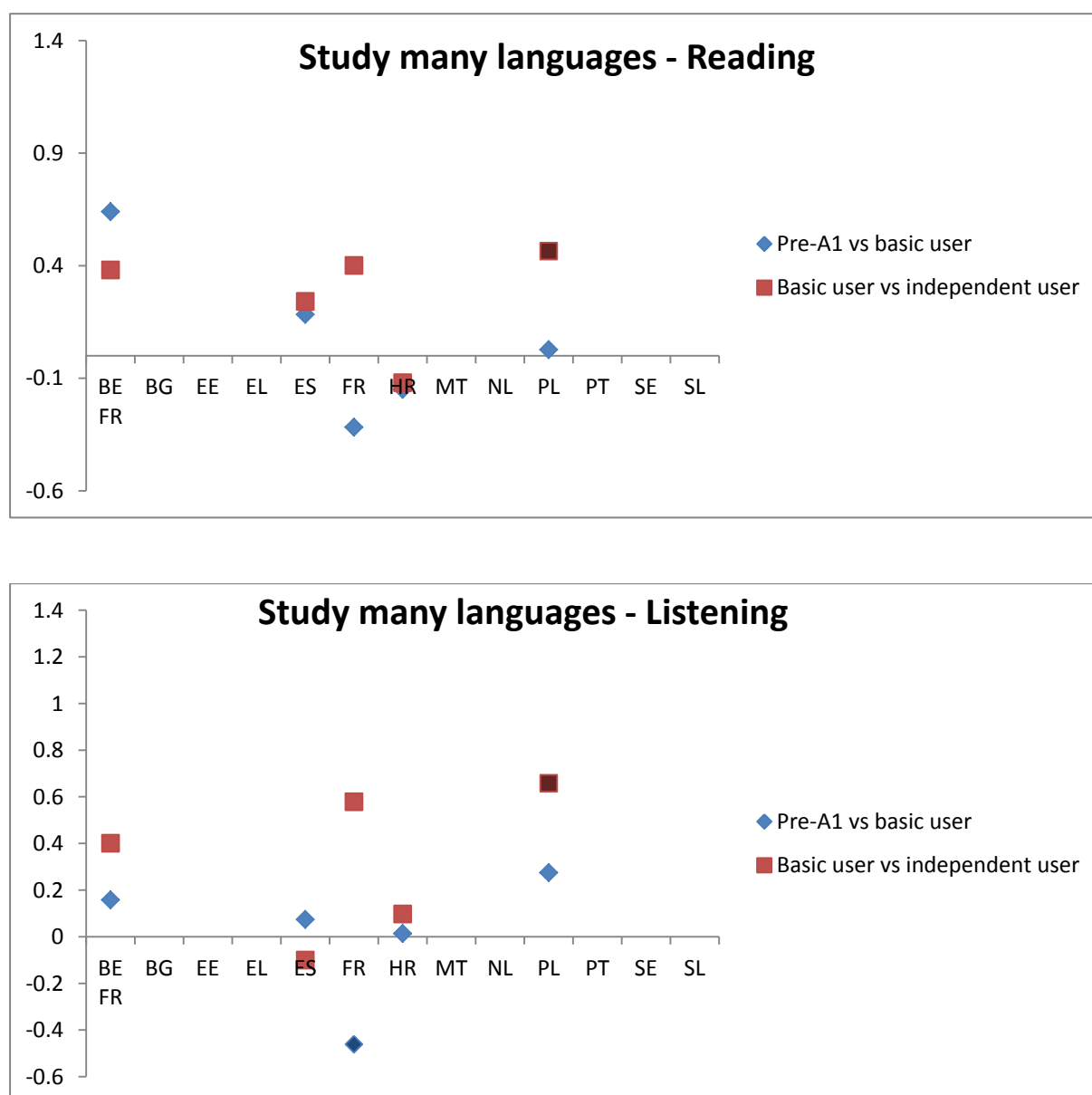
System-level policies

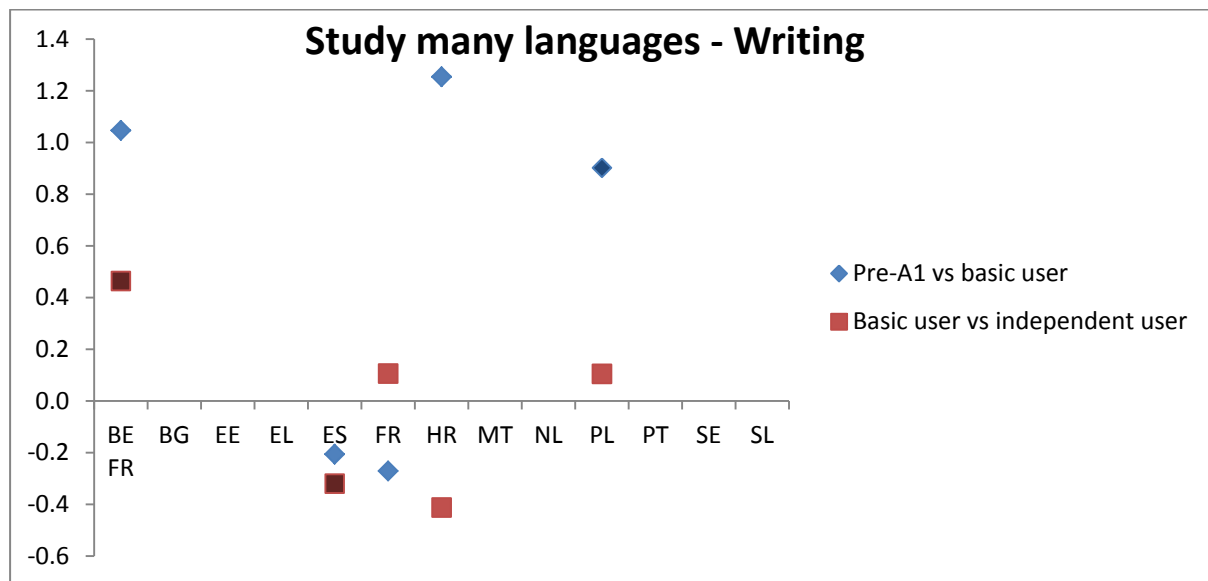
Figure 1: Multinomial regression coefficient of “Onset” in the 3 skills



In reference to the Onset, the results show that almost all the adjudicated entities present a negative coefficient for the multinomial logistic model in the three skills. Furthermore, for the comparison between basic and independent users approximately half of the countries exhibit a statistically significant coefficient. This means that we found an early onset advantage in reading, listening and writing in both comparisons (pre-A1 with basic user and basic user with Independent user).

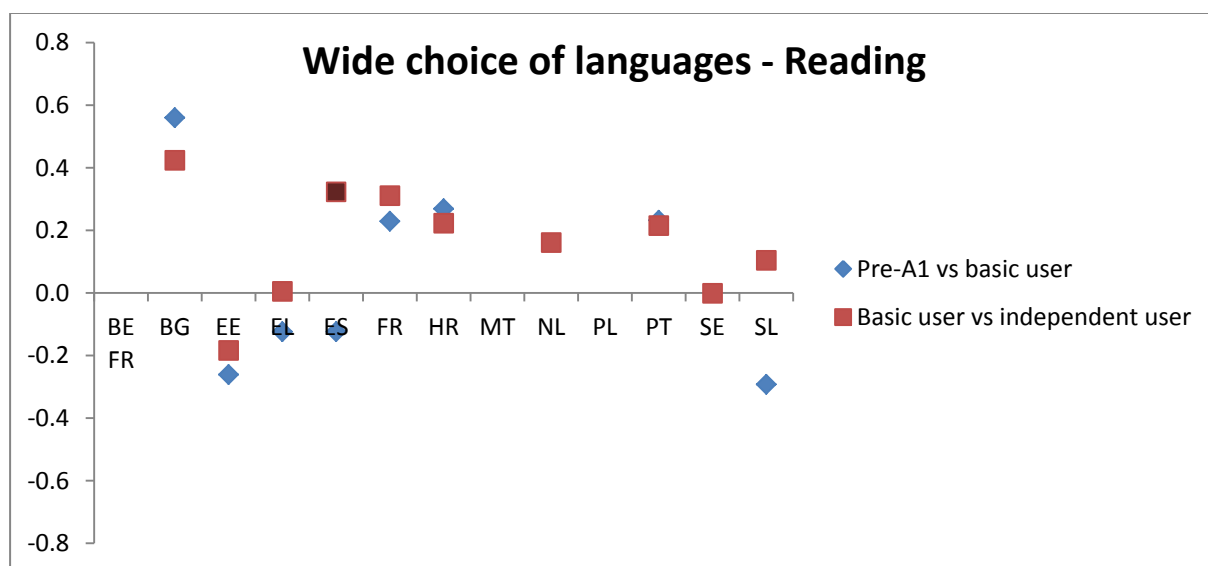
Figure 2: Multinomial regression coefficient of “Study Many Languages” in the 3 skills

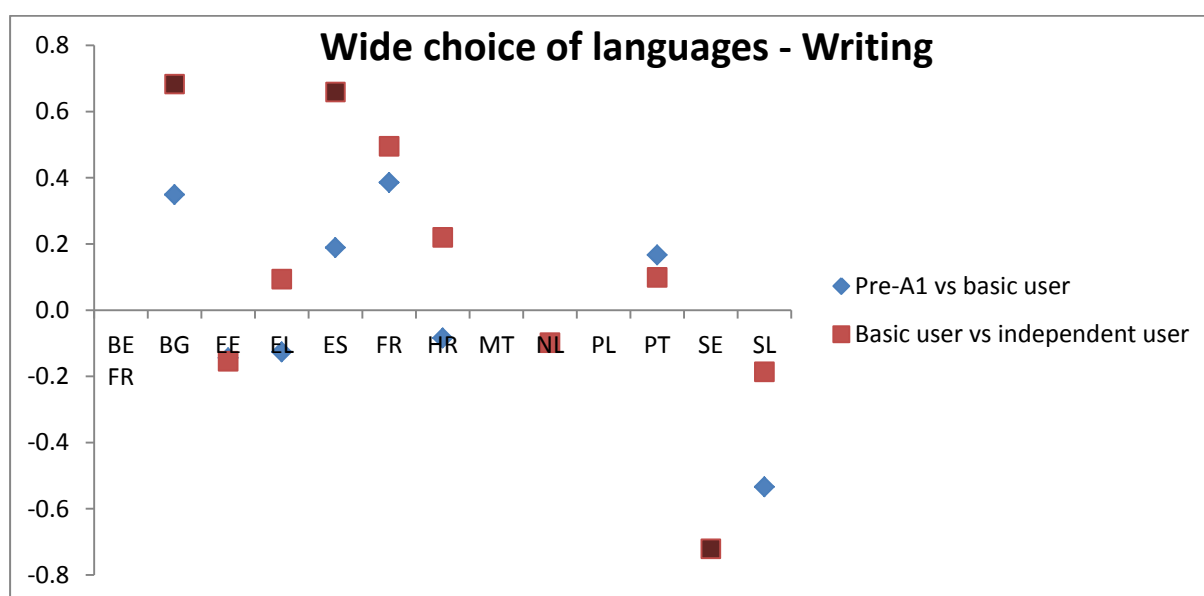
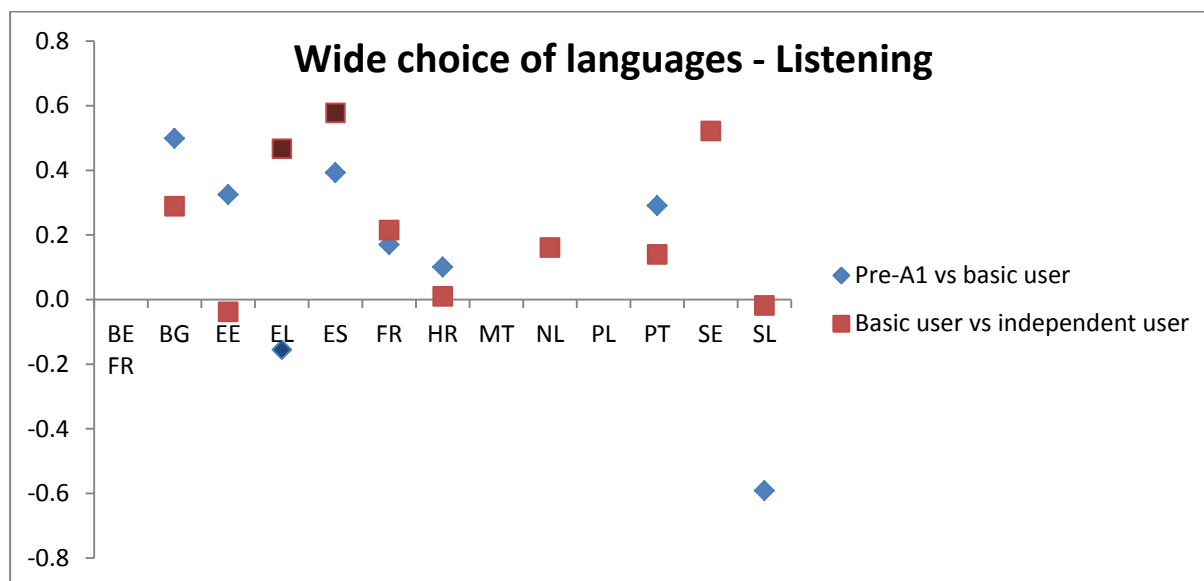




Regarding the variable that measures if students can study more languages than is common or required, we verify that, for most of the adjudicated entities in reading and listening skills, the students who had answered yes are more likely to achieve a higher CEFR level than the students who answered no. In writing, both negative and positive effects were found for this variable. However, the graphs show that, for reading and listening, only Poland presented statistically significant coefficients in the comparison between basic and independent user. In writing, the coefficients of the model were significant for Belgium and Spain, for the basic and independent users comparison.

