

Adult Access to English as a Foreign Language Education:  
A Comparative Exploration of Policy and Research within the European Context

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### **Abstract**

The following is an exploratory comparative study of the state of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Europe. Drawing on an existing body of literature and various Reports from the European Commission and UNESCO among others, the paper will explore Where and how is Research, Policy, and Practice intersecting and what is the effect on access. Key findings include a lack of specific research or data on ALE for EFL in particular and broad variances between the regions of Europe, such as Nordic, Southern, and Eastern in both markers. After a comparative analysis of the aforementioned regions, the paper concludes with recommendations for future research.

**KEYWORDS:** *Adult Learning and Education; English as a Foreign Language; English as Lingua Franca; Europe; European Union*

## Part I

### Introduction and Background

This paper will focus on the crux of two major, multi-generational, global trends which have intersected more and more in recent decades: the spread of English as a lingua franca (ELF), and the ever-increasing global focus on Adult Learning and Education (ALE) by policymakers and researchers at national and supra-national levels (Andriescu *et al*, 2019; European Commission, n.d.; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021; ICF International, 2015; UNESCO, 2017, 2021, 2022a,b). This phenomenon is perhaps best exemplified, or at least best understood, in the European context, which in the last 40-odd years has experienced both trends at an accelerated pace, partly driven by the emergence of supra-national organizations such as the European Union (EU), and partly by the rapid economic changes experienced across the relatively small continent since the dissolution of the Soviet Union (USSR) and the subsequent redirection of former Eastern Bloc states towards western-style, capitalist governance and economy.

Europe today is a collection of states which are highly diversified in culture, language, economy, and history. However, they are unified by their memberships and participation in various supra-national organizations as the EU, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Economic Union (EEA), the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, and the World Trade Association (WTA). It is worth noting that these organizations rely heavily on English as a common language in their activities and their reports, that they exert significant influence on national policy direction in their member or participatory states, and that all have emphasized education as one of the key priorities of development. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the European Commission (EC) regularly publish reports and statistics on adult

learning, including participation rates and barriers across countries, country level policies targeting adult learning, provision and access, equity and inclusion, and statistical data on skills (European Commission, n.d.; ICF International, 2015; UNESCO, 2017, 2022a, 2022b).

Unsurprisingly, academic research into the field of ALE has proliferated alongside these organizations. The relationship between the academic world and the policy and governance worlds is irrefutable, if somewhat unclear and difficult to define. What can be said at the simplest level is that policy, funding, and research tend to move in the same direction.

There are limitations in the field when it comes specifically to the question of ELF as a part of ALE. English skills are not often differentiated in the data or the literature, and may be grouped into literacy, ICT, employability, or some other category of skill. Similarly, participation, provision, access, and equity in English as a foreign language (EFL) education for adults is often gathered into the whole of ALE. However, inferences can be made from available data and some conclusions will undoubtedly be drawn. The goal of this paper therefore is twofold: 1) to explore the broad state of Adult Learning and Education of English as a Foreign Language (ALEEFL) in the European context, and 2) compare the differences thereof between broad geopolitical regions of Europe. The paper will draw on the existing literature as much as possible however, given the apparent lack of such specific research, information from various agencies such as UNESCO or the EC will feature heavily in the analysis.

The paper will be organized broadly into three parts:

- Brief literature review to explore existing research and trends and to situate this work within the existing body of knowledge.

- Analysis of current developments, largely based on reports from the afore-mentioned agencies, to paint as clear a picture as possible of the on-the-ground reality and conduct a comparative analysis.
- Discussion of any salient findings and concluding remarks.

## **Background Literature Review**

Hager (2021) describes the “Second Wave” of research interest in ALE as originating in the 1990’s with the renewed enthusiasm by UNESCO, OECD, and the EC among others toward the emergent key term of “Lifelong Learning” as a policy instrument. This renewed interest was largely driven by globalization, technological advancement, and the neoliberal economics that dominated that period. Lifelong Learning became the answer for western economies that were facing increased competition and an accelerated pace of technological change (Hager, 2021). One other key characteristic of this second wave was the shift away from the previously prominent term, Lifelong Education, signifying a shift in focus from the provision of education to the fostering of learning and therefore an increased emphasis on the learner (Hager, 2021).

