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**POLICIES FOR PLURILINGUAL EDUCATION AND FL TEACHING IN  
THREE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES: A COMPARATIVE ACCOUNT OF  
TEACHERS' VIEWS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The study was conducted to provide a comparative account of teachers' beliefs on plurilingual learning in three diverse European educational contexts: the Greek, Cypriot and Bulgarian one. Its objectives were to: i) specify teachers' perceptions of key issues on plurilingual Education Policy, ii) identify their attitudes to English as a lingua franca and to early foreign language learning, iii) record their suggestions about further developing plurilingual education. 150 state primary school teachers participated in the study; 50 from each educational context. Semi-structured interviews were used, comprising the following sections: a) conceptualization of multilingualism, b) status of European languages c) introduction of foreign languages in early stages of education, d) suggestions about the development of multilingual education. The findings indicated the teachers' overall positive attitudes towards issues of plurilingual policies and revealed the teachers' acknowledgement of the benefits from plurilingualism and early foreign language learning.

**Key Words:** Plurilingualism, plurilingual education, plurilingual policies, comparative account, teachers' beliefs.

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**1. Introduction**

Plurilingualism, a concept promoted by the Council of Europe in its CEFR ( Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), refers to a number of languages mastered by an individual. The importance of developing plurilingual ability – identified as the '2+1 formula' (Commission of European Communities, 2002) – is acknowledged for European citizens, since plurilingualism is considered as an 'asset' for individuals and the main prerequisite in a Europe of free movement and intercultural communication (Council of Europe, 2003). Due to the fact that learning English as 'lingua franca' (Graddol, 2006), alone is no longer considered adequate, plurilingual skills development "has become a precondition if European citizens are to benefit from the occupational and personal opportunities open to them in European Union" (Council of Europe, 1995, p. 44) and may be attained by simply diversifying the languages on offer in a particular educational system' (see Council of Europe., 2001, p. 4). It has been pointed out that the implementation of plurilingual education would have an impact on the ability to use different competences in various languages, by moving away from the ideal of 'mastering' a foreign language to the perspective of developing individual linguistic abilities and competences (Council of Europe, 2001, 2004). In an enlarged and multilingual Europe, where there has been a call for "further action to improve the mastery of basic skills from a very early age" (European Council,

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2002), official policies have emerged aiming to implement activities for plurilingual learning during the last two decades. In effect, the development of communicative skills in two foreign languages is considered as a basic competence for European citizens, a principle that was reflected on documents such as the Common European Framework and the European Portfolio (Council of Europe, 2001). In line with the Commission's policy that proclaims the furthering of pluri/multilingualism through the educational systems of all member states (Council of Europe, 2003; European Commission, 2006; Grin, 2003), the member States have taken initiatives and actions to promote plurilingualism and linguistic diversity through language education policies, with different languages on offer in various national educational systems (Eurydice, 2001, 2005).

The policies for promoting plurilingual education has brought changes to the role of the language teacher and to teachers' attitudes towards language diversity and plurilingualism (Heyworth, 2003). On the other hand, teachers' attitudes and beliefs about language learning and the status of languages in their teaching environment: a) are closely intertwined with ideologies of language status, b) tend to affect and shape the nature of their instructional practices, c) can have an impact on every language policy decision, d) determine a new direction for plurilingual education ( see Woods, 1996). As a result, identifying teachers' beliefs is essential in terms of improving both professional development and teaching effectiveness, since there is a positive correlation between the teachers' beliefs and the language classroom practices (Pajares, 1992; Nespor, 1987 in Griva & Chostelidou, 2011).

### **Overview of plurilingual policies in the three European countries**

Both Greece and Cyprus have made some attempts to promote plurilingualism in order to keep up with the demands of promoting linguistic diversity. Also, Bulgaria, a newly joined European member has adopted official policies aiming to implement actions for plurilingual learning and linguistic diversity.