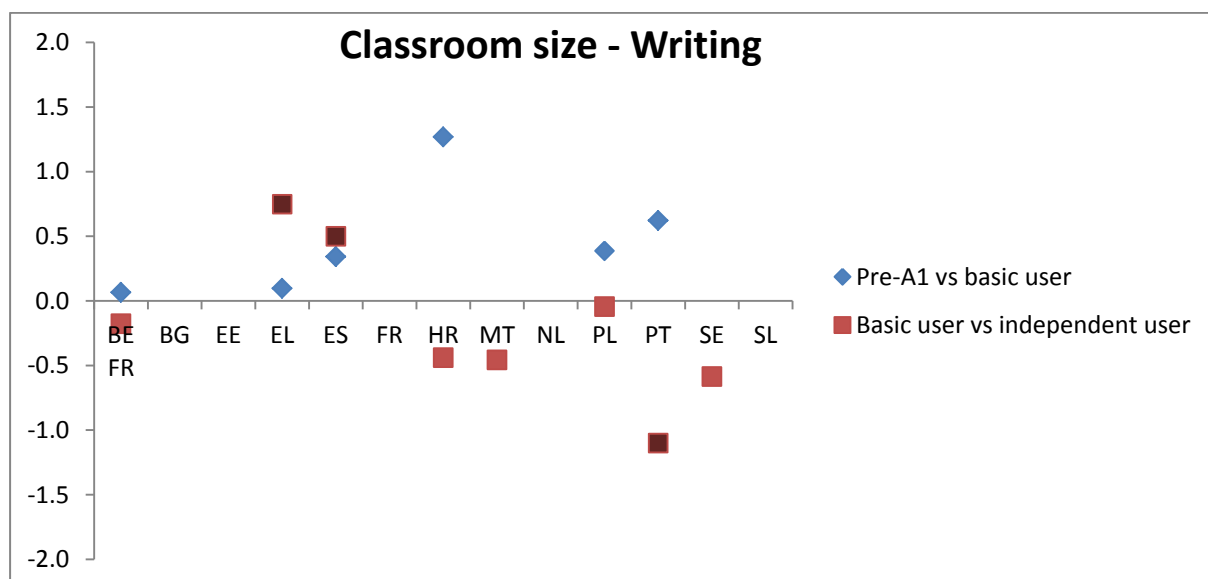
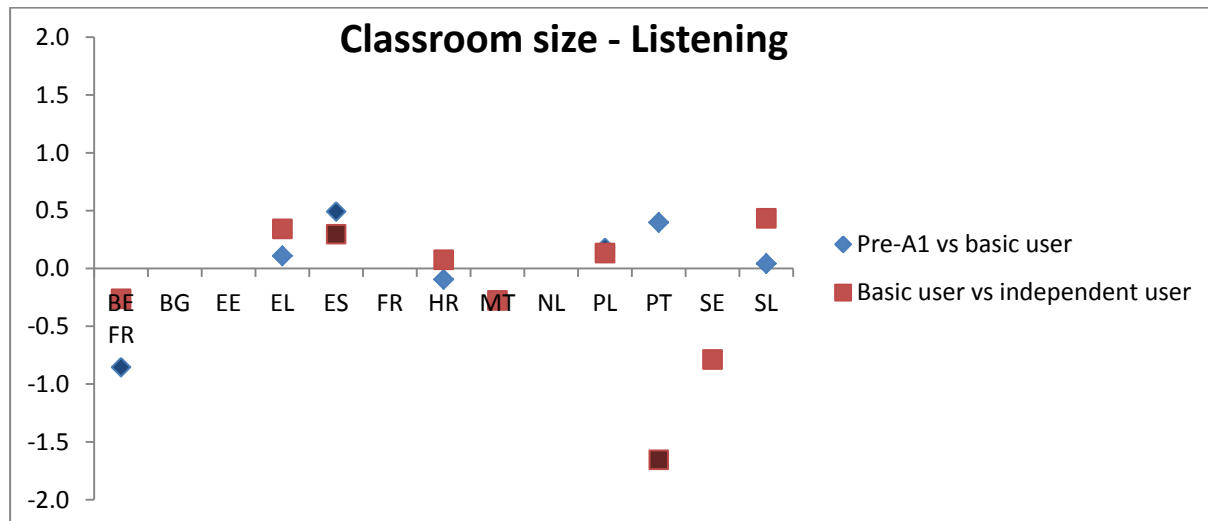
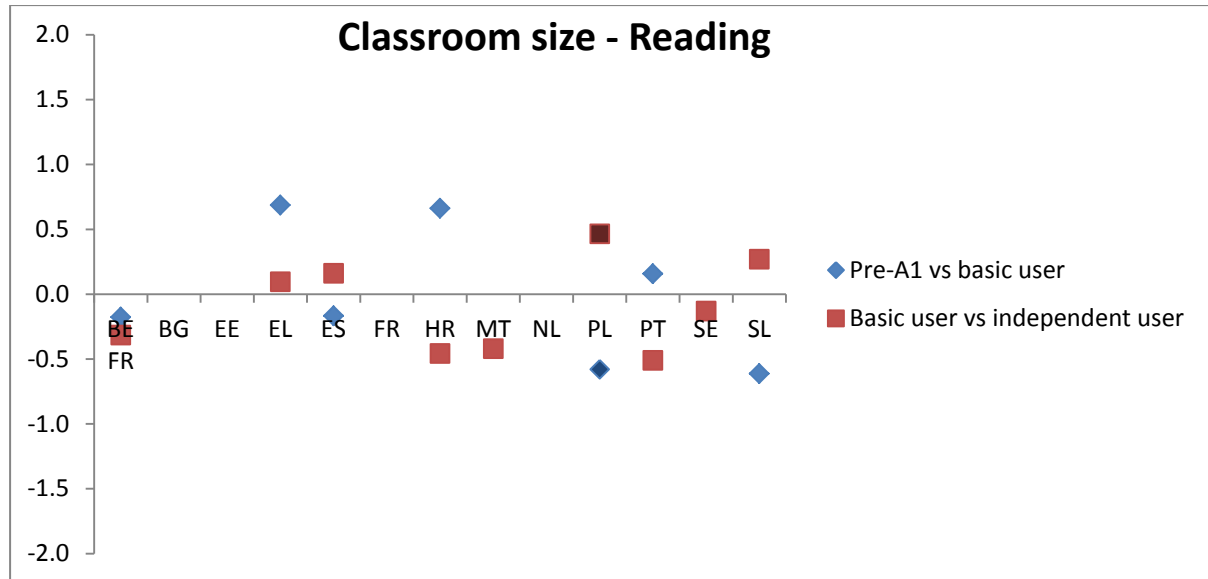
Figure 3: Multinomial regression coefficient of “Wide Choice of Languages” in the 3 skills





In what concerns the availability of languages, for the 3 skills, positive effects in English proficiency are found for most of the countries. For some countries a negative relationship was found. Nevertheless, the coefficients are not significant for almost all the adjudicated entities. Only one, two and three adjudicated entities present a significant effect in reading, listening and writing, respectively. Therefore, the results show a small and, at times, counterproductive effect of availability of languages.

Figure 4: Multinomial regression coefficient of “Classroom Size” in the 3 skills



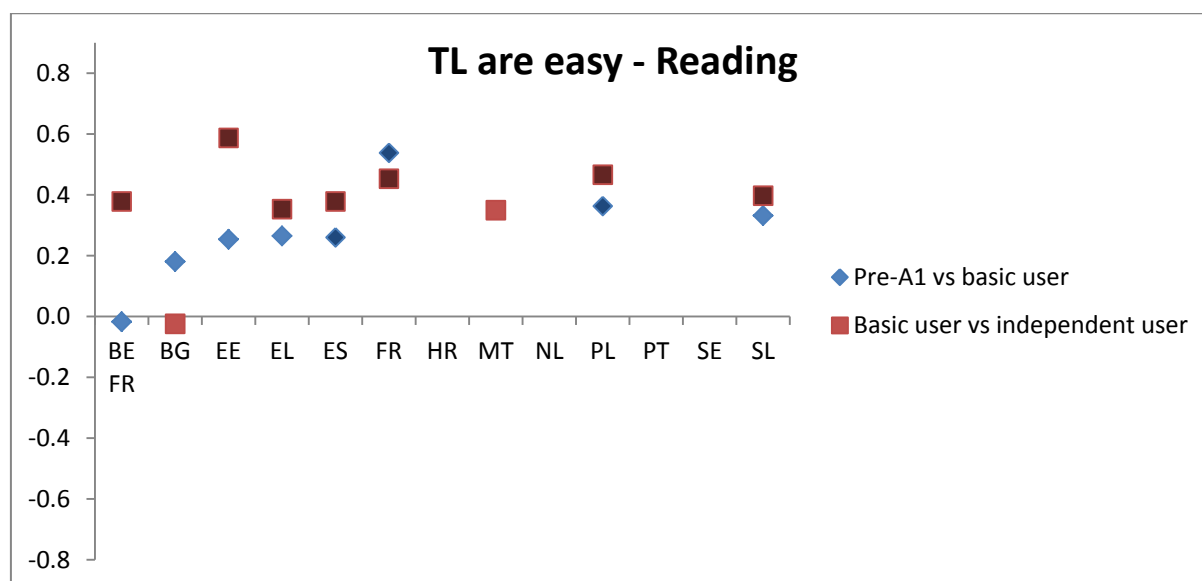
In what refers to the variable “The classes for foreign language lessons are smaller than is common or required”, the results indicate that in some adjudicated entities the coefficient of the model is positive and in other countries the coefficient is negative. Additionally, in almost all the adjudicated entities the results are not statistically significant. This indicates that there is little effect of classroom size in foreign language learning, but at times in the opposite direction – students in smaller classes have lower achievement.

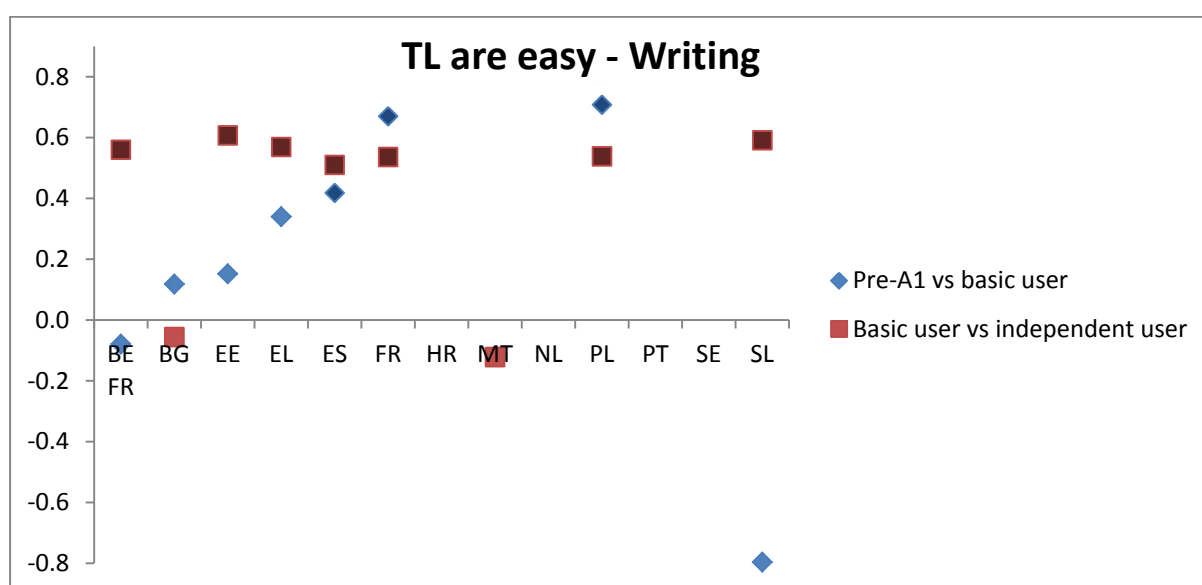
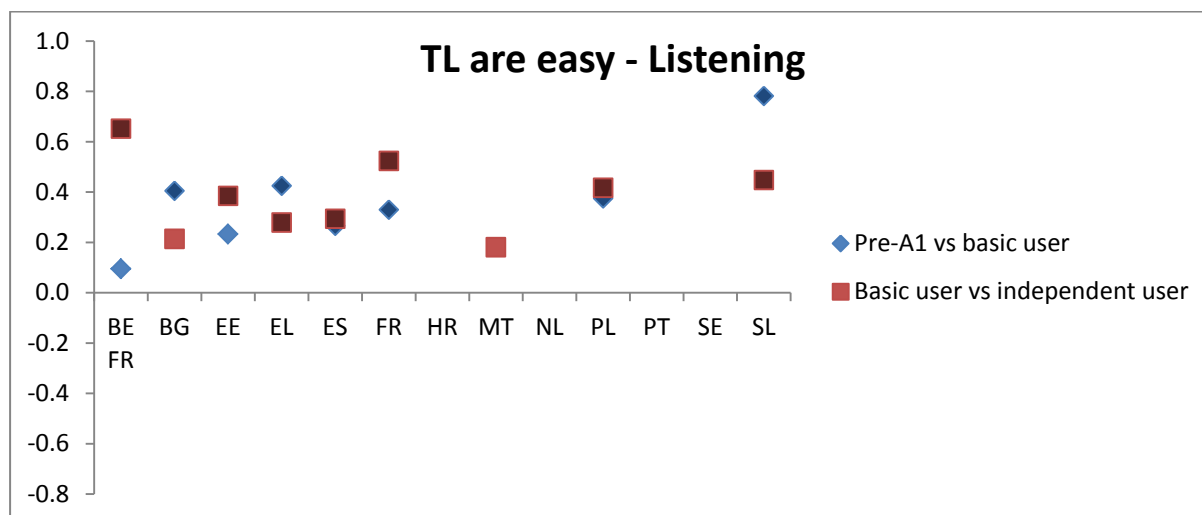
Summary of System-level policies cluster

In general, with respect to system-level policies, we can say that the most significant effect is the onset of language learning and that having a wide choice of language available to study also has a small positive effect in some countries. Having the possibility to study many languages does not seem to have much influence on achievement, as is also the case for being in a small classroom. The exceptions for the students’ opportunity to study many languages are Poland for reading and listening and Belgium French speaking community for writing. A small classroom size has a significant positive effect in foreign language achievement in Poland for reading, in Greece for writing and in Spain for listening and writing skills.

