

## France's SNCF puts English lessons on fast track for passengers

France may not be known for proficiency in English, but its state-owned railway company has just put learning the international language of business on the fast track.

5 SNCF has started offering commuters on its Reims-Paris line the chance to take English classes while hurtling through the French countryside at speeds of up to 320kph (199mph). “Many of our customers need to speak English at work so it’s a useful service,” says David Potier, SNCF’s commercial director for the Champagne-Ardenne region. He says the classes could gradually be rolled out to other routes if they prove successful.

15 The learning-at-speed tuition comes as a study this month on English proficiency around the world placed the eurozone’s second-biggest economy in a lowly 35th place, sandwiched between China and the United Arab Emirates.

20 Education First, an international education company that carried out the study, put its findings bluntly: “France currently has the weakest English skills in Europe.”

25 It also noted that, in contrast to the rest of the continent, English proficiency in France was getting worse.

30 Jérôme Paillet wants to buck that trend. The fresh-faced 29-year-old buyer for an Italian company, where speaking English is essential, has been one of SNCF’s first four students on the 47-minute ride into central Paris.

“I have to be on the train anyway so this is a really productive use of my time,” he says, stepping off the silver and blue shovel-nosed monster that has just eased into Paris’s Gare de l’Est. “At school, I was one of 25 kids. On the train, I am in a class of four.” 35

Even better for him is the fact that his employer pays the €690 cost of his 30-hour course as part of its obligation as a company based in France to contribute the equivalent of 1 per cent of its payroll bill to employee-training. 40

English on Track, as SNCF calls the classes, was the idea of Calum MacDougall, an English teacher whose language-training activity took him back and forth across France. “I saw the time people spent on trains and quickly realised that for most, it was time wasted,” he says. 45

The speed of the TGV – France now has 10 high-speed routes with another four under construction and 11 more in the pipeline – has also increased the commuter population. On SNCF’s eastern route alone, the number of season-ticket holders has quadrupled since the line opened in 2007. 50

That, says Mr Potier of SNCF, spells a captive audience with time on its hands. “English is clearly a priority for our clients but we could start teaching other languages or even subjects,” he says. “Anything is possible.” 55

(443 words)

## Annotations

- line 4: **fast track** – a quick way to achieve sth  
 line 5: **commuter** – a person who travels some distance to work on a regular basis  
 line 7: **to hurtle** – to move very fast, especially in a way that seems dangerous  
 line 12: **to roll out** – officially introduce a new product or service  
 line 21: **bluntly** – in a very direct way without trying to be polite or kind  
 line 26: **to buck the trend (coll)** – to be obviously different from the way a situation is developing  
 line 26: **fresh-faced** – feeling, looking and being healthy  
 line 48: **TGV** – a French high-speed train  
 line 55: **to spell** – to mean or have as an result  
 line 56: **captive** – having no freedom to choose alternatives  
 line 56: **to have time on one’s hands (coll)** – to have time when you have nothing else to do

## Tasks

### 1 Content/Comprehension

Read the article and summarise the measures taken by French railway company SNCF to promote the foreign language proficiency of its customers.

### 2 Form/Analysis

Establish the text type by analysing its structure, language and point of view. Support your answer with examples from the text.

### 3 Comment/Text production

Choose one of the following tasks:

- a) According to the research acted out by Education First, French learners rank among the lowest in Europe when it comes to speaking English (ll. 19–22). Comment on the result and discuss whether foreign language courses on French trains are the right way to reverse this trend.
- b) Imagine SNCF wants to expand its service to other countries. Mr Potier has asked you think about similar language training on trains in Germany. Write an email in which you explain why you think English on Track could be established in Germany as well (or not).

### 4 Listening comprehension: English as a lingua franca

- ⊙ In the interview BBC radio presenter Chris Legard asks Dr Val Hennesy, the director of a Bristol language school, and University of Southampton Professor Jennifer Jenkins about the possible consequences of English as a lingua franca on the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language.

Listen to the recording and decide whether the following statements are true or false.