Disagreements within the research community itself often revolve around what should or shouldn’t be considered as part of learning, with some definitions limited to formal schooling while others include informal, non-formal, and/or vocational education and training (Hager, 2021). Recently there has been an observable effort to include and recognize all kinds of learning in the policy and literature, culminating in the emergent concepts of the Learning Society and Knowledge Economy (Andriescu *et al.*, 2019; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018; David & Foray, 2003; EBRD, 2019; Hager, 2021). Another criticism of the field is that its failure to move beyond a critical approach has prevented it from increased relevance for not only policy but also practice (Rose, 2011, as cited in Rubenson & Elfert, 2019, p. 18).

A recurrent theme throughout the literature on Lifelong Learning is the concept of education (however defined) as a public good (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018). This can be understood as an argument in favor of the benefits of education as going far beyond the individual, and also leads to arguments for public funding. However, as Boyadjiev & Ilieva-Trichkova (2018) point out, the adult education sector is the most privatized of all education sectors with private investment into ALE exceeding public investment into virtually all countries. Furthermore, the extent to which ALE is realized as a public good varies widely among the countries of Europe, with the Nordic countries scoring highest and Eastern and Southern countries scoring lowest (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018). This difference will be explored further in the following section.

There is little in the way of research into how this disparity came to be, particularly in the post-communist European East. Wetzl (2010) provides some insight into the development of ICT and English language skills in post-communist Romania. This process was largely driven by political forces since both ICT and English Language skills were perceived as the way for the country to reach its goal of joining NATO and the EU and as the pathway to opportunity for individuals. However, Wetzl points out that in their zeal they overlooked equality of access, thereby deepening the divide between social classes. It is also worth noting that today Romania consistently ranks as having the lowest ALE scores (Andriescu *et al.*, 2019; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018; ICF International, 2015; UNESCO, 2017). Interestingly, Romania lags behind the Nordic states in English proficiency as well but is at the front of the Eastern European pack which as a whole is somewhere in the middle with the European South taking the last place (Education First Ltd., 2021).

Participation rates are widely regarded as a key indicator of the health of ALE within a particular country or demographic. Boeren (2017) gives us a layered perspective into Lifelong Learning participation rates, conceptualized as the micro- (individual), meso- (providers), and macro- (state policies) levels. At the level of the individual, participation is determined by factors such as motivation, confidence, and attitudes to learning, but is also largely impacted by historical participation or success in education which is usually also related to socio-economic background. Put simply, the better one's position in life, the more education one has successfully completed, the more likely one is to participate in education, leading to improved position in life and an intractable cycle of inequality.

A similar pattern emerges at the meso-level, where provision of lifelong learning can be impeded by cost, geographic accessibility, market forces, and by type of employment. Access is greater in urban areas, in larger and more knowledge-intensive companies, and for skills which are highly marketable (Ahlgren & Engel, 2011; Andriescu *et al.*, 2019; Boeren, 2017). All of which are typically the domain of individuals that already have a relatively high level of educational attainment and a strong socio-economic background. Ahlgren & Engel (2011), through their case study of 12 Small and Medium Enterprises (SME's) in England and Scotland, concluded that although employers have an important role in driving and funding lifelong learning opportunities, they usually restrict those opportunities to job related training. They argue that this narrow view limits workforce skill development and undermines the broader goals of Lifelong Learning Policy. Interestingly, this stands in contrast to Rubenson & Desjardins' (2009) findings that although employers in Nordic countries typically spend very little on ALE for low-skilled workers, it is so well-provisioned at a state level that individuals have abundant opportunities for training and development that do not necessarily fit their employers' business needs.

At the macro-level participation is strongest in Nordic and Western countries, which also have stronger and more sophisticated knowledge economies, higher income per capita, and higher standards of living, and is weakest in Southern and Eastern European Countries (Boeren, 2017; EBRD, 2019; UNDP & MBRF, 2021). The correlation is clear at all three levels, but causation is more difficult to determine in what is essentially a chicken-and-egg scenario. What is apparent is that the following indicators largely move together:

- knowledge-based economies,
- income and standard of living,
- investment into ALE (public and private),
- provision, accessibility, and affordability of ALE, and
- participation in ALE.