Methodology

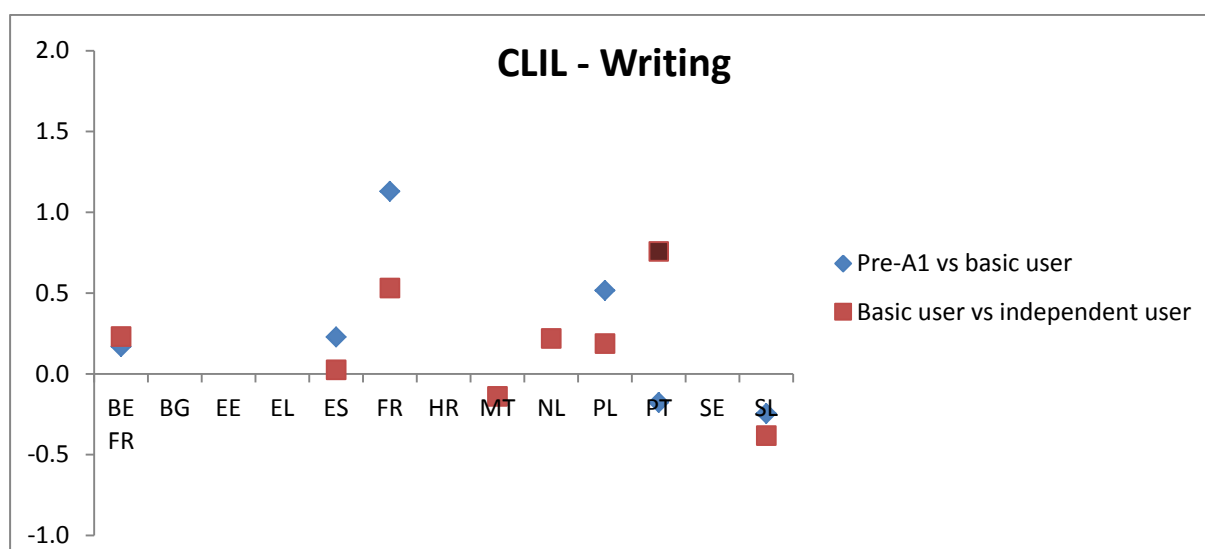
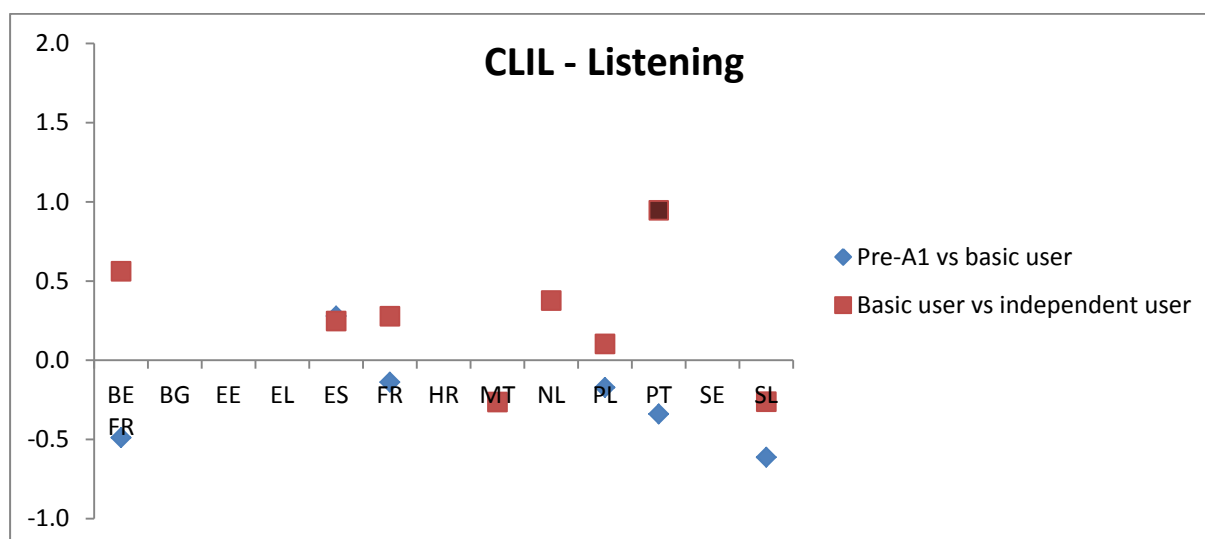
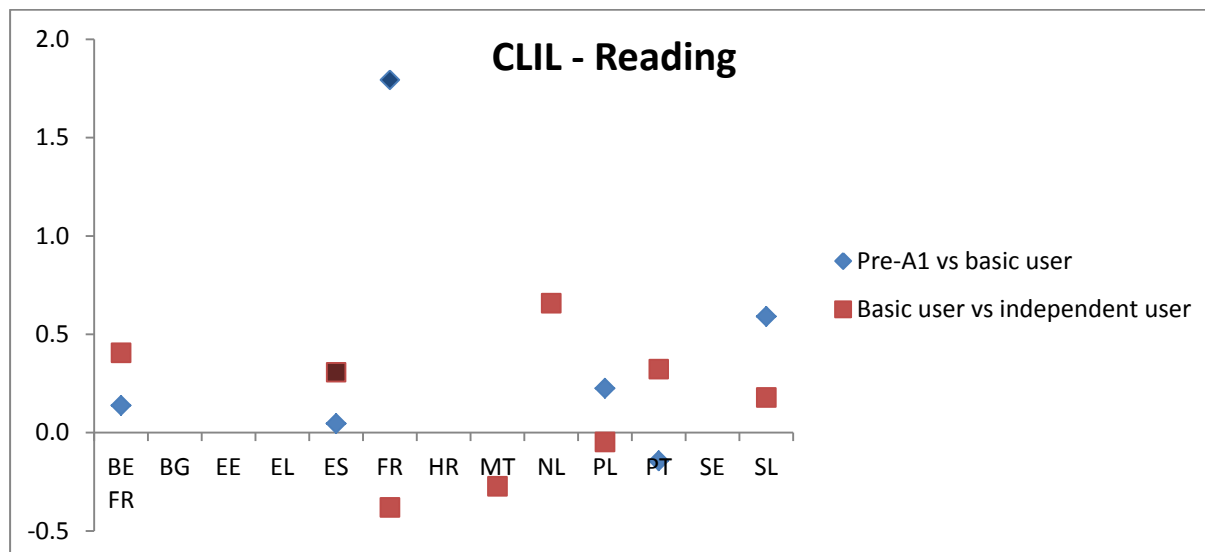
Figure 5: Multinomial regression coefficient of “Target Lessons are Easy” in the 3 skills





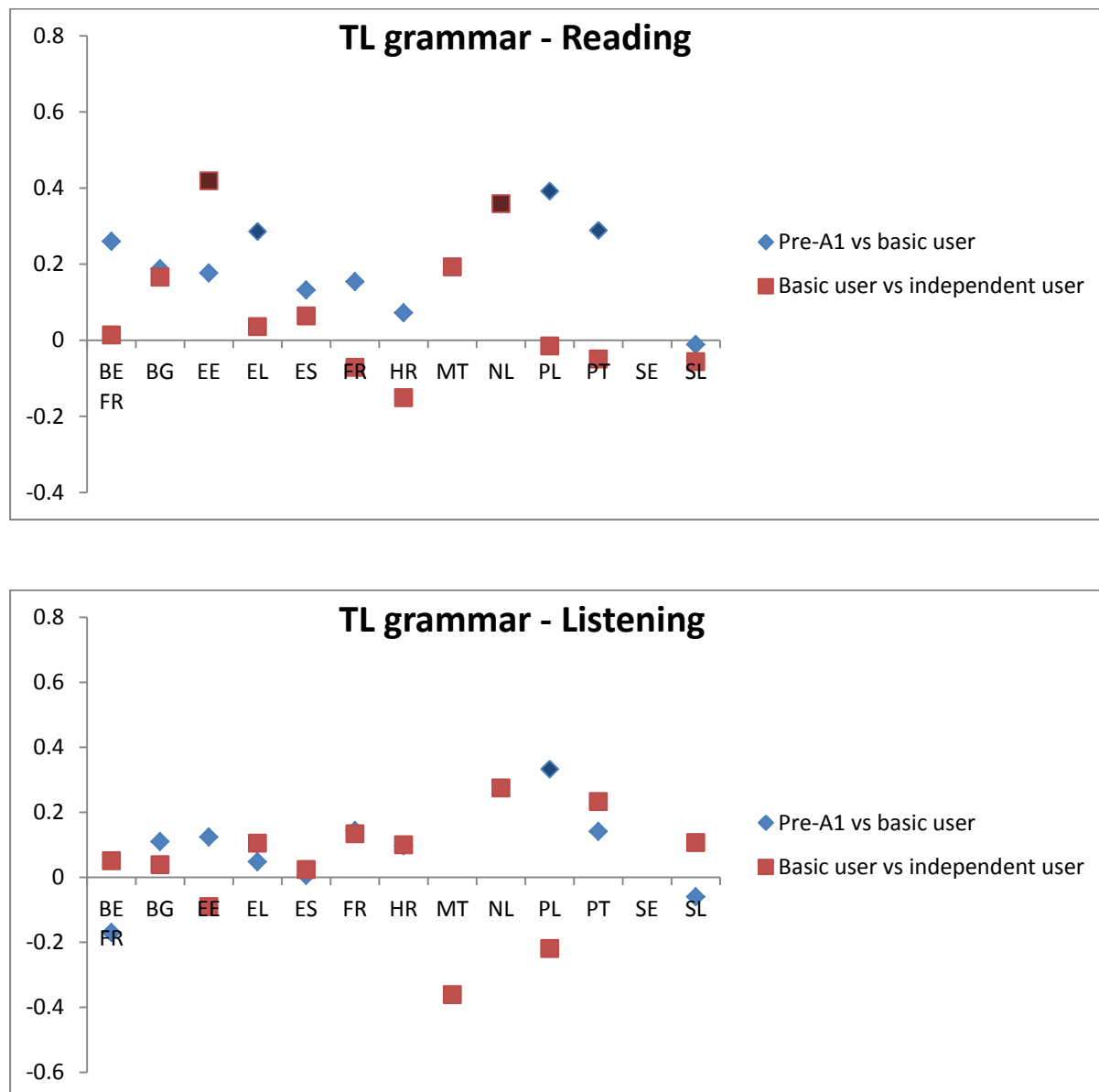
The analysis of the previous graphs indicates that the perceived difficulty level of lessons has an impact in most countries. The students that responded that their foreign language lessons are easy were more likely to attain higher levels of foreign language proficiency, rather than the group of students who considered that their TL lessons are not easy. This relationship is found for the 3 skills and at the same time for the comparison between pre-A1 and basic user as well as for the comparison between the basic-user with independent user. In addition, for the second comparison, the coefficients of the model are statistically significant for the majority of the adjudicated entities.

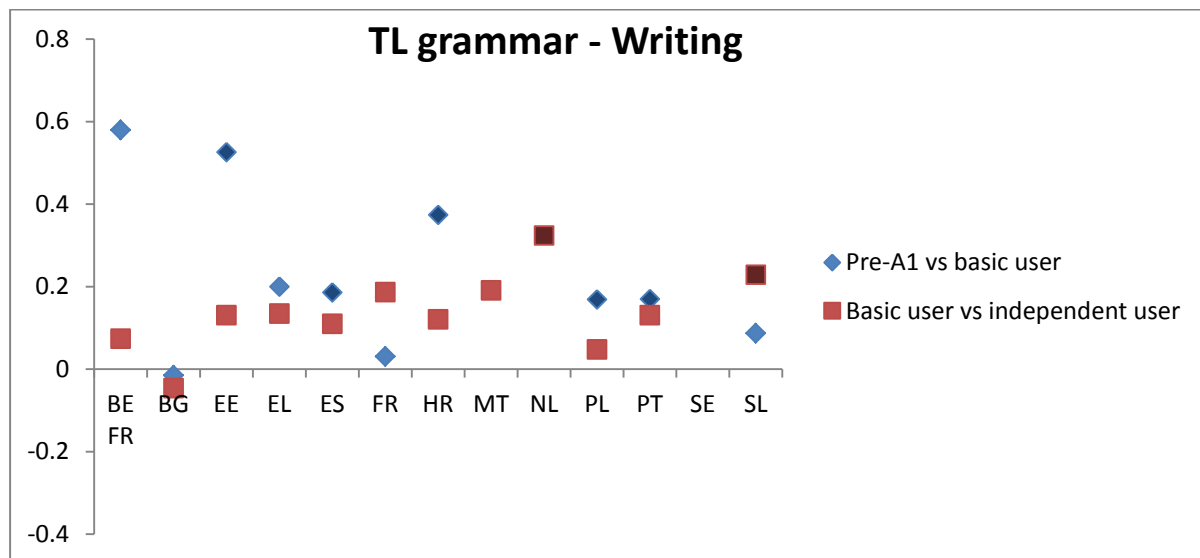
Figure 6: Multinomial regression coefficient of “Content-and Language-Integrated Learning” in the 3 skills



Regarding CLIL, we found that this variable has little impact on foreign language achievement. Positive and negative coefficients are found for this variable and only in one adjudicated entity the value is statistically significant, for reading, listening and writing skills.