	True	False
0. English as a lingua franca is only spoken in academic contexts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
1. Dr Hennesy thinks that native speaker proficiency should be a clear model for language teaching.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. She points out that communicative competence is the major goal of language teaching.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Tests and exams like the Cambridge exams aim at testing communicative competence and do not exclusively test grammatical correctness.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Professor Jenkins thinks that English as a lingua franca (ELF) only works in small groups.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. In lingua franca communication people have to make sure that they can understand each other.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. English as a lingua franca does not mean that anything goes – there are certain structures that help to keep communication under control.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Although ELF might develop its own specific set of rules in the near future, these are not likely to be strict and narrow regulations of linguistic correctness.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Erwartungshorizont

### Textinformationen

<b>Autor</b>	Adam Thompson
<b>Titel</b>	France's SNCF puts English lessons on fast track for passengers
<b>Quelle</b>	<i>Financial Times</i> , 24 November 2013, <a href="http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/5c182d88-53ac-11e3-b425-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3TaQ0HTSK">http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/5c182d88-53ac-11e3-b425-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3TaQ0HTSK</a> (geprüft: 23.02.2015)
<b>Textformat (Textlänge)</b>	Zeitungsartikel (443 Wörter)
<b>Autor</b>	Chris Ledgard (Moderator)
<b>Titel</b>	English as a lingua franca
<b>Quelle</b>	BBC Radio 4, <i>Word of Mouth</i> , 5 September 2011, <a href="http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b013q210">http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b013q210</a> (geprüft: 23.02.2015)
<b>Textformat (Textlänge)</b>	Podcast/Reportage (4:01 Min/616 Wörter)

### 1 Content/Comprehension

Read the article and summarise the measures taken by French railway company SNCF to promote the foreign language proficiency of its customers.

- ♦ France's public railway SNCF has started offering language courses in English on its high-speed trains between Reims and Paris.
- ♦ The company aims at improving its customers' foreign language skills.
- ♦ According to recent studies by Education First, an international education company, foreign language proficiency in France is generally considered one of the weakest in Europe.
- ♦ Commuters take courses in English because English is essential for their jobs, and courses are much smaller than classrooms at school. Furthermore, some companies even pay for the courses in order to enhance employee training.
- ♦ The future prospects for additional courses are quite promising: SNCF has already got ten high-speed routes and is about to open up an additional 15 routes in the near future. That will lead to an increase in the number of commuters and will add to the number of people taking foreign language courses while travelling by train.
- ♦ Apart from English there might also be a growing demand for courses in other foreign languages and even non-language subjects in the near future.

### 2 Form/Analysis

Establish the text type by analysing its structure, language and point of view. Support your answer with examples from the text.

Structure:

- ♦ Clear text structure – the text is subdivided into three main parts of similar length:
  - Part 1: English language courses in French trains (ll. 1–18),
  - Part 2: New opportunities for customers (ll. 19–41),
  - Part 3: Future prospects (ll. 42–59).
- ♦ Inverted pyramid – the most important information comes first; less important information can be found towards the end of the article.
- ♦ The first two paragraphs answer all the major (wh) questions:
  - What? (English language courses on French trains, cf. ll. 1–4)
  - When? (services have just started, cf. ll. 1–4)
  - Who? (French Railway SNCF, cf. l. 5)
  - Where? (France – the route from Reims to Paris, cf. ll. 5–7)
  - Why? (French customers need to improve their English language skills, cf. ll. 5–10)

Language:

- ◆ Formal and precise language, complex syntax (e.g. subordinate clauses and participle constructions), passive voice and rhetorical devices (e.g. parallelism “At school I was one of 25 kids. On the train I am in a class of 4”, ll. 35f; alliteration “fresh-faced”, ll. 26f).
- ◆ The choice of words is neutral; emotionally charged language is avoided.
- ◆ Direct speech (e.g. ll. 8ff; ll. 21ff) helps to avoid making suggestions and premature conclusions by quoting the experts or people directly.

Point of view:

The article strictly avoids advocating a particular opinion; direct speech helps to create a greater sense of authenticity and immediacy than reported speech. It avoids bias and helps the readers to draw their own conclusions.

### 3 Comment/Text production

- a) According to the research acted out by Education First, French learners rank among the lowest in Europe when it comes to speaking English (ll. 19–22). Comment on the result and discuss whether foreign language courses on French trains are the right measure to reverse this trend.

At first, it has to be asked whether the results of the research are reliable and statistically significant. It has to be kept in mind that Education First, as an education service, might have an ulterior motive for ranking French learners so low in order to promote its own language courses in France. Moreover, the French learners that participated in the research are not necessarily identical with the customers who are planning to take courses on French trains. Therefore, it does not seem highly likely that English on track will help to reverse a general trend and promote language proficiency in English among French learners. Consequently, the argumentation presented in the text should be questioned because French learners of English rank among the weakest in Europe. Although it might be a good idea for commuters to take English language courses on trains, the results may not be representative. Apart from that, however, it might be a good idea for business commuters who want to spend their travel time doing something interesting. Therefore, I would very much appreciate it if SNCF also offered other courses on its trains. Commuters could use the time to learn other languages, take courses in philosophy or literature or other subjects they might be interested in.