#### *Plurilingual policy in the Greek educational system*

In Greece, learning English as a foreign language (FL) is considered as an important goal of citizens inside and outside the formal educational system. More precisely, three in four Greek citizens recognize the benefits of speaking languages in line with the general consensus among Europeans about the benefits of multilingualism and the great majority of them are reported to be able to hold a conversation in two foreign languages (European Commission, 2006). Although the Greek education system has tried to introduce foreign language learning from an early age and to develop a multilingual competence in "strong" European languages, it has not managed to deal with the issue of minority languages effectively.

English has been the dominant foreign language in the curricula of primary and secondary education for years. Nevertheless, many initiatives have been launched to offer a broader choice of languages since the early 1990s (see Griva & Iliadou, 2011). Specifically, English as a foreign

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language has been a compulsory subject in the primary school curriculum from the 3rd grade onward for the last fifteen years. In 1992-93, English was established as the first compulsory foreign language in lower secondary education while a second compulsory foreign language, either French or German, was introduced in lower secondary education (L.Decree 447/1993 in Griva, 2004). In 1998/99, a foreign language which was selected among the three on offer at this level (English, French, or German) became compulsory in upper secondary education (Griva & Iliadou, 2011).

In the school year 2005-2006, the introduction of a second foreign language (French or German) was piloted as compulsory subject at a number of primary schools from 5th grade onwards (Ministry of Greek Education, 2005). Furthermore, in 2008 Italian was piloted as a second foreign language in lower secondary education (Ministry of Greek Education, 2008 in Griva, Chostelidou & Panteli, 2013). Moreover, the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) has resulted in Greek school system making use of the six main 'levels' identified as targets for foreign language learning in the Greek educational context.

#### *Plurilingual policy in the Cypriot educational system*

In Cyprus, a former British colony, until the 1960s English had the status of a second language in the community. It was since then that English was a compulsory foreign language in secondary education. The dominance of the English language in Cyprus needs hardly be argued as it presents the primary foreign language to be learned while it has acquired the status of second language in education. However, the introduction of the teaching of English in primary education and in particular at the fourth grade took place much later in 1992 (Persianis, 2006 in Panteli, Griva & Tsakiridou, 2013). In addition, it was in 1996 when it was decided to include a second foreign language, the teaching of French, as a compulsory subject in the first grade of lower secondary school (Griva, Chostelidou & Panteli, 2013).

The process of curriculum revision of all grades was initiated in 2008, four years after the Republic of Cyprus became a member state of the European Union. However, it was not until the school year 2010-11 that the new curricula were partly introduced in primary and secondary education, developed on the basis of the levels of competence suggested by the common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001, 2004). The second FL is provided from the first grade of lower secondary education until the first grade of higher secondary education with the aim to reach A1 or ideally A2 level. Among the FLs on offer which can be selected by the students are French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, and Turkish.

The curricula for English in early primary and primary education focus on the teaching of the target language not only as a subject, but as part of the everyday routine of the students from early education onwards. This is suggested to be implemented by means of the CLIL approach, the inclusion of computer assisted language learning, and a methodology based on games, songs and rhymes, and stories.

In addition, students have the opportunity to choose a second compulsory foreign language in secondary education; among the six languages on offer either French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian or Turkish.

#### *Plurilingual policy in the Bulgarian educational system*

In Bulgaria, till 1993 two foreign languages were taught as compulsory subjects in secondary education with Russian language being the first foreign language. In addition, the students had the opportunity to choose a second FL (English, French or German) (Eurydice, 2001). The reform of 1993 placed all taught foreign languages (English, Spanish, Italian, German, Russian and French) on equal basis. In the same year, a study was conducted in relation to early foreign language, which proposed the introduction of a FL in the first grade and the introduction of a second FL in the 2nd grade.

In 1998, the Ministry of Education made attempts to introduce FL learning from an early age on a pilot basis, by establishing the teaching of a first foreign language in the first grade and the teaching of a second foreign language in the 5th grade of primary school. In the schools not involved in the pilot implementation, a foreign language was taught as a compulsory subject from the second grade onwards (Gerdzhikova, Peeva, Keskinova, 2003).