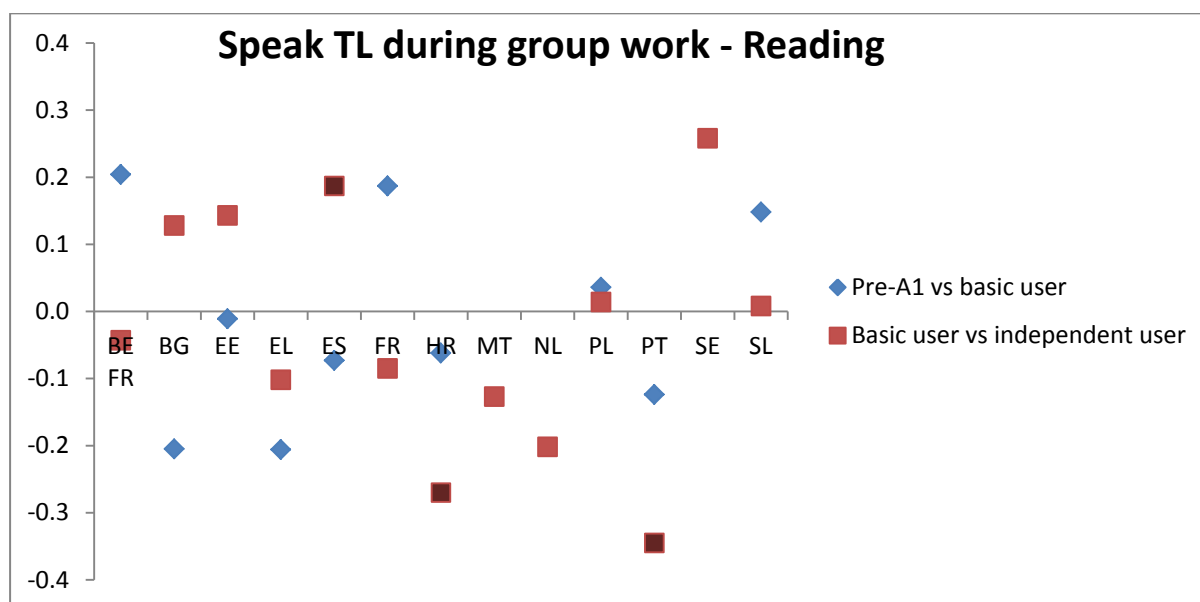
Figure 7: Multinomial regression coefficient of “TL Grammar” in the 3 skills

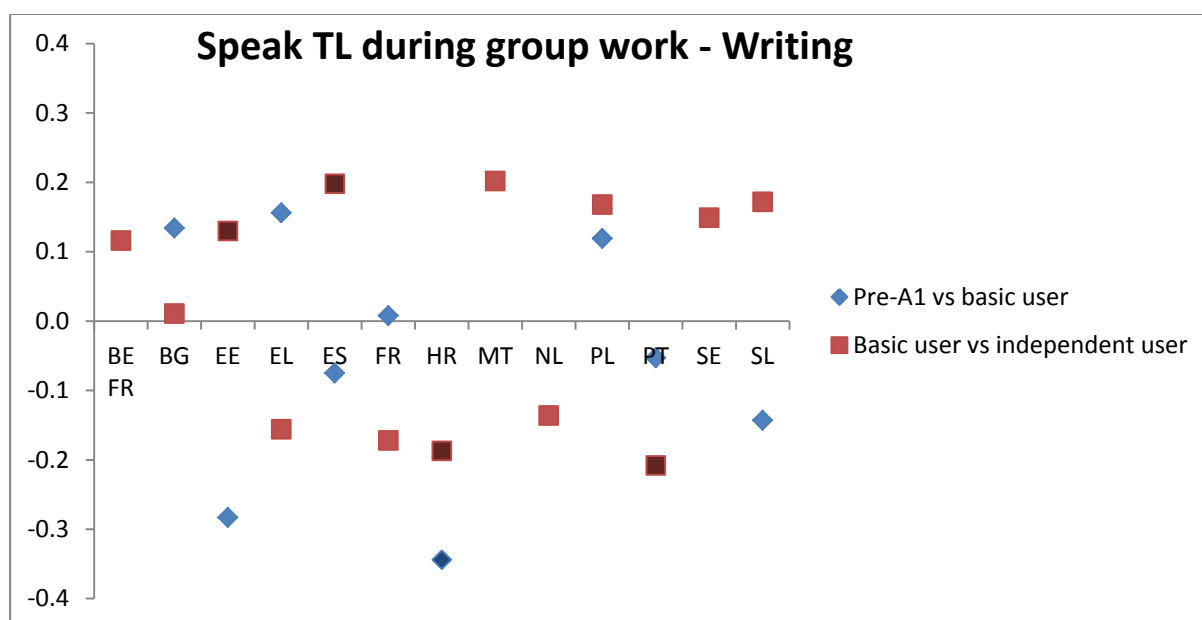
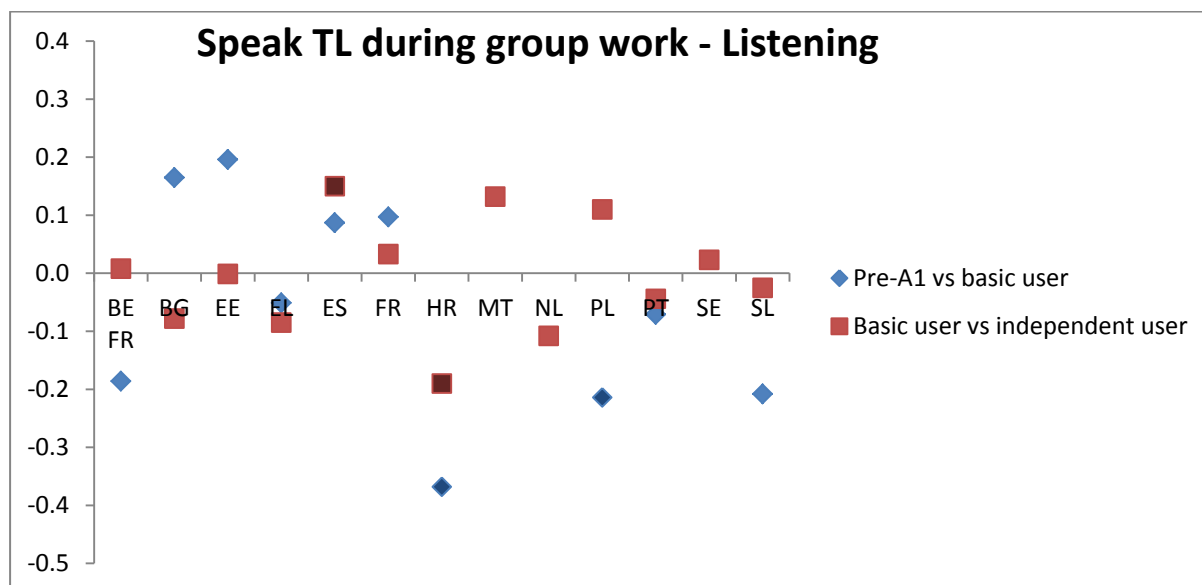




The variable that measures the frequency during foreign lessons of learning grammar presents mainly positive effects for the 3 skills. However, a stronger positive relationship between the variable and the students' CEFR level is found for listening and writing for most of the countries. For reading and writing skills only two adjudicated entities present significant effects.

Figure 8: Multinomial regression coefficient of "Speak TL during Group Work" in the 3 skills





The frequency with which students speak the target/foreign language during group work can have contradictory outcomes. Positive and negative coefficients are found in the 3 skills and in the comparison between pre-A1 and basic user as well as in the comparison between basic user and independent user.

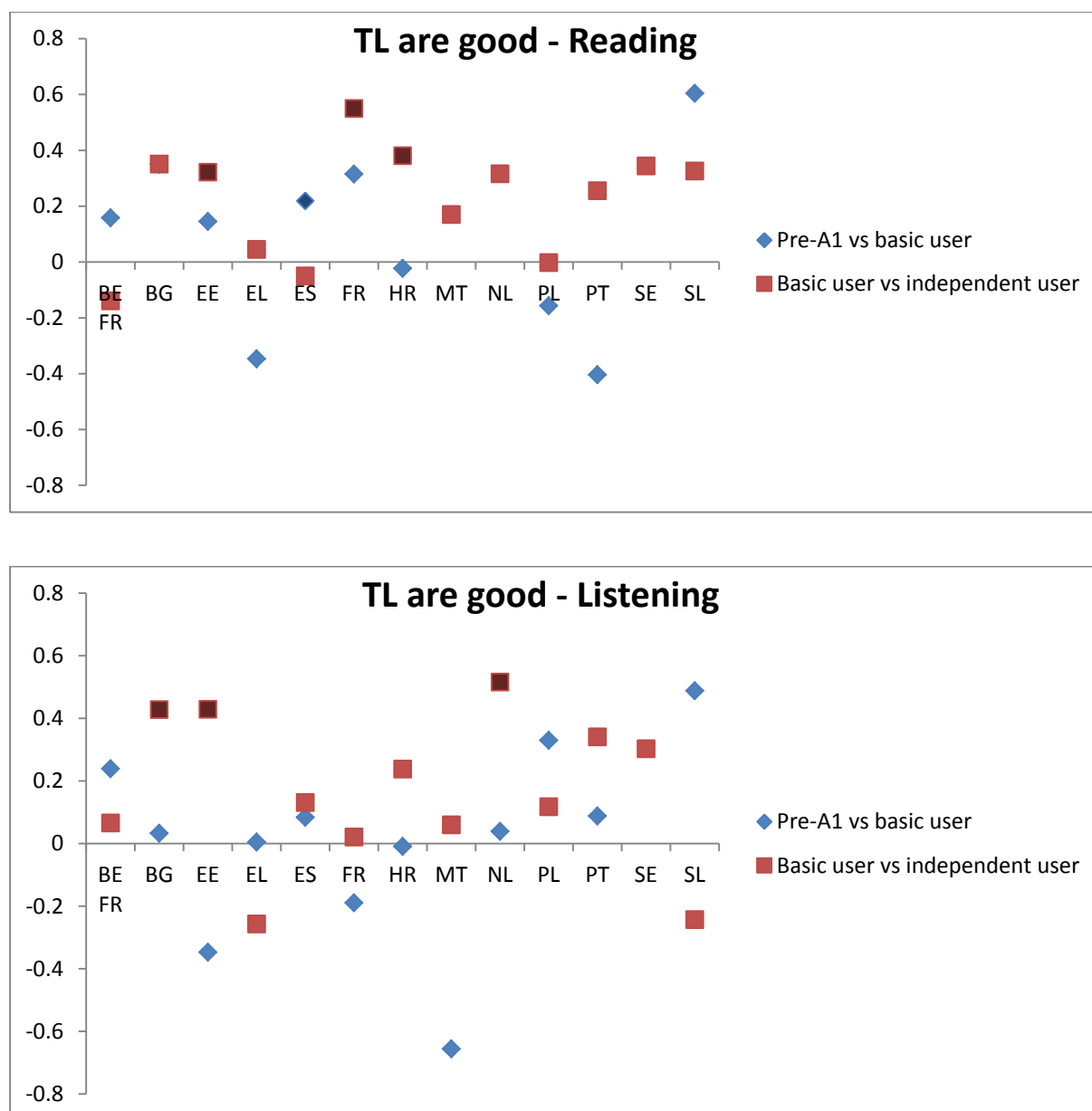
Summary of methodology cluster

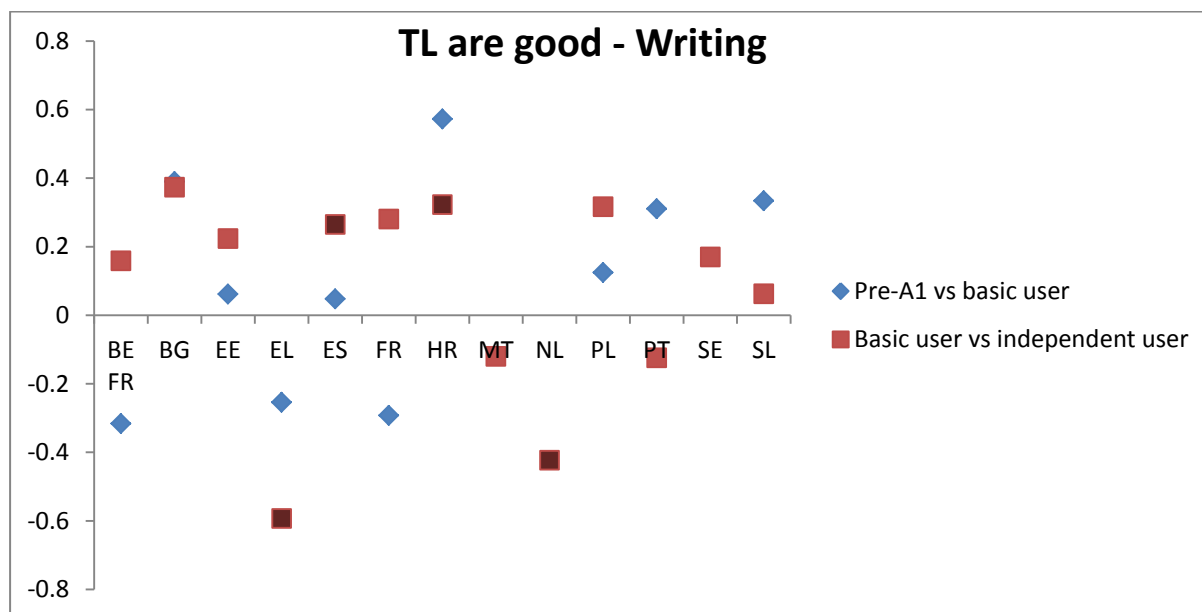
With regard to the methodology factors that explain foreign language learning, the results broadly indicate that the most significant effect is the students' expectations of their performance based on their exposure to comprehensible input (variable TL are easy). CLIL does not seem to have much influence on students foreign language

proficiency. Only Spain, in reading and writing, and Portugal in listening present a significant positive effect of this variable on achievement. The same for the teaching of grammar in foreign language classes. A significant positive relation between the frequency of teaching grammar and the foreign language CEFR level can be found in Estonia and Netherlands for reading and/or writing skills. Speaking the foreign language during work group also presents both positive and negative outcomes on achievement, depending of the adjudicated entities.