Boeren's analysis echoes the work of Rubenson & Desjardins, who in 2009 conceptualized the problem of ALE participation and barriers to participation through a Bounded Agency Model, whereas the individual's choice to participate in ALE was determined in part by structural factors. In their analysis of Nordic states, they determined that perceived barriers were not significantly different than those in non-Nordic states. The relative success of the Nordic states in increasing participation was therefore perceived to be a function of how well the structures of the society, including policy and labour market, were designed to assist individuals in overcoming those barriers. They identified a labour market based on high-skill equilibrium, and policy measures targeting disadvantaged individuals and groups as highly effective at increasing participation rates (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009).

Roosmaa & Saar (2017) offer us more insight into perceived barriers for the subsegment of adults who neither participate nor intend to participate in ALE across 19 European countries. In

line with much of the other literature, Nordic countries demonstrate the least structural and institutional impediments to participation, while dispositional barriers were most frequently perceived in post-communist and Southern countries (Roosmaa & Saar, 2017).

## **Part II**

### **Current Developments**

One of the consequences of this field being driven by big organizations is that it tends to favour big data, especially in policymaking. Funding for research tends to be contingent on policy relevance, especially within the EU, and although a certain autonomy does exist in the literature, the resulting disconnect between the policy realm and research community threatens the field with continued marginalization (Rubenson & Elfert, 2019). Regardless of its challenges, the field continues to proliferate with more and more cross-national comparative studies, favoured by EU funding schemes, as well as national studies from individual member states (Fejes & Nylander, 2019). Much of the research being done in recent years aims to produce comparative data, reflecting the governance models of the EU and its member states, wherein big data and big policy are directive in nature with national actors exercising their autonomy in how or if they implement policy directives based on international data (Fejes & Nylander, 2019).

The most recent Eurydice Report on Adult Education and Training in Europe (2021), reveals that there is still much variance in policy directives between the different regions of Europe. Northern and western countries report low levels of low qualified adults and high rates of ALE participation, while most eastern countries also report low levels of low qualified adults but also low levels of participation in ALE. Southern countries report high levels of low qualified adults and low levels of participation. It is also interesting to note that the report finds that 80% of non-

participating adults in Europe have no wish to participate, implying that policies that focus primarily on access may not be as effective as ones which include motivational outreach. These findings echo those made in the European Commission's 2019 report on Adult Learning Policy and Provision, which found significant differences in participation rates between Member States (high of 30.4% in Switzerland and low of 1.1% in Romania) as well as between low and high qualified adults (18.6% in tertiary-educated and 4.3% in those with basic skills) (Andriescu *et al.*, 2019).

There continues to be a lack of differentiation for ALEEFLL both in the research community and the policy realm. This is problematic for two reasons; firstly, it ignores the fundamental nature of ELF to individuals' access to learning and education opportunities. Given the importance and widespread use of English, it is natural that availability of education, particularly for adults outside of formal schooling, is comparatively high in comparison to less widespread native languages. This is especially true considering the technological advancements which have effectively made geographic borders virtually inconsequential. This inequity between English and native language opportunities for ALE is its own problem, but that is not the focus of this paper. The salient point is that if the goal is to increase access and participation rates to ALE, then increasing English skills should be a priority since it is much faster and simpler to focus on one skill which in turn provides access to an existing wealth of ALE opportunities, then to replicate those same opportunities in a myriad of languages and countries. Secondly, it betrays an Anglo-centric worldview which appears to assume that English literacy and general education go hand-in-hand. While this may be observationally true for the western, urban elites, it is not necessarily true in other areas of even the European continent, and it does a dis-service to sub-segments of the population that do not fit

this stereotype by essentially leaving them out of the conversation. This lack of specificity in the literature makes it difficult to properly assess the state of ALEEFL.

To begin our comparative analysis, it's useful to look at English proficiency across the geographical regions in Europe. According to the 2021 English Proficiency Index (EPI) published by Education First, the highest scores are to be found in the Nordic and Germanic countries, while the Southern countries score lowest with the notable exceptions of Portugal and Croatia whose scores are in the highest band. Most Central and Eastern States are in the middle band, including the Baltic states and the post-communist states in the EU. There is some correlation between ALE rankings and the EPI, however the two do not precisely follow each other. A notable Example is Romania, which scores dead last in virtually all rankings of ALE (Andriescu *et al.*, 2019; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018; ICF International, 2015; UNESCO, 2017) yet has a relatively high EPI of 598, scoring just two points below the first band. Serbia, being the only Eastern country to best Romania in the EPI with 599 points, also tends to rank low on ALE indexes. In contrast, Spain and Italy both score above the eastern countries in provision and participation in ALE yet lower in EPI (540 and 535 respectively) (Education First Ltd., 2021). An interesting possibility is that the more privileged members of society leverage their relatively higher skills to pursue employment and therefore also ALE opportunities in other countries; a common phenomenon in former Eastern Bloc states, often referred to as brain drain. Given that the most underprivileged segments of the population which are left behind are also the least likely to engage in ALE, this may partly explain the low ALE participation level in the country as well as the region. It is also conceivable that nationals of Southern Countries are less likely to move abroad which could partly explain why their EPIs are lower. Although beyond the scope of this paper, this is an interesting area of possible future study.