In the early 21st century, attempts were made for Bulgaria's accession to EU, a feat accomplished in 2007. In such a context the educational policy was in line with the Commission's policy which proclaims the furthering of multilingualism through the educational systems. For this purpose in 2006, a framework related to teaching foreign languages was revised and enriched with a framework striving for plurilingualism and improvement of foreign language skills (Journal Gazette: 58 / 2006). In particular, among the six languages on offer (English, German, French, Spanish, Italian and Russian) the students have to choose one to learn within school environment.

## **2. METHOD**

### **Purpose and objectives of the study**

The present study was conducted with the aim to provide a comparative account of language teachers' beliefs on issues related to plurilingualism and plurilingual education in the contexts of three European countries of East Mediterranean Area with some common social and educational features: the Greek, the Cypriot and the Bulgarian one. The teachers' contribution to the study is considered of major significance, since it is acknowledged that teachers' beliefs can determine the directions for plurilingual education. In effect, interviews with the primary teachers were expected to provide useful insights and contribute in developing a account of their perceptions in relation to plurilingual policies in the specific educational contexts.

For this reason, an attempt was made to: i) specify teachers' perceptions of central issues on plurilingual Education Policies, ii) identify their attitudes to English as a lingua franca and to early

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foreign language learning, iii) record their suggestions about further developing plurilingual education.

### **Participants**

150 language teachers, we had access to, were recruited for the purpose of this pilot study; Fifty (50) Greek (GR) teachers employed in primary schools in Thessaloniki, fifty (50) Cypriot (CY) teachers employed in primary schools in Nicosia and Limassol, and fifty Bulgarian teachers (50) employed in primary schools in Sofia.

Concerning the Greek teachers, their teaching experience varied: the least experienced teachers had been working from one to ten years (N=28), while the most experienced teachers had been teaching FL for more than ten years (N=22). Twelve of the participants held a Master's degree. The majority of them expressed their wish to learn another FL. In particular, the Italian language was identified as the most favourite language, selected by 48% of the sample. Spanish (24.5%) and French (10.2%) followed, while a few of the participants (12%) expressed the wish to learn a Balkan language.

As for the Cypriot teachers, their teaching experience varied: the least experienced teachers had been working from one to ten years (N=25), while the most experienced teachers had been teaching FL for more than ten years (N=25). Half of them held a Master's degree. The majority of them expressed their wish to learn another FL. In particular, Spanish and French were the most favourite languages selected by 36% and 32% respectively. Italian (24%) and German (18%) followed while fewer teachers expressed the wish to learn Russian (10%) or Turkish (8%).

In relation to the Bulgarian teachers, their teaching experience varied: the least experienced teachers had been working from one to ten years (N=26), while the most experienced teachers had been teaching FL for more than ten years (N=24). Only six of the participants held a Master's degree. The majority of them (62%) declared that they speak another FL (Russian, French or German).

### **Research Instruments**

Semi-structured interviews were used as the basic instrument to collect the data, which comprised the following sections: a) conceptualization of multilingualism, b) the status of European languages and the role of English as a 'lingua franca', c) introduction of foreign languages in early stages of education, d) suggestions about the development of multilingual education. The interviews were conducted individually, and were tape recorded, transcribed and analysed through a qualitative thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data were analyzed through two basic phases: a) first and second level coding as well as pattern coding. Codes resulted in groups of sub-categories, 'labeled' by a specific name, which were grouped into major categories. Then, similar concepts with common characteristics were clustered into basic 'themes'. b) data display. The data were displayed on individual tables and in crosschecking formats including the categories and codes of the 150 interviewees.