- b) Imagine SNCF wants to expand its service to other countries. Mr Potier has asked you think about similar language training on trains in Germany. Write an email in which you explain why you think “English on Track” could be established in Germany as well (or not).

- ◆ Although Germany is not listed among the lowest in the research conducted by Education First, many people still do not have sufficient knowledge of English.
- ◆ Additional teaching services might help the German railway to become more popular, so more people might decide to take the train instead of travelling by plane, which would be more environmentally friendly.
- ◆ Services like English on track could motivate travellers to take additional foreign language courses and might open up new job opportunities for people in business where fluency in English is expected.
- ◆ But the German railway system has not developed its train system as well as the French train system with its high-speed trains and seamless connections among all the major cities. Instead, German travellers are more used to overcrowded trains and delays, which might put them off language courses on German trains.
- ◆ In Germany commuters mainly travel short distances and usually do not spend hours on a train. Therefore, it seems that there is currently no real need for similar services in Germany.

## 4 Listening comprehension: English as a lingua franca

Listen to the recording and decide whether the following statements are true or false.

True: 2., 4., 6., 7., 8.; False 0., 1., 3., 5.

### Transkript

#### Part 1 (13:40–16:20)

- Chris: So this then is a challenge to people who teach English as a foreign language. It's a huge industry. I'm on my way to a school in Bristol which is part of the International House Group.
- Teacher: And we're looking at these words here: Are they real world or online? Anonymity? Online. Making a tie-dye scarf? Real world - very difficult online!
- Hennessy: I'm Dr Val Hennessy, and I am one of the two directors of International House Bristol.
- Chris: Is native speaker proficiency a kind of model for language teaching – is that what people hear or aspire to – native speaker proficiency?
- Hennessy: No, it hasn't been the standard for almost as long as I have been teaching. Communicative competence is what we aim at. In other words: if the students can make themselves understood, if they can get their message across, then they have achieved communicative competence. This means that getting the tense completely right, having all your prepositions in the right place or using exactly the right phrasal verb might not be necessary.
- Chris: So, if someone said that "he go to the bank", you don't necessarily correct them?
- Hennessy: It would depend on the task, if they were specifically working on verb structures – yes, you'd correct them. But if they are working on a communicative exercise where their partner or their partners understand the message, why correct them? If you listen to high-level politicians speaking in the morning, they make mistake after mistake after mistake and nobody corrects them because they get their message across.
- Chris: What about exams, though? Presumably when they do their tests at the end of their time here, whatever that test is, that test is very much geared towards correct English.
- Hennessy: It is, but it is also geared towards getting the message across, so there will be one section of the major exams, the Cambridge exams, which is grammatical. But much of it is not grammatical. They have to do reading and they answer questions on it, most of which will be multiple choice. So grammar doesn't really come into it, although they may have had to understand the grammar of the text. They have to do writing as well, but many years ago, fifteen or twenty years ago, the writing tasks were all changed to make them *tasks*. In other words, you didn't just write an imaginative piece any more. You wrote a letter, giving certain information, and you're judged on whether that information comes across. So the odd bad spelling or missing punctuation – you might not get top marks, but you will still pass the exam.

#### Part 2 (26:13–27:24)

- Chris: Back in the social setting of the Southampton pub, Jennifer Jenkins' students talk the language that works for them as a group and Jennifer is convinced that the lingua franca concept is here to stay and that it's a healthy development.
- Jenkins: With globalisation, of course, and so many people using English in small groups and sometimes large groups together, they are going to be self-monitoring, they are going to be always making sure that they can understand each other. So I think that people, without actually consciously doing anything, are going to be ensuring they can always communicate and as long as they have the skills to make themselves understood to each other, that is going to be what stops some sort of anything goes situation. The ELT profession are always arguing that ELF means anything goes, that there will be no kind of norms, any kind of way of keeping communication somehow under control. I think there will be something, but it won't be the traditional sort of correctness where you have very narrow, strict rules about "This is what you do" and "This is what you don't do". It's going to be something else. But, you know, this is only ten years since this has really got going big time.