Student Motivation

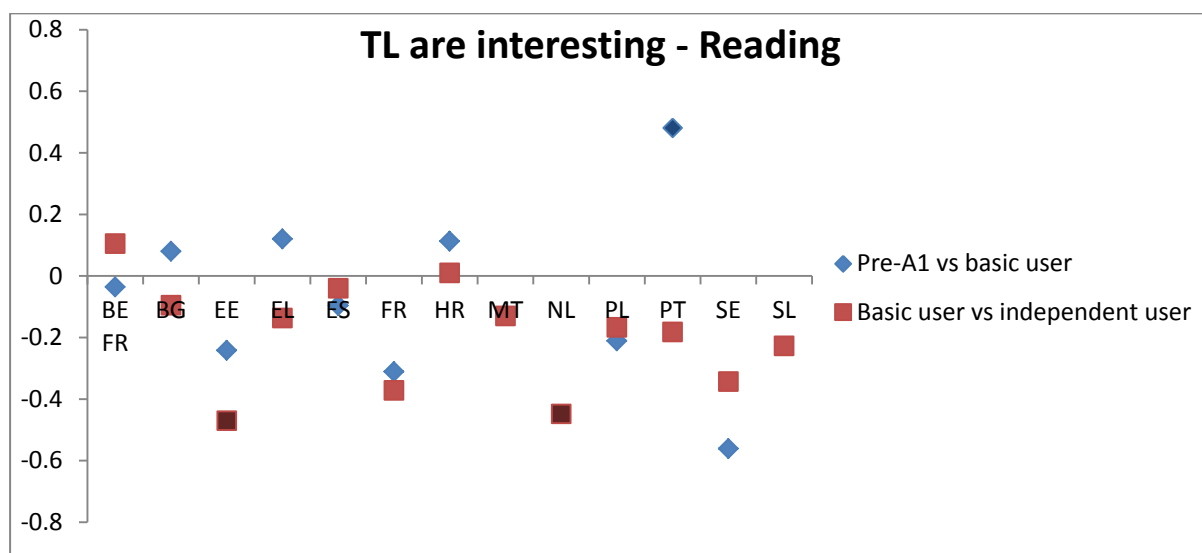
Figure 9: Multinomial regression coefficient of “TL is Good” in the 3 skills

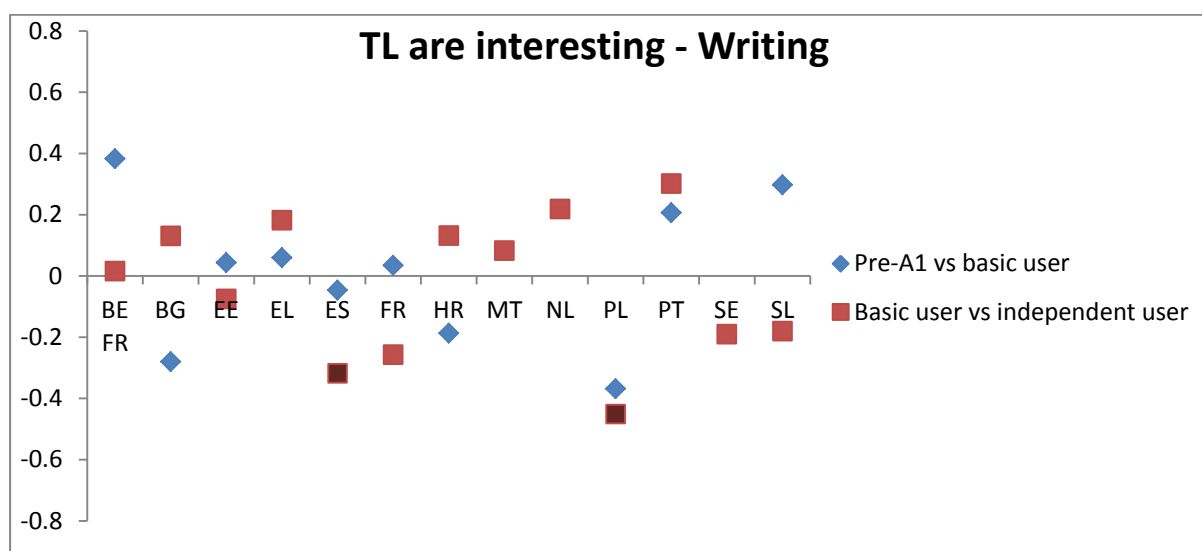
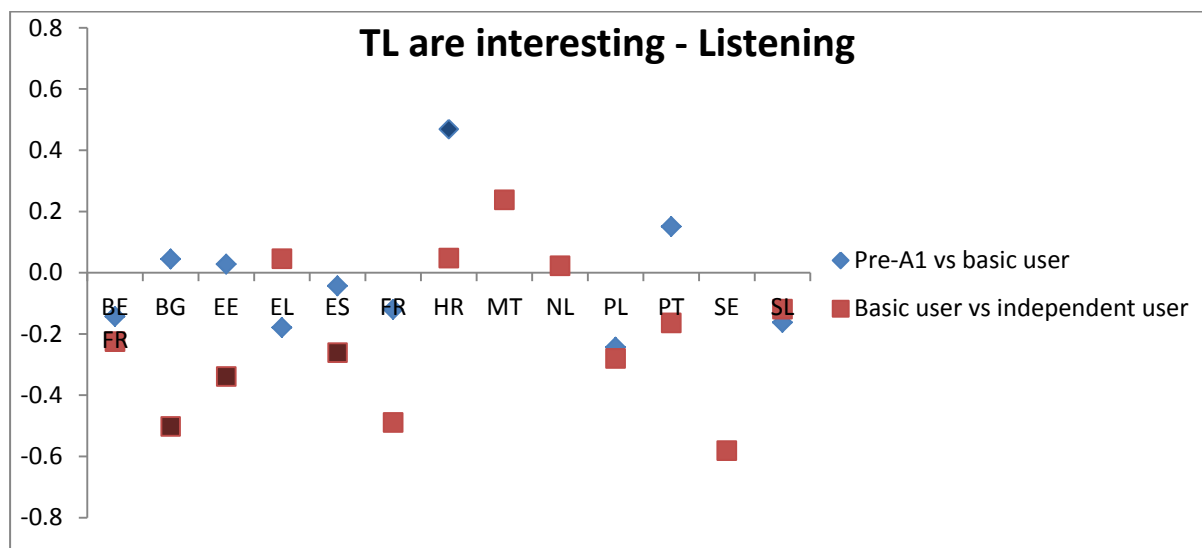




The perceived quality of lessons has a positive effect in students' foreign language proficiency level in most adjudicated entities for the 3 skills, but at times in the opposite direction. In addition, only a few countries present a statistically significant multinomial regression coefficient in the comparison between basic user students with independent user students.

Figure 10: Multinomial regression coefficient of "TL are Interesting" in the 3 skills





For reading and listening skills, the variable that refers to students' perception of the interest of their foreign language lessons has an unexpected negative effect in the attained foreign language CEFR level in most of the adjudicated entities. For writing, the majority of the countries present a positive coefficient for the model, but this is not statistically significant in any country.

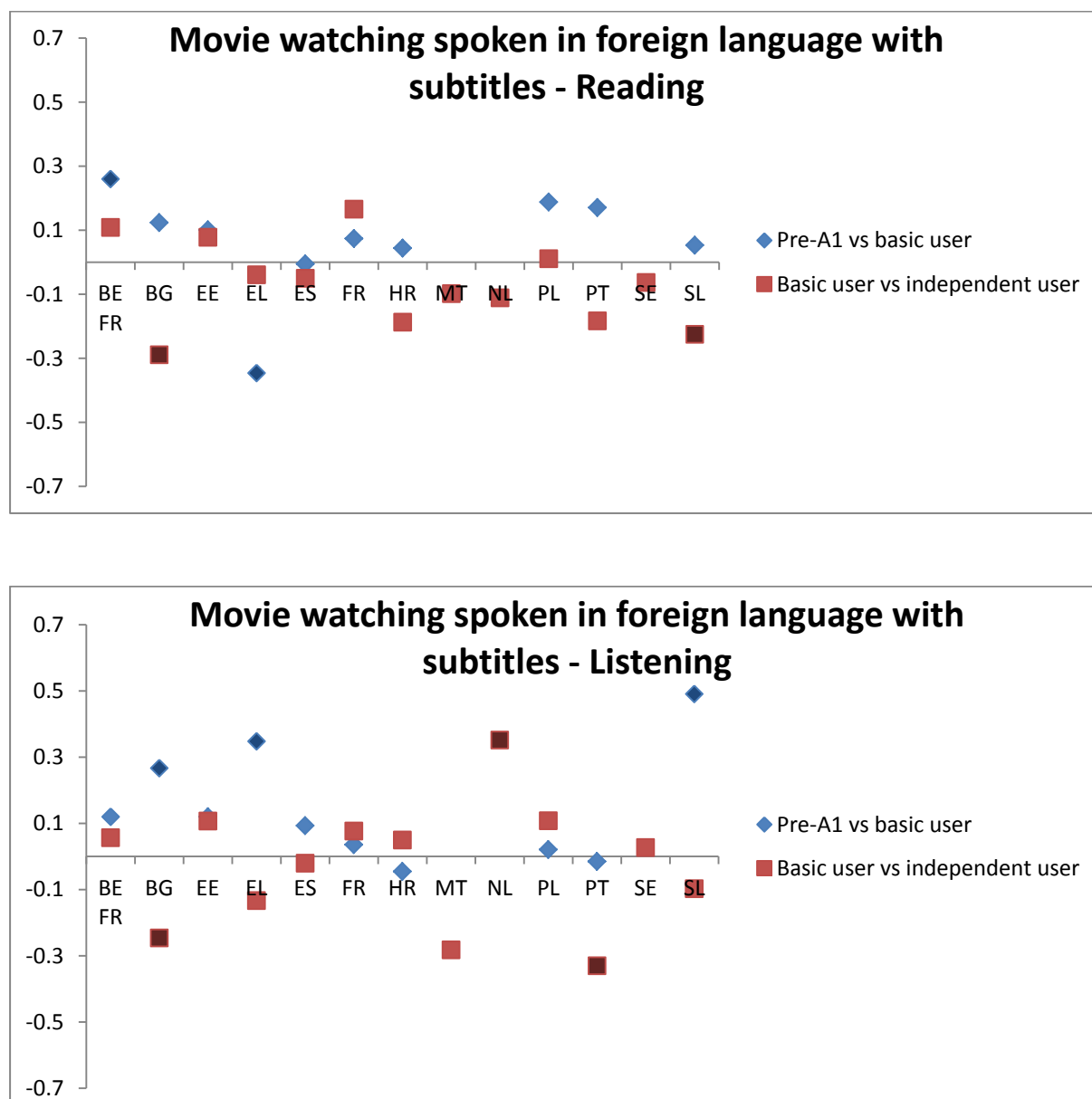
Summary of students' motivation cluster

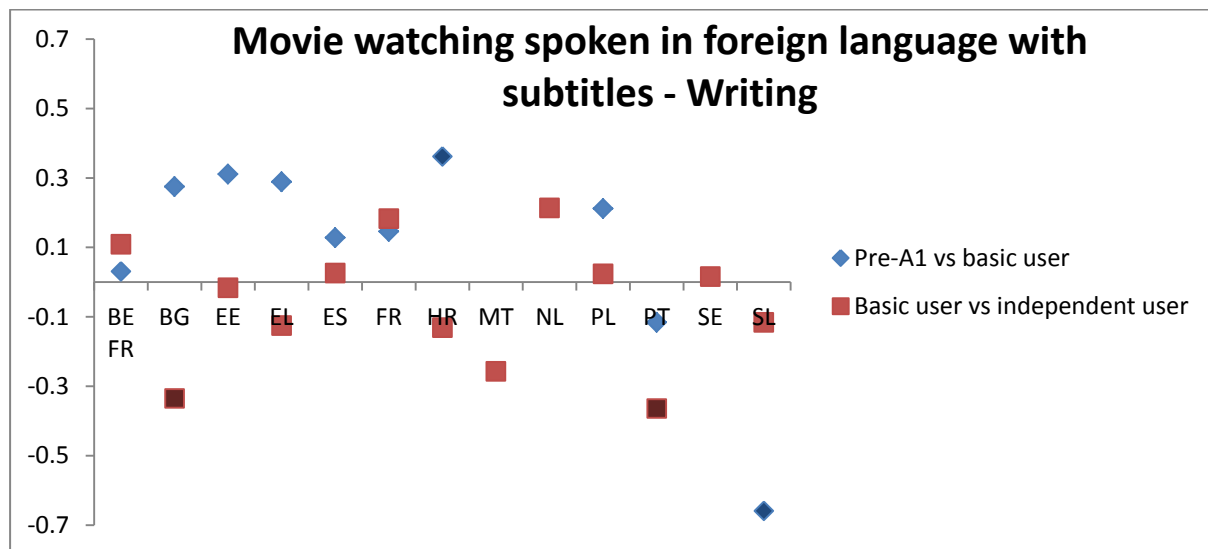
In general, students' motivation variables show that some effect is found for students' who consider that their foreign lessons are good - they will be more likely to attain higher CEFR levels. In contrast, Greece and Netherlands present a significant

negative effect of this variable on achievement in writing. Students' perception of the interest of their lessons has an unexpected negative effect in most countries.