### 3. FINDINGS

The interview data, after being analysed qualitatively, resulted into 90 codes, classified into 16 categories, which were then grouped into the following thematic strands:

- Issues related to multilingualism and European languages
- Appreciation of European languages on national level
- Plurilingual issues in education
- Early foreign language learning
- Suggestions about plurilingual education

#### Issues related to multilingualism and European languages

##### *The status of European languages in E.E*

Regarding the status of the European languages, the vast majority of the teachers of the three countries highlighted the supremacy of widely used languages and declared that 'equity is far from being a reality': "... there are some languages which are considered as 'strong' and other which are regarded as 'weak' and less popular languages" (GR teacher), "...there is an obvious preference and special positive attitude towards English, German and French", ".....languages of South-East Europe are less used and 'less valued'" (BG teacher).

Both Greek, Cypriot and Bulgarian teachers believed that there is an interrelation between the economic status of a country and the status of the language spoken in the specific country, which results into unequal status of 'lesser used languages' and the supremacy of 'high status' languages, like French and German: "...there are languages such as English, French, German which are regarded as 'high status' languages due to the high financial status and political influence of the countries where these language are spoken" (GR teacher). They also commented that: "... regarding everyday life, some languages have been established to be used more frequently, because they are used by the majority of the population in the E.U." (GR teacher), "... the more economically developed a country is, the more significant role this country plays at the European and world economy" (CY teacher) (see table 1).

##### *Benefits from learning European Languages*

It is also worth mentioning that a significant part of the Greek, Cypriot and Bulgarian teachers were confident that plurilingual learning holds a number of benefits: "... I think that it is essential for every European citizen to learn foreign languages and I appreciate that the benefits from plurilingualism are obvious....." (GR teacher). More precisely, it promotes openness to other people's languages and cultures: "plurilingualism introduces children and teenagers gradually to other cultures, other civilizations from early on" (CY teacher), "... every citizen could be familiar and aware of different cultures, and broaden their horizons..."(GR teacher). It also promotes multicultural interaction among European citizens: "...multilingualism is one of the ways for

achieving diversity not only linguistic but also cultural” (BG teacher). In addition, it facilitates mobility and communication among EU citizens: “.... the more languages the European citizens know, the greater opportunities of communication they have” (GR teacher), “.... If you speak one of the three most ‘popular’ languages in the member states of E.U. ... you can easily communicate....” (BG teacher), and it ensures opportunities for occupational rehabilitation: “learning languages could also offer more career opportunities” (CY teacher).

*The status of English language*

Acknowledging the fact that ‘English has been long established as the international language regarding trade, technology, tourism, and education’, the great majority of the teachers from the three countries exerted the ‘leading’ role of English in Europe as a ‘lingua franca’: “...I think that there is ‘linguistic imperialism’ and it is a common idea that English has the ‘leading’ role” (GR teacher), “....everyone is aware of the fact that English is the leader language at European and global level” (BG teacher).

English was valued as a basic communication tool for vocational purposes, for touristic purposes, for further studies, and it was regarded as the language of ‘a model of life or society’ “.....English plays an important role in the European field due to the fact that as an International Language it is used in the European market, it is a communicational tool and a common reference in our everyday life....”(GR teacher), “... take for example the labels in supermarket products, the Greek language is under-represented” (CY teacher)..

Table 1. Categories and Codes of the thematic strand “Issues related to multilingualism and European languages”

Categories	Codes- operational definitions	Occurrences			
<i>Issues related to multilingualism and European languages</i>		GR	CY	BG	Total
<b>1. Defining multilingualism</b>	COMORLA=Communicative competence/ability in more than two languages	32	20	33	85
	BACOFLS=A basic communicative ability in FLs	27	37	17	81
	MULMUCA=Interrelation between multilingualism and multicultural awareness and sensitivity	23	22	29	74
		3	7	5	15