## Part III

### Discussion

Few concrete conclusions can be drawn from this analysis except that Adult Learning and Education for English as a Foreign Language is not clearly understood or differentiated at the level of policy or research. Largely the trends in Europe are as follows:

Nordic countries tend to have the best results in ALE, largely thanks to their policy framework which more successfully enables individuals to overcome their barriers, targeted policies towards low-qualified adults, efforts to increase access and ensure equity, and high social commitment to ALE in general. Their policy frameworks are well aligned at the macro- and meso-levels and they enjoy strong funding into ALE from both state and non-state providers, consistently showing the highest levels of employer-sponsored training. At the micro-level of the individual, access and equity are relatively high and, thanks to a strong social commitment, so is motivation. Barriers to ALE are perceived with equal frequency as in other regions, however the targeted policy framework is designed to help individuals overcome their barriers and it does this more successfully than in other regions (Andriescu *et al.*, 2019; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018; ICF International, 2015; Roosmaa & Saar, 2017; UNESCO, 2017). These countries, unsurprisingly, also tend to be amongst the highest scorers in English Proficiency (Education First Ltd., 2021), yet little is known about the relationship between these two variables.

Southern countries are an interesting mix of results, generally showing moderate results in ALE measures, with somewhat low participation rates and poor scores in access, equity, affordability, and especially disposition. Educational attainment is quite low with the Southern countries having among the highest rates of adults who have not completed a basic level of education (upper-secondary). ALE policies, where they exist, are not always targeted, and rarely

monitored for effectiveness, and there is a lack of sufficient funding (Andriescu *et al.*, 2019; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018; ICF International, 2015; Roosmaa & Saar, 2017; UNESCO, 2017). Unsurprisingly, these countries tend to score the worst on the EPI (Education First Ltd., 2021).

The Eastern European countries present an interesting puzzle. The population is generally more educated than in the south, with the rates of adults having not completed basic education being generally low and, in some cases, comparable to the Nordic countries. Yet their levels of participation in ALE are poor or invisible, generally bringing up the rear in any cross-country EU comparison. Despite efforts of the policy actors at the macro-level, the frameworks in these countries do not appear effective and continue to be somewhat fragmented. Policies are not targeted and equal access amongst different groups is far from being a reality. Funding from both state and non-state actors is also generally low, and employer-sponsored training is much less frequent in the region, although not non-existent as Czechia and Slovakia show average or higher levels of employer-sponsored training (Andriescu *et al.*, 2019; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018; ICF International, 2015; UNESCO, 2017). The biggest barrier to participation at the micro-level in this region, similarly to the Southern region, appears to be dispositional (Roosmaa & Saar, 2017). Yet for having the lowest apparent scores for ALE, they have relatively high scores for English Proficiency (Education First Ltd., 2021). The most notable example of this disparity is Romania, whose EPI score is one of the best in the region, comparable to Western or even to Nordic countries, yet whose ALE sector is invisible and scores at the absolute bottom in every ranking that has been looked at for this paper.

## Conclusion

The key findings of this exploratory comparative study stand as follows:

1. The research field of Adult Learning and Education in Europe is fairly robust (Fejes & Nylander, 2019) yet lacks an understanding of English as a Foreign Language education or its outcomes.
2. There are significant variations in the realization of ALE between the different regions of Europe and a clear pattern of ranking emerges, with Nordic countries leading, followed by Western, then Southern, and finally Eastern Countries bringing up the rear (Andriescu *et al.*, 2019). Although these trends are not absolute and exceptions do exist, they are nevertheless persistent.
3. There is also significant variation in English proficiency between these regions, with Nordic countries once again leading, but this time closely followed by both Western and Eastern countries, and Southern bringing up the rear (Education First Ltd., 2021).
4. Although some correlation exists between the extent to which ALE is successfully realized and the proficiency of English, there are strong counter indicators, particularly in the Eastern region. The relationship between these two variables remains largely unexplained. It is conceivable that one affects the other, but it is unclear which way, and it is equally conceivable that they are both dependent on other factors not captured in the current data.