External Factors: Contextual Conditions (Country, students and parents)

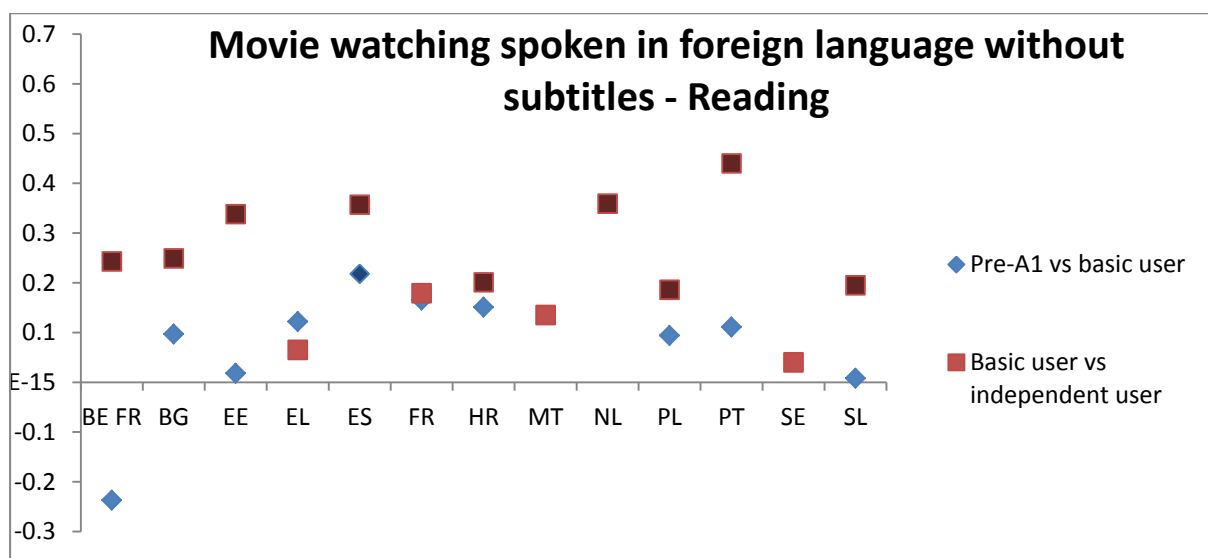
Figure 11: Multinomial regression coefficient of “Watching Movies Spoken in Foreign Language with Subtitles” in the 3 skills

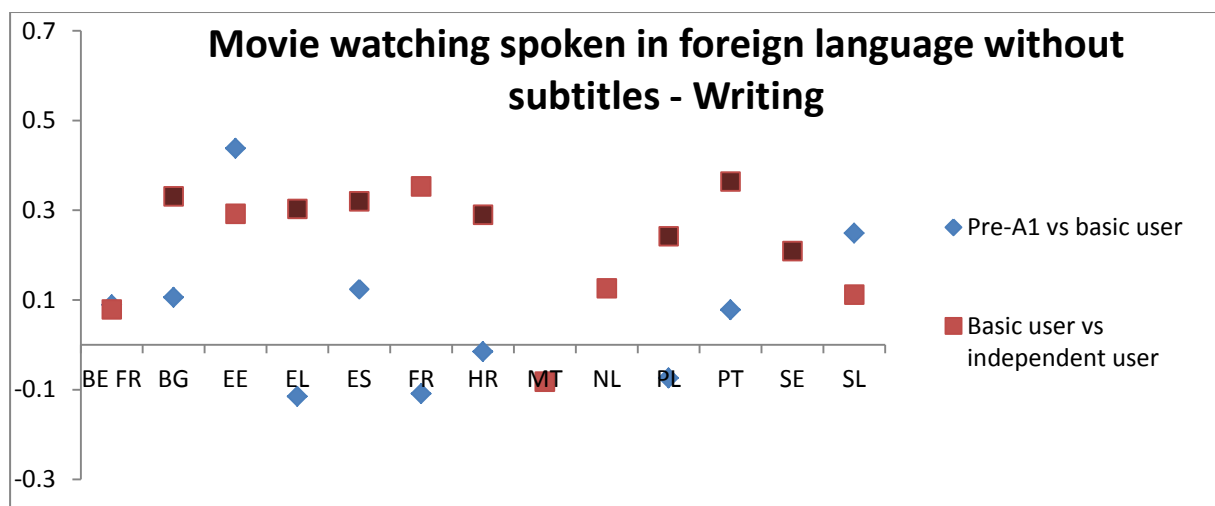
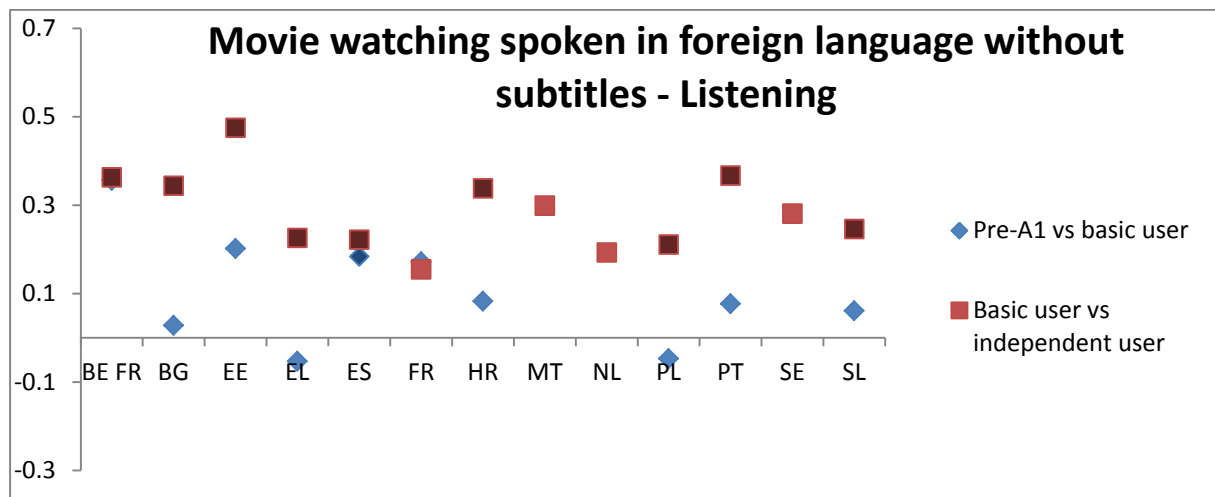




The analysis of the previous graphs indicates that for watching movies spoken in the foreign language with subtitles the comparison between pre-A1 and basic user impacts students' foreign language levels, a positive effect is found for almost all the adjudicated entities for the 3 skills. However, the results for the comparison between basic and independent user is at times in the opposite direction for reading, listening and writing.

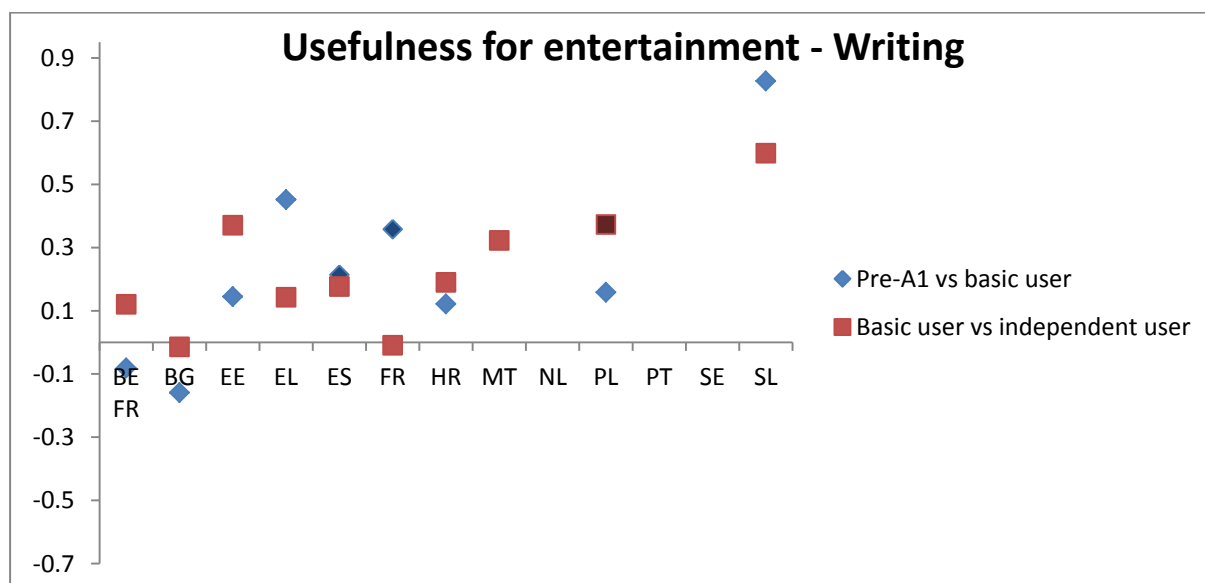
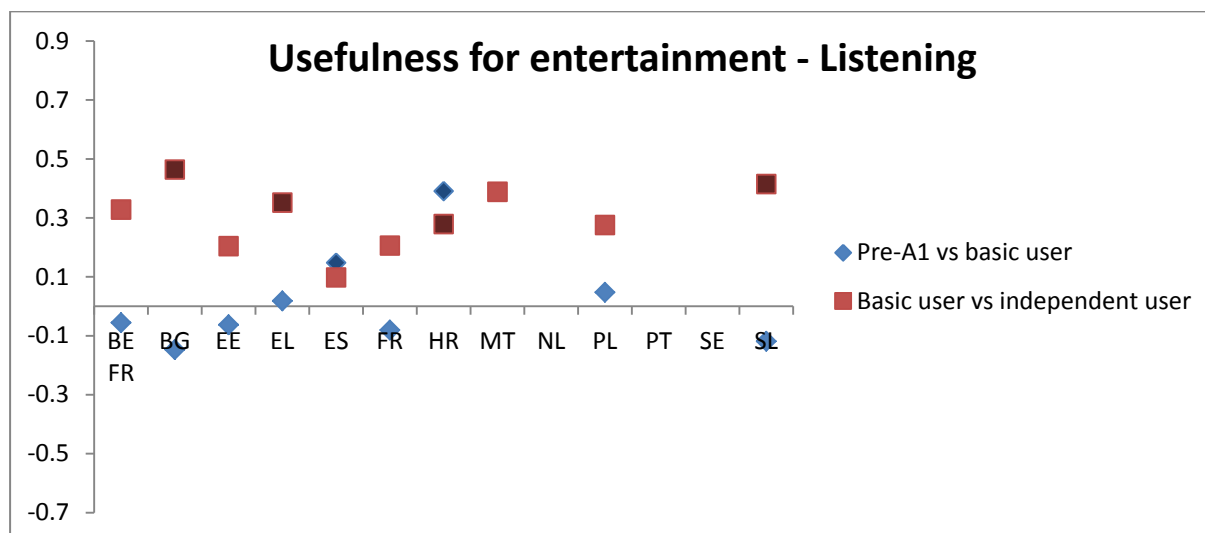
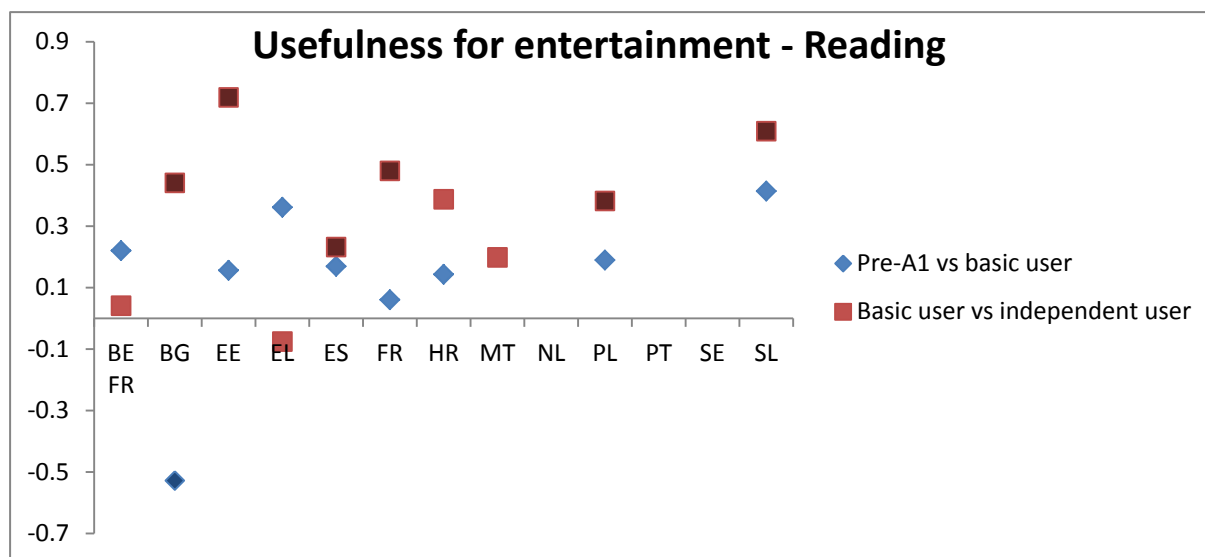
Figure 12: Multinomial regression coefficient of "Watching Movies Spoken in Foreign Language without Subtitles" in the 3 skills





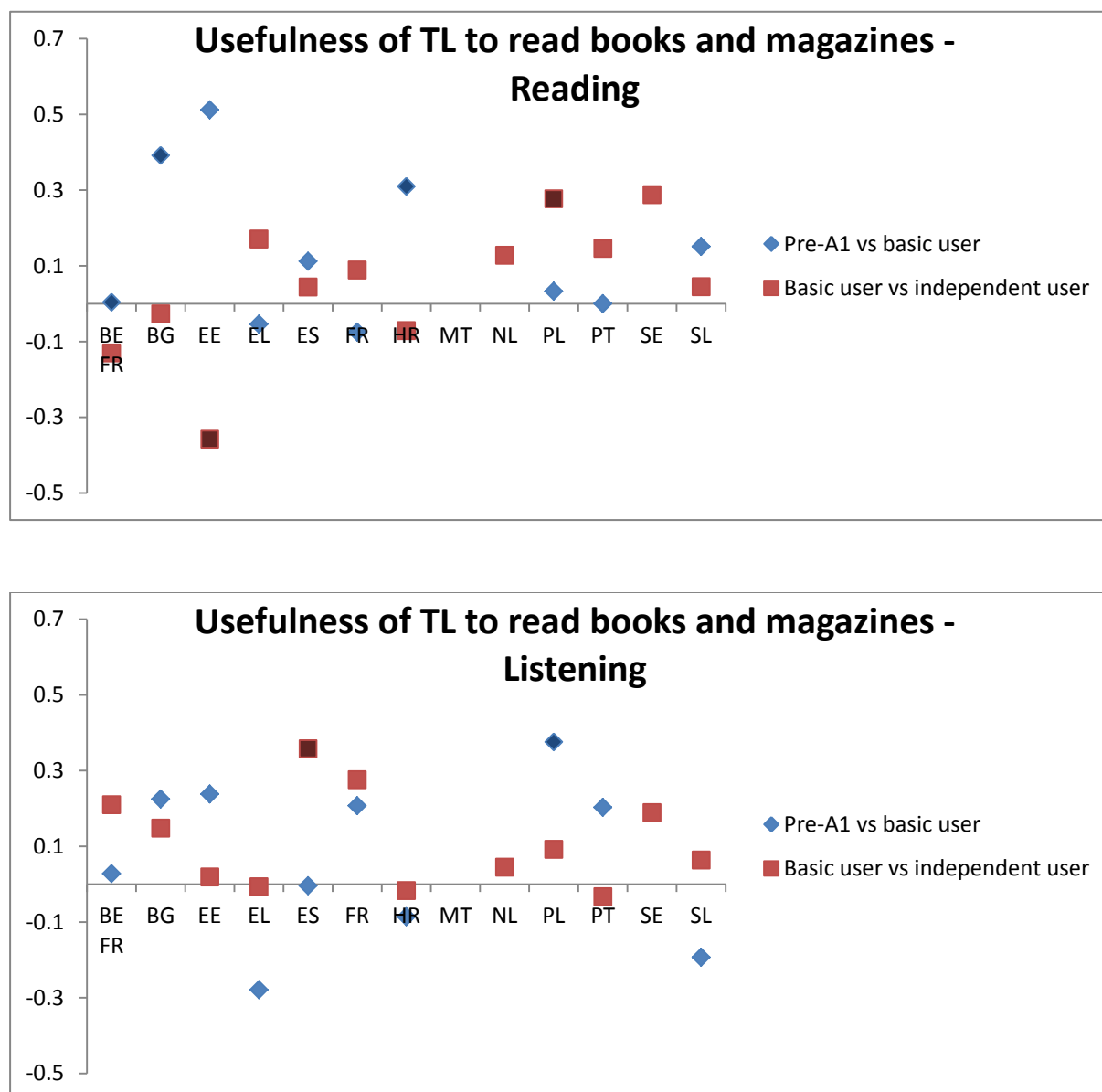
In what refers to watching movies spoken in foreign language without subtitles, we can verify that the students that watch movies without subtitles with more frequency are more likely to have higher CEFR levels rather than the students that attained lower English proficiency levels. Furthermore, the results are statistically significant for most of the adjudicated entities in the comparison between basic and independent users.

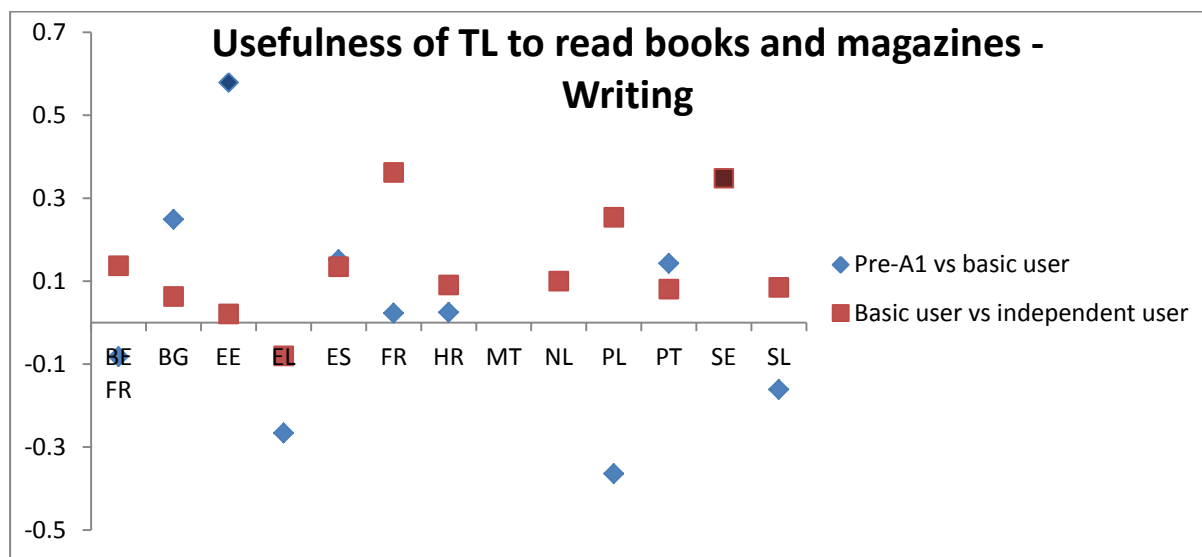
Figure 13: Multinomial regression coefficient of “Usefulness for Entertainment” in the 3 skills



The variable “language usefulness for entertainment” has positive effects in almost all the adjudicated entities in the comparison between basic and independent user students. Additionally, in some of them, statistically significant coefficients are found. A higher variability of results can be found in the comparison between students classified in pre-A1 level and basic user level, in which this variable can have contradictory outcomes.

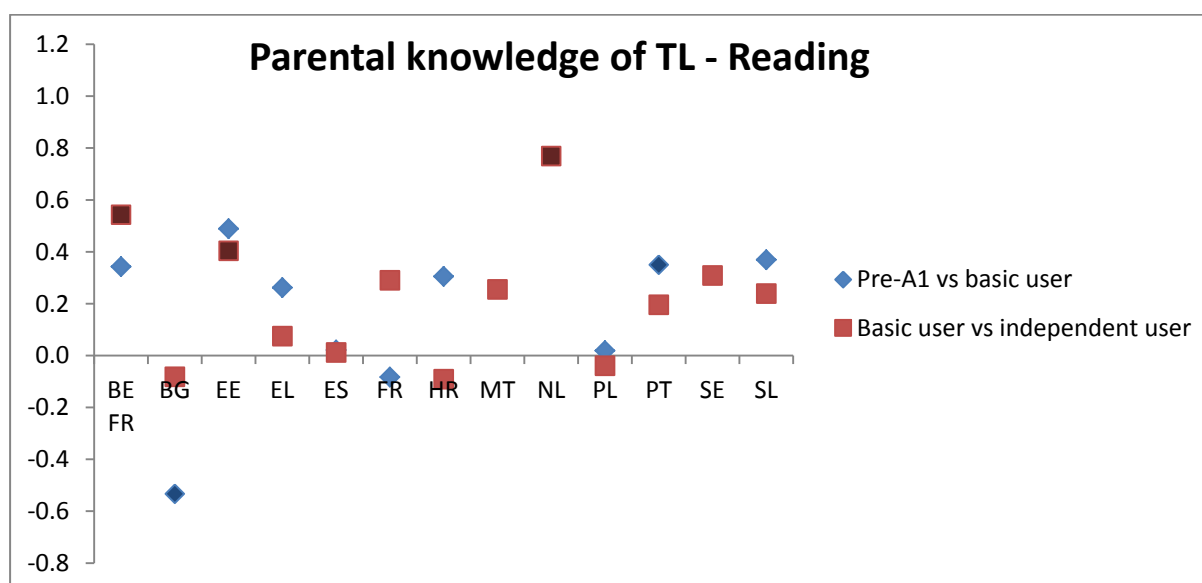
Figure 14: Multinomial regression coefficient of “Usefulness to Read Books and Magazines” in the 3 skills

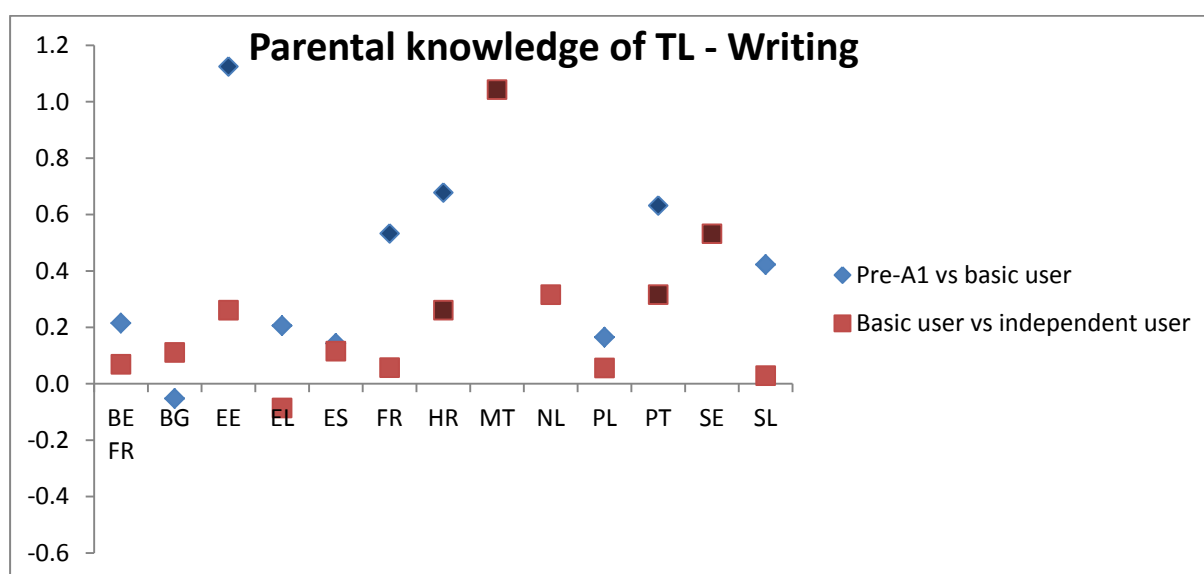
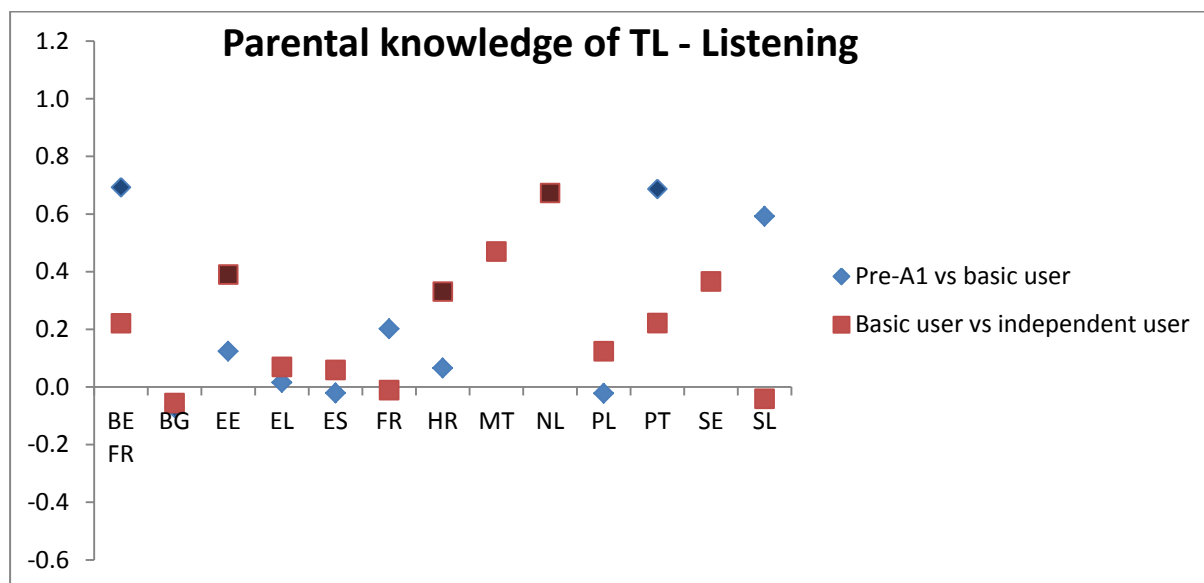




The variable that measures the usefulness of the foreign language to read books and magazines indicates that, for reading and listening, in most of the countries the students who consider that it is very useful to read books and magazines in English are more likely to attain higher levels of foreign language CEFR levels. However, this relationship is not significant for almost any of the adjudicated entities. In writing, for the comparison between pre-A1 and basic user students show a wide variation of results.

Figure 15: Multinomial regression coefficient of or “Parental Knowledge of TL” in the 3 skills





The analysis of the previous graphs indicates that parents' knowledge of foreign language, as perceived by students, has positive effects in students' foreign language proficiency, in most countries, in both comparisons (pre-A1 with basic user and basic user with Independent user) and in the 3 skills.

Summary of external factors cluster

In general, with respect to external factors, we can say that the most significant effect is watching movies spoken in the foreign language without subtitles for high achievers. Also, the reported usefulness of the TL for entertainment presents an impact in students' achievement. Parental knowledge of the TL language presents a positive

relationship with students' foreign language proficiency, for most of the adjudicated entities. The usefulness students attach to reading books and magazines has some effect in students' achievement. The exception is Estonia that presents a statistically significant negative relationship with students' performance for reading. Movie watching spoken in the foreign language with subtitles has little impact in the students' CEFR levels. A negative relationship between this variable and achievement is found for Bulgaria for the 3 skills, in Portugal for listening and writing and in Slovenia for reading.

Socio Economic status and gender analysis

Regarding the socio-economic status of the students in the model, for the comparison between the pre-A1 user and the basic user we find that there is a positive relation between CEFR levels and the socio-economic status (ISEI). The results indicate that in terms of parents' ISEI the relation is positive in at least one of the three skills in Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Slovenia. The results of the comparison between the basic user and the independent user show the same type of relation between ISEI and students achievement. For this comparison, almost all the adjudicated entities present differences that are statistically significant in the 3 skills for socio-economic status of one or both of the parents. The French Community of Belgium and Malta present ISEI' differences in writing and listening, respectively. Netherlands is the only adjudicated entity that does not present any statistically significant influence of ISEI of the parents on students' achievement.

With respect to gender, in the comparison between basic and independent user, the gender analysis indicates that it does not affect listening in any of the countries and it affects writing in the majority of the countries, favoring females. It affects reading in the Netherlands, Sweden and Greece - favoring males. In what refers to the comparison between students in pre-A1 level and basic user, the results show that in France, Netherlands, Poland and Portugal there are statistically significant gender differences in one of the skills (favoring females). In Croatia, in reading and listening skills, gender affects the results (favoring females).

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Findings indicate that there is wide variation across countries, but that it is worth considering the contribution of variables related to internal system-level policies and external learning conditions. Likewise, we find that some variables related to classroom methodology and student motivation also contribute to explain achievement. Nonetheless, there are several country-specific results that are most likely mirroring the contextual conditions of language learning.

Regarding the variables related with the system level policies, the findings of our analysis indicated that one of the most important school factors that impact students' attainment is that the earlier the onset of language learning the higher the attained language proficiency. The policy measures that have been initiated to encourage early language learning – the Barcelona agreement 1+2 are in accord with this finding. It is important to note that this principle of language learning – the earlier the better – stood the test of including other factors, as we tested in our analysis, that may contribute to promote language proficiency. That is, whereas the findings from SurveyLang investigated a biunivocal relationship – a relation that exclusively links two factors – between an early onset and language proficiency measured in a continuous scale we tested for other influences on the students' CEFR foreign language levels by including other variables in our model. The fact that onset still shows a large positive contribution to language achievement reinforces the importance of an early start in language learning, as many researchers have noted (Enever, 2011; Larson-Hall, 2008).

We found that, in general, there is a positive effect of a wide choice of languages and a small and, at times, counterproductive effect of the availability given to student to study many languages in foreign language achievement. This suggests that being able to study more languages than is common or required has less of an influence on achievement than being in a school context that offers a wide choice of languages.

The results indicate some effect of classroom size in foreign language learning in a few countries, but at times in the opposite direction – students in smaller classes have lower achievement. According to world-wide instructional positions, “the goals of a standards-based language program (i.e., the development of students' communicative competence), there must be opportunity for frequent and meaningful student-to-teacher and student-to-student interaction, monitored practice, and individual feedback

during instructional time. This warrants attention to a class size that remains as small as possible” (ACTFL, 2006). Our results, however, suggest that class size is not a determinant factor in language learning in the majority of countries.

In what refers to the methodology variables, we found that the perceived difficulty level of lessons has a positive impact in foreign language achievement in most countries. This variable serves as a proxy for students’ expectations of their performance with basis on their exposure to comprehensible input. Krashen’s (1985) model of language learning predicts that students will attain better proficiency when exposed to comprehensible input (perceived easiness of lessons) or to language discourse they can easily understand. Thus, the language performance can be optimized when situationally, in the classroom, students are well matched to language levels they can cope with and thus understand the lessons.

Content-and-Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), presents little impact in foreign language learning in the 3 skills and this finding is consistent with SurveyLang’s results. Research by Dalton-Puffer (2011, p. 185) shows that “CLIL is the way to transcend the perceived weaknesses of traditional foreign language teaching” by focusing on meaning more than on form. Moreover, in general, studies on CLIL show that when it is implemented in primary school language measures taken in middle school, four or five years after, are better for CLIL students than for students in regular foreign language classrooms. Specifically, research indicates that the language-learning outcomes of CLIL students in vocabulary and morphosyntactical (e.g. affixal inflection and sentence complexity) knowledge surpasses that of their non-CLIL peers (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Lo & Murphy, 2010). However, since the principals/schools responded to the question about the adoption of this methodology in a Yes/No dichotomous way, we have no way of knowing for how long the students had been exposed to this practice. As such, any definite conclusions about the effectiveness of CLIL should be avoided.

The teaching of grammar in the target language lessons has positive effects in some countries and students speaking the foreign language when working in groups has both positive and negative effects, depending on the countries. Foreign language research indicates that receptive and productive skills are affected by the amount of target language spoken in the classroom. However, it is not the amount of L1 (mother tongue) and L2 (foreign language) that is most important but rather the when and why the L1 and L2 are used (Nikolov & Djigunovic, 2011). Thus, the findings suggest that

teaching grammar may have positive effects that assist in the development of functional competence and that speaking the target language when working in groups may be positive or negative depending on the nature of the task. Importantly, research indicates that communicative language teaching can be implemented alongside methods that focus on teaching language forms and explicit grammar rules (Cummins & Davison, 2007; Westhoff, 2007). This balanced view of teaching and learning a language should be further investigated in future surveys.

One of the variables that measures student motivation indicates that the perceived quality of foreign language lessons – lessons are good - has a positive effect in achievement in most countries. Researchers have shown that motivation matters in L2 learning, in the sense that it provides the impetus to begin learning and the driving force to continue (Dörnyei (2005). For example, Sparks, Patton, Ganschow, Humbach and Javorsky (2009) found a positive correlation between L2 achievement and motivation. Also, students' perception of the interest of their lessons is linked to motivation and has an unexpected negative effect in most countries. This finding is surprising and we would expect exactly the opposite relation between this variable and students' foreign language proficiency. We can only interpret this finding as an indication that students' motivation is not aligned to actual performance. That is, even though students can show a high interest in learning a language this does not mean that they will attain better proficiency levels.

These variables – lessons are good and interesting – serve as proxies of students' motivation and they are also linked to methodology because students are making a judgment about the quality of their language lessons. If, on the other hand, they were simply answering whether learning English is easy for them or fun motivation alone would be addressed. Nevertheless, we cannot dissociate motivation from the judgment of the quality of lessons. If one is more motivated to learn the language one is also more likely to find the lessons interesting. The finding that these two variables do affect achievement, both positively and negatively, call for attention to future studies that benchmark progress in language learning. Specifically, perhaps questionnaire design should be improved and a link to actual classroom practices via matching students' responses to teachers' responses could provide some insights into the type of lessons implemented and their relation to students' proficiency.

In what concerns the variables that measure the factors external to the school that explain foreign language attainment, we find that the frequency with which students watch movies in the original version explains achievement. Different relationships were found for the comparison of students classified as pre-A1 and basic users and between students in the basic-user category and independent user level. Whereas the probability of moving from the lowest level to the basic level is more dependent on watching movies in the original version *with subtitles* in the mother tongue, but with a little impact in students' achievement, moving from the latter to the independent level is more dependent on watching movies in the original version *without subtitles*. The most significant effect was found for the relationship between this variable and students' achievement for the external factors cluster. The results are in accord with the ELLiE study (Enever, 2011) and with Kuppens's (2010) idea that watching non-subtitled movies requires a certain language proficiency. Thus, while students with higher language proficiency can profit more from watching non-subtitled movies, beginners can still gain in language proficiency by watching original, non-dubbed films with subtitles. This finding has implications for classroom practice because teachers can also make use of these resources in the classroom and choose one mode or the other according to the language proficiency level of the students, in particular to promote foreign-language acquisition (Van Lommel, Laenen & d'Ydewalle, 2006).

With respect to the other contextual conditions, results indicate that, in general, students' perception of the usefulness of language learning for entertainment influences positively foreign languages achievement. The usefulness students attach to reading books and magazines has some effects in students' foreign language performance. In addition, in most countries, parents' knowledge of the foreign language has a positive effect in students' achievement. Although this parental knowledge had been identified by SurveyLang as one factor that influences positively students' achievement, this result confirms that it still holds when other factors are considered.

Lastly, from the analysis of the socio-economic status of students (ISEI) we gather that only in one country no impact was found. Since in most countries, at least in one skill, the differences were significant we can conclude that ISEI influences language learning. Previously, in an analysis on the relationship between foreign language achievement and gender and socio-economic status, requested by DG EAC to CRELL, we

found that ISEI mean increases across CEFR levels (pre-A1 to B2). Additionally, our findings showed that for both parents, a B2 CEFR level corresponds to a higher ISEI mean when compared with lower CEFR levels. Also, in PISA 2009 for reading it was found that students with a more socio-economically advantaged background generally perform better (OECD, 2010). Since ISEI in the language survey was derived in the same way as in PISA – captures the attributes of occupations as a measure of parental education converted into income - our findings are in line with PISA results. In terms of gender, the most relevant finding is that girls perform better than boys in writing. This finding warrants further evidence but is in line with second language learning studies suggesting that women are better at organizing, planning, and revising their work (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daley, 2000). Writing effectively for communication purposes requires this type of strategic and conscious approach to learning.

Finally, a comprehensive view of our analysis, reveals that the comparison between the pre-A1 level and the basic user level yields a small number of significant effects and that, on the contrary, a greater number of significant effects can be found in the comparison between basic users and independent users. This is most likely the case because a minimum amount of language knowledge is necessary for the impact of language-related factors to be thoroughly assessed. In this sense, this report corroborates the view that language competences need to be significantly improved (European Commission, 2012) and that solutions must be sought to bring the many students that are at the pre-A1 level to a better knowledge of their first foreign language.

How this secondary analysis extends the results of SurveyLang's ESLC final report

This multivariate analysis of the ESLC data provides in-depth information on the most important variables that explain foreign language learning, and identifies clearly the effect of each variable when other variables are considered. Some of our results are in accord with the findings of the ESLC survey, which was based on a univariate analysis of a continuum scale of foreign language proficiency (European Commission, 2012).

First, we find that the earlier the onset of language learning the higher the attained language proficiency. The same was reported by SurveyLang in their final report "*The results of the ESLC show that an earlier onset is related to higher proficiency in the foreign language tested...*" (European Commission, 2012, p. 77). Second, our

findings related to the number of languages offered by the schools show that a wide choice of languages available to study has a small positive effect in some countries. The results of the ESLC show that a larger number of foreign languages is related to higher proficiency in the foreign language tested. Thus, although the same trend was found for this variable in the two analyses, we can conclude that when other factors are included to explain foreign language proficiency, this variable doesn't have such a large impact. In other words, other factors contribute to explain foreign language learning. Third, in much the same way as SurveyLang, we found that Content-Integrated-language learning (CLIL) has little impact on language proficiency. However, as previously discussed, this survey does not include the amount of information necessary to adequately assess the advantages or disadvantages of adopting the CLIL methodology.

In terms of other methodology-related conditions that were not analyzed by SurveyLang in the final report, we found that the perceived difficulty of lessons has an impact on language proficiency in most adjudicated entities. That is, the more students find their lessons easy the better they perform. This suggests that it is important to ensure a good match between students' language level and the level of their lessons. In addition, we found that it is worth considering the frequency of teaching grammar and the time students spend speaking the foreign language while doing group work. The results indicate that these two variables can either contribute negatively or positively to language learning, depending on the country. Unlike Surveylang, we included variables related to students' motivation and the results show that students' perception of the quality of their lessons positively impacts achievement, whereas the opposite is true for their perception of the interest of their lessons. As we already discussed in this report, this is a surprising finding and we make suggestions for ways to address this in future survey rounds.

With relation to factors external to the school that affect achievement, our analysis offers confirming and additional evidence that media exposure in the target language strongly influences language proficiency. Specifically, we identify language-friendly practices – watching movies in the original version with and without subtitles – as factors that affect learning positively. Whereas Surveylang identified the impact of media exposure using general information from the National Questionnaire, we used information from the Students' Questionnaire and found this very useful to pinpoint exactly what type of exposure affects achievement. Our secondary analysis indicates that

parents' knowledge of the foreign language has a positive effect in students' achievement. This positive relation between proficiency in the tested language and the students' perception of their parents' knowledge was also identified by SurveyLang as one factor that influences positively students' achievement.

Lastly, while SurveyLang measured the overall effect of students' perception of the usefulness of the target language, we investigated the specific influence of usefulness for entertainment and usefulness to read books and magazines. We found that usefulness for entertainment is the variable that impacts positively students' achievement the most. Instrumental motivation – reading books and magazines in the target language - is also influential in terms of its positive impact on language achievement but to a lesser extent.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These findings have important policy implications as they show which factors can be addressed by policy measures to improve students' foreign language performance. For example, measures to encourage language learning from an early age (onset of language education) can be implemented by national governments to reduce the wide discrepancies found between the adjudicated entities. In addition, this analysis indicates that factors related to classroom methodology and students' motivation should be addressed and further explored. Similarly, policy implications can be derived from the finding that specific practices linked to media exposure outside of school affect learning. Creating a language-friendly environment can include policies that make exposure to films in the target language more widespread, both in societies at large and in the classroom. Finally, this secondary analysis raises equity issues since it indicates that only in one country the socio-economic status of families has no impact on language learning in the three skills tested.

Finally, as Byrnes (2007) states, "Language education policies inherently respond to larger socio-cultural trends as they are perceived at a particular time and place by a policy-making body" (p. 642). This report confirms that school systems that offer a wide choice of languages tend to achieve better results in language learning. This suggests that a plurilingual cultural environment is more conducive to language learning. However, the fact that English is the most widely taught first foreign language and the one in which students reach higher levels of achievement also reflects a particular cultural trend. Thus, it seems appropriate for the Commission, through the open method of coordination, to use research to inform common policies and to take into account the current larger trends that frame language education policies.

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Abstract

In this report we used the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) in order to identify factors specific factors to language learning that affect secondary school students' proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). We considered variables related to the school in terms of system level policies, variables related to students' perception of the nature and quality of their lessons, the usefulness they attach to learning the target language and their exposure to it out of school. We used a multinomial regression model to compare students in the Pre-A1 level with the Basic User level (combination of CEFR levels A1 and A2), and the latter with the Independent User level (which includes levels B1 and B2). We ran the analysis for 13 adjudicated entities that participated in the ESLC and have English as their first foreign language. We found that there is wide variation across countries, but that it is worth considering the contribution of variables related to internal system-level policies and external learning conditions. Likewise, we verified that some variables related to classroom methodology and student motivation also contribute to explain achievement. Results indicate that, in general, students' perceived difficulty level of lessons, students' perception of the usefulness of language learning for entertainment and the frequency with which they watch movies in the original version explains achievement. In addition, in most countries, parents' knowledge of the foreign language has a positive effect in students' achievement. Among the most important school factors that impact students' attainment, we found that the earlier the onset of language learning the higher the attained language proficiency.

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