Categories	Codes- operational definitions	Occurrences			
	COEXLCO=The co-existence of different languages within a community				
<b>2. The status of European languages in E.E</b>	LSTRWEA=Classification of languages under “strong” and “weak”	10	14	9	33
	ECSCCLADO=Interrelation between economic status of a country and language dominance	35	29	40	104
	SUPWIDLA=Supremacy of widely used languages	35	27	27	89
	SUPENGLA=Supremacy of English Language compared to other European languages	34	33	14	81
	HISTGER=High status of German language	15	10	6	31
	HISTFRE=High status of French Language	14	16	6	36
	EQLACURE=Equity of languages and cultures is far from being a reality	12	15	15	42
	EQSTLGEU=Equal status of languages in the EU institutional framework	2	5	5	12
<b>3. Benefits of learning European Languages</b>	AWLAGCU=Awareness/openness to other people’s languages and cultures	19	23	21	63
	MULEUCI=Multicultural interaction among European citizens	7	7	4	18
	FACOEUC=Facilitating Communication among EU citizens	18	22	17	57
	FAMOEUCI=Facilitating mobility of European Citizens	18	11	7	36



Categories	Codes- operational definitions	Occurrences			
	EXPCAPO=Expanding career potentials	10	11	5	26
	MUPERIMR=Multidimensional personal improvement	10	2	6	18
<b>4. The status of English language</b>	ENGLOLA=English as a global language of communication	50	50	48	148
	ENLAVOC=English language for vocational purposes	23	22	6	51
	ENLATOU=English language for touristic purposes	39	45	-	84
	ENLAFUST=English language for further studies and research	23	20	-	43
	ENRAINC=Importance of English due to rapid innovations in communication technology	29	20	6	55

#### **Appreciation of European languages on national level**

Regarding the status of the European languages, almost all teachers from the three European countries agreed on the supremacy of 'high status' languages like French, German, Italian and Spanish with slight variations in promoting these languages in their countries (see table 2). For example, the German language holds a higher status in Greece and Bulgaria, more preference was shown for French and Italian in Greece and Cyprus, while the Russian language is more highly regarded in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, the majority of the three groups of teachers recognized the usefulness of 'strong' languages for communicative and working purposes and declared that the governments of their countries encourage the use of high status languages through promoting their teaching in primary and secondary education. The foremost reasons for the promotion of those languages are:

economic and touristic factors as well as factors related to the international relations of the country: "our source of tourism determines which language we should use more... for example the last few years we need the Russian language, due to the increase in [Russian] tourists' numbers" (CY teacher), in recent years [the learning of] Turkish language has been given emphasis, with free

lessons to [Greek] Cypriots” and “there is an attempt from private schools and universities to enrich their language policy, to enhance it” (CY teacher).

As far as the benefits of learning European Languages, the majority of the three groups of teachers (Greek, Cypriot, Bulgarian) strongly admitted that knowing two foreign languages represents a huge advantage since plurilingualism: a) is a doorway to various cultures, enabling a person to have a broader understanding of those languages and cultures: “a plurilingual person can have the advantage of viewing the world from different aspects” (BG teacher), b) facilitates communication among EU citizens “... learning other languages makes the individual more aware of other cultures and provides people with the opportunity to meet and communicate with citizens who speak other languages...”(GR teacher), c) facilitates mobility of European citizens, d) expands career potentials.

#### *The status of English language*

It is worth mentioning that all interviewees exerted the ‘leading’ role of English in their countries, which is valued as a global communication tool, as a means of access to modernity, and as the language of ‘a model of life or society’: “...because English is the major world language at the moment and the most common spoken language within the European Union” (GR teacher), “English has been playing a significant and dominant role in the education system, while it has been established as a dominant FL in secondary education the last four decades and in primary education the last two decades” (GR teacher), “... In Bulgaria the last decades English has been established in the national curricula of primary and secondary education as a compulsory foreign language” (BG teacher). Also, one Cypriot teacher stated: ‘I don’t think there is any child that doesn’t know any English. They definitely have some familiarity with the specific language from stimuli received around him (CY teacher).

The growing significance of English in Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria results from several factors. These factors include modernization, urbanization, technologization, and internationalization within society as a whole. Moreover, trade and working life, as well as educational reforms led to more effective foreign language teaching.