The topic of Adult Learning and Education will continue to increase in prominence and importance in the European context as it becomes more and more central to the developmental goals of the region (UNESCO, 2022a). For example, in line with the headline target of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, 60% of all adults should be participating in training every year by 2030 (European Commission, n.d.). There are many stakeholders in the ALE

research community and many more in the policy community which drive this field with Big Data (Hager, 2021). One apparent drawback of this approach, despite its ability to succinctly capture a vast and complex phenomenon, is that this data is unclear and incomplete at higher resolution levels of analysis, especially when it comes to such a specific question as Adult Learning and Education of English as a Foreign Language. The usage of English as a Lingua Franca will also continue and in the coming decades English proficiency is likely to be an important factor in the advancement of both individuals and nation states in Europe. Brexit, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) on 31 January 2020, is not likely to have a negative impact on this trend, as the Republic of Ireland remains a committed member of the EU and English is one of the two official languages of NATO, as well as of many other supra-national organisations.

This paper, while limited in its exploratory nature, has nevertheless drawn attention to an important and overlooked gap in our critical understanding of these phenomena. Future research should be conducted to better understand several crucial questions at a national and international level:

1. What is the relationship between ALE and EFL proficiency?
2. What determines EFL proficiency in adult learners at a national level?
3. To what extent is EFL training for adults included in state policy frameworks?
4. What are the rates of participation in EFL training for adults?
5. Is access equally distributed, and are there provisions for disadvantaged groups?

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### **Author's Reflection**

I debated including a personal reflection in this paper as I did not wish to distract from its academic merit, such as it is. However, my personal background grants me not only insight into the topic but also introduces the potential for bias. For this reason, I felt it necessary to share my perspective. I was born in post-communist Romania, educated in Canada, began and continue my career as an EFL teacher for adults in the Czech Republic, and have been living and occasionally working in Spain for the last two years. I am pursuing my MSc in the UK at Glasgow University and I aspire to continue my academic research in the Nordic countries.

Much of what I discovered in writing this paper was not shocking to me given my background. However, one or two things did surprise me, such as the case of my native country, Romania. I was surprised and a little saddened to discover how low it ranks in measures of ALE, even given the general trend in the region. I believe that there are two often overlooked cultural factors, firstly the general distrust of authority and educations as an extension of that authority. The legacy of dictatorial control, often enforced through propaganda disguised as education, has left its mark on the region and especially on Romanians who, already cynical by nature, endured one of the harshest Regimes in the region which ended bloodily. It is also of no surprise to me that Czechia and Slovakia (formerly Czechoslovakia) whose Velvet Revolution was famously one of the most peaceful, are the ALE leaders in the region. Most of my work with Czechs over the past two years was employer-funded, a common feature of at least office work in the country. A similar argument can be made for the European South, albeit to a lesser extent, given their history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century under dictators like Franco and Mussolini.

However, a secondary issue is the popularity of languages. Italian and Spanish are amongst the most popular secondary languages in Europe outside of English. Greek, with its differing

alphabet is more difficult to learn as are most Eastern languages. Coincidentally Greece has a level of English proficiency above its southern neighbors and more in line with the East. If more people speak your native language than perhaps there is less incentive to learn English, and vice versa. Another interesting phenomenon I have observed in Spain is the socio-cultural attachment the people have with their language, and not just Spanish but many local dialects as well. Language education is a controversial issue in Spain, with various laws promoting different dialects throughout the country, and it is not uncommon for foreign media to be dubbed into these local dialects. In Romania by contrast, foreign language media is much more prevalent and attitudes towards English are far more positive than in Spain.

This kind of informal education, or passive education through movies and TV, could account for more of the variance in EPI than we realize, and it is also ALE which is not captured in the statistics. Given the previously mentioned distrust of authority in countries like Romania, it is likely that adults there would rather teach themselves than participate in any kind of structured, funded training. After all, Romanians and their Eastern neighbours are just as intelligent and curious as any other nationalities. This makes it all the more important to begin to recognize and validate non-formal and informal training and education.