

Beyond English: Do You Need German or French to Enroll at AELO Swiss Academy?

If you have landed on this page after midnight, with eleven tabs open and a half-written application sitting in another window, I want you to take a breath first. The question you are asking is one of the most common ones prospective students send to admissions teams across Switzerland, and it usually hides a deeper worry. You are not really asking whether German or French appears on an entry checklist. You are asking whether you belong there. Whether you can handle a country whose map looks like a patchwork of languages. Whether you will spend two years nodding politely at things you do not understand.

So let me give you the short answer first, then the honest, nuanced one, because you deserve both.

The short answer, so you can breathe

No. You do not need German or French to enroll at AELO Swiss Academy. The language of instruction is English, and admission decisions rest on the things you would expect: your previous qualifications, your motivation, and your ability to study comfortably in English. Depending on your background, you may be asked to show evidence of English proficiency through a recognized test or an internal assessment, and the admissions team can confirm exactly what applies to your program, since requirements are reviewed from year to year. What you will not be asked for is a certificate in German or French. Not for enrollment, not for classes, not for exams.

That answer surprises some people. It should not. English-medium education is well established in Switzerland, particularly among private academies, business schools, and hospitality institutions that serve an international student body. AELO Swiss Academy sits in that tradition. Your classmates will likely come from a dozen countries, and English will be the language that binds them together.

But here is the part worth reading slowly: enrollment is not the same as living. And that distinction shapes everything else in this article.

What Switzerland actually sounds like

Switzerland has four national languages. Roughly six in ten residents speak German as their main language, just under a quarter speak French, around eight percent Italian, and about half a percent Romansh. Where you end up studying determines which of these surrounds you. In Zurich, Bern, Basel, Lucerne, and St. Gallen, you will hear German. In Geneva, Lausanne, Montreux, and Neuchâtel, it will be French. Lugano belongs to Italian, and a few Alpine valleys still hold Romansh with quiet pride. There are bilingual seams, too, cities like Biel/Bienne and Fribourg/Freiburg, where street signs change language midway across a bridge.

Now the reassuring part. Switzerland consistently sits in the very high proficiency band of international English rankings, and in city centers you can accomplish an enormous amount in English alone. Bank appointments, grocery shopping, most university administration, a surprising number of doctor's offices. The receptionist who switches to fluent English the moment you hesitate is a genuinely Swiss experience.

So the honest picture is layered. The country runs on its national languages, but its urban, educated, international layer runs on English, and you will be living inside that layer as a student at AELO Swiss Academy. The question is not whether you can survive in English. You can. The question is what you gain by going further, and what you quietly lose if you never do.

What admission looks at versus what life demands

Admissions processes look backward. They examine what you have already done: your transcripts, your references, your English level. Life in Switzerland looks forward, at every small task waiting for you after you step off the plane. There is a gap between those two things, and nobody warns you about it, because nobody thinks to mention that the hardest part of studying abroad is not the lectures. It is the paperwork.

Within your first month, you will likely register with the local commune for your residence permit, sign a health insurance policy, which is mandatory in Switzerland and must be arranged within your first three months, open a bank account, and possibly negotiate a room in a shared apartment. In larger cities you can manage all of this in English, sometimes with help from your academy's student services. But the documents that follow will arrive in German or French. The insurance welcome packet. The gym contract with its cancellation clause. The yellow slip from the post office telling you where your package went, printed in the local language, because the post office assumes, reasonably, that you live here.

You will translate the first few of these, word by word, phone raised over the page. By the fifth, you will recognize the structure without needing to. That progression, from foreign document to familiar shape, is what learning the local language actually feels like in practice. It is less like passing an exam and more like watching your world get easier.

The gap nobody warns you about: textbook German versus the street

Here is a nuance that took me years to appreciate, and it matters if your academy is in the German-speaking part of the country. The German you learn in courses is Hochdeutsch, standard High German, the language of newspapers, novels, and national news broadcasts. The German you will hear at the bakery, on the tram, and among your Swiss classmates is Schwyzerdütsch, the local dialect, and it is, for practical purposes, a different language. Different pronunciation, different grammar, words that appear in no dictionary. A student with a solid B1 in High German can read a Swiss newspaper cover to cover and then fail to understand a single sentence of small talk at the checkout counter.

I say this not to discourage you but to prepare you, because the reverse surprise is crueler. Many students arrive with good German, feel confident for a week, then hear their first full-speed Zurich dialect and conclude, wrongly, that their German is worthless. It is

not, merely aimed at the wrong target for that particular moment. Your classroom German will carry you through a rental contract, a formal email to the residents' registration office, a doctor's appointment booked a week in advance. The dialect carries everything that makes a place feel like home: the joke your flatmate tells at midnight, the teasing at the football club, the butcher asking whether you want the same as last week. You do not need the dialect to enroll, to graduate, or even to work. You need it, eventually, if you want Switzerland to stop feeling like a very well-organized hotel.

French: the gentler surprise

On the western side of the country, newcomers get an easier ride. Swiss French is recognizably the language you studied in school or on an app. The accent runs slower and more melodic than Parisian French, the numbers sound different (septante for seventy, nonante for ninety, huitante for eighty in some cantons), and a handful of everyday words diverge. But the distance between textbook French and street French is one of vocabulary and rhythm, not of grammar. A student with a solid B2 can step off the train in Lausanne or Geneva and follow the tram announcements the same afternoon.

If your AELO Swiss Academy program happens to sit in the francophone region and you already speak some French, count yourself fortunate. If you speak some German and assume it transfers, it does not. The two halves of the country share a flag and not much linguistic DNA.

The trade-offs, stated plainly

Every hour you give to German or French is an hour not spent on your coursework, your network, or your sleep, and pretending otherwise would be dishonest. Reaching a genuinely useful conversational level, enough to handle appointments and small talk without panic, takes most learners somewhere in the range of 300 to 600 hours of consistent practice, depending on the language and on what you already speak. Spread across a two-year program, that is very manageable. Crammed into a single intense term alongside exams, it is a recipe for doing both things badly.



So the real question is what you are buying with those hours.

You are buying daily life that runs smoother. Appointments you can make by phone. Landlords who warm to you. Official notices you read without holding your phone over the page like a torch.

You are buying a wider job market, and this is the one with real teeth. Switzerland's economy is deeply local in its hiring habits. International companies and English-speaking workplaces exist in abundance, but many Swiss firms, and many of the internships and part-time roles that students rely on, still lean toward German or French. In hospitality especially, a candidate who can greet a guest in the guest's own language holds an edge no English certificate replicates. I [remember](#) a student who completed an internship at a hotel near Montreux. Her school French was good enough to be hired, good enough to check guests in, and never quite good enough to join the laughter in the staff room. She did the job beautifully and ate lunch alone more often than she wanted to. That is the level of nuance we are discussing. Not success or failure. Belonging, or watching from just outside it.

And you are buying a different relationship with the place itself. There is a moment, usually in the second or third month, when a cashier answers your hesitant sentence in the local language instead of switching to English, and something shifts. You stop being a guest. Nobody hands you a certificate for that moment. It is worth more than most certificates.

None of this is required. All of it is real. Students at AELO Swiss Academy graduate every year without a word of the local language and go on to solid careers in international, English-speaking environments. If your plan keeps you inside that international layer, a multinational firm, a global team, a career that relocates you every two years,

then investing those hours elsewhere may genuinely be the smarter trade. That is a legitimate choice, not a failure of character.

What tends to work in the first term

For those who do want to learn, experience points to a handful of habits that separate the students who end up conversational from the ones who buy a textbook in September and abandon it by November.

- Choose the language of your city, not of the country. German in Zurich does nothing for you in Geneva, and the reverse is equally true.
- Aim for functional before fluent. Ordering food, booking appointments, understanding a delivery notice. That is A2 territory, and it arrives faster than you expect.
- Treat the city as your classroom. One mangled sentence per shop visit beats an hour of an app you keep skipping.
- Find one tandem partner through the academy or local exchange groups, and protect that weekly hour like an exam date.
- Postpone the dialect. On the German side, learn standard German first and let Schwyzerdütsch wash over you for a year. It begins to make sense on its own, the way weather does.

That last point deserves its own breath, because so many learners burn out trying to understand everything immediately. You are allowed to not understand. You are allowed to smile and say, in whatever words you currently have, that you are learning. Swiss people, for all their reputation for reserve, respond remarkably well to visible effort. A mangled greeting delivered with sincerity opens more doors than flawless English ever will.

Where this leaves you

If you are still reading at whatever hour you started, here is the whole picture in plain terms. German and French are not keys to the door at AELO Swiss Academy. English opens that door, and the admissions team will confirm exactly which evidence of English proficiency your chosen program requires, since details shift from year to year and are worth checking directly rather than trusting a forum post from 2019.

The local languages are something else entirely. They are not keys to a door. They are keys to the rooms behind it: the staff room, the neighborhood, the second-hand furniture market where the seller speaks no English, the bench conversation that tells you what this country is actually like beneath its postcard. Some students collect those keys. Some decide the extra rooms are not for them and build a complete, happy life among the international crowd. Both groups graduate. Only one of them, in my experience, tends to leave Switzerland feeling that the country was partly theirs.

Whichever you choose, choose it deliberately. Learn a few words of the local language even if you never go further, as a courtesy, as a signal, as a small act of respect toward the place hosting you for these years. Then let everything else follow your own appetite rather than anybody's checklist.

You asked whether you need German or French to enroll. You do not. What you need is the honesty to see the difference between being admitted and truly arriving, and the courage to decide what arriving should mean for you. Everything else is just vocabulary.