Table 2. Categories and Codes of the thematic strand “Appreciation of European languages on national level”

Categories	Codes- operational definitions	Occurrences			
<i>Appreciation of European languages on national level</i>		GR	CY	BG	Total
<b>5. Supremacy of European Languages</b>	DOMENL=Dominance of the English language	49	50	49	148
		45	17	43	105

Categories	Codes- operational definitions	Occurrences			
	PRELEGER=General preference for learning German language	39	38	26	103
	PRELEFR=General preference for learning French language	6	9	16	31
	PRELERU=General preference for learning Russian language	18	15	7	40
	PRELEIT=General preference for learning Italian language	11	22	26	59
	PRELESP=General preference for learning Spanish language	10	4	8	22
	PROMULT=Contemporary tendency of promoting multilingualism through education				
<b>6. Factors related to the Supremacy of a Language</b>	POPSPLA=The number of the population speaking the specific language	24	34	25	83
	ECPOLFA=Economic and political factors	39	21	32	92
	CULSPCO=The Culture of the specific country	12	-	11	23
	EASLALEA=Easiness of learning the specific language	6	11	7	24
	LAGINTRE=Interrelation between Language 'status' and the international relations of the country	14	14	11	39
	EDLAPOL=Education Language policies of the country	4	7	14	25

Categories	Codes- operational definitions	Occurrences			
	FACLIREV=Facilitating literature review	1	5	-	6
	USESCIE=Usefulness to science	5	-	2	7
	INNCOMTE=Rapid innovations in communication technology	7	-	5	12
	OCCREHA=Occupational rehabilitation	3	-	14	17
<b>7. Factors related to the dominance of the English language</b>	LENGOCC=Significance of learning English for occupational purposes	17	14	20	51
	MAJCIEN=Tendency of the majority of citizens to learn English	27	40	31	98
	PROLENG=Promotion of learning English via Educational Policy	26	4	29	59
	POLECONFA=Political and economic factors	15	4	18	37
	PREPOSTU=Prerequisite for postgraduate studies	28	20	6	54
	ENLFTOU=English as a lingua franca for touristic purposes	45	48	14	107
	MOBMUND=Facilitating mobility and mutual understanding within country	37	32	12	81
	EASLENGL=Easiness of learning English language	3	-	5	8
	PRENGMM=Promotion of English through Mass Media	12	16	4	32

**Plurilingual issues in Education**

The great majority of the teachers from the three countries (Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria) showed a positive attitude towards learning other languages even from a very early age, and they declared that promoting plurilingualism means actively encouraging the introduction of the widest possible range of languages in schools of their countries. They suggested that students of the last grades of primary education and students of the secondary education should learn at least two foreign languages at school in order to improve communication skills and mutual understanding. According to Greek and Cypriot teachers, plurilingualism is related to tourism in the two countries. This is because both Greece and Cyprus have invested in tourism for the last decades and tourism has been the major 'engine' for the two countries (see table 3).

According to the participants' answers, all students should be encouraged to acquire a certain ability to communicate in several languages, thus enhancing their mobility and employability in the future, as well as understanding among peoples and nations: "plurilingualism facilitates communication and mutual understanding among people from different countries" (GR teacher). Promoting foreign language learning from the start of schooling and making every pupil aware of linguistic and cultural diversity are schools' priority, since "every FL is a wealth and another open window to/in the world ...that is why I agree with the introducing of a second foreign language" (BG teacher).

Almost all teachers believed that policies for language education should promote the learning of several languages for all individuals, thereby encouraging plurilingualism, with the Greek, Cypriot and Bulgarian teachers focusing on the introduction of Italian, Spanish and Russian in primary and secondary education. On the other hand, some Greek teachers suggested the introduction of Turkish as an elective foreign language, in the context of promoting languages of neighbouring countries. Also, a few Cypriot teachers were in accord with the introduction of Turkish in Cypriot schools. This is clearly explained by a teacher: "it depends on which factors I would prioritize...If I take a priority that Greek Cypriot students will have to live together with the Turkish Cypriots in the future, then Turkish language should be learned in a formal context (CY teacher). In addition, the Greek teachers suggested the introduction of Albanian and Bulgarian as optional subjects. This is explained by the fact that a great number of immigrants of Albanian and Bulgarian origin live in Northern Greece.

Table 3. Categories and Codes of the thematic strand "Plurilingual issues in education"

Categories	Codes- definitions	operational	Occurrences			
			GR	CY	BG	Total
<i>Plurilingual issues in education</i>						
<b>8. Attitude to introducing a second Foreign Language</b>	POATSEFL=Positive towards the introduction of a second foreign language	attitude	37	34	44	115

Categories	Codes- operational definitions	Occurrences				
	NEATSEFL=Negative attitude towards the introduction of a second foreign language	6	9	2	17	
	CONCFL2=Concerns about the introduction of a second foreign language	7	7	4	18	
<b>9. Preferences for introducing a second foreign language in primary education</b>	INTRALB=Introduction of Albanian language	5	-	-	5	
	INTRRUS=Introduction of Russian language	13	13	9	35	
	INTRBUL=Introduction of Bulgarian language	4	-	-	4	
	INTRITA=Introduction of Italian language	18	17	16	51	
	INTRSPA=Introduction of Spanish language	8	19	5	32	
<b>10. Reasons for choosing a second FL</b>	COMIMMC=Communicative purposes with people of other countries and the immigrants in the country	16	13	12	41	
	INTCOOP=For interrelation and cooperation purposes with other countries	17	15	17	49	
	TOURPUR=For touristic purposes	20	21	1	42	

Categories	Codes- operational definitions	Occurrences			
	INDIMPR=For individual improvement	16	14	11	41
<b>11. Preferences for introducing a variety of foreign languages in secondary education</b>	POATPLUR=Positive attitude towards plurilingual development	27	18	32	77
	NONEURLA=Introduction of non-European languages	10	5	4	19
	INTRALB=Introduction of Albanian language	12	2	-	14
	INTRRUS=Introduction of Russian language	18	14	10	42
	INTRITAL=Introduction of Italian language	5	2	-	7
	INTRSPAN=Introduction of Spanish language	28	18	16	62
	INTRTURK=Introduction of Turkish language	17	19	15	41
		8	6	-	14

### Early foreign language learning

Most of the interviewees showed positive attitudes towards very early language learning focusing on the need for very young children to start learning English: "I consider English as an easy language to be learned and it is the best choice for introducing it at an early age" (GR teacher).

They agreed on early language learning, because young children can learn easily and quickly at the age of five and six: “young children welcome foreign children more readily” (CY teacher).

They also claimed that learning a second language from an early age is important, since it could contribute to young children’s awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as to long term school/academic achievement. In addition, learning other languages could contribute to improving cognitive skills and strengthening learners’ mother-tongue skills. Early foreign language learning gives pupils a head start with languages and may lead to greater proficiency in learning other languages in the future. A Cypriot teacher stated: «when we went to Sweden I saw that children learned English from the first grade and their school achievement was better than our children’s.” (CY teacher). Besides, a number of children are familiar with some words in English from the social environment. Specifically, another Cypriot teacher commented: «from a young age, children hear and use a lot of English words from TV and other mass media... they have contact with the language from very young age».

Nevertheless some concerns were expressed in relation to early foreign language learning from all groups of teachers, since they believed that:

a) young children are immature: “...it is too early for the young students... young learners are still immature to acquire a second language...”(GR teacher), “I’m not sure ... they would confuse the two languages” (CY teacher).

b) learning a second language could cause some impediments in L1 acquisition at this age: “Because of the foreign languages the mother tongue has been placed in an inferior position (BG teacher), “...learning a FL could be an obstacle to young children’s acquiring L1”(CY teacher) (see table 4).

Table 4. Categories and Codes of the thematic strand “Early Foreign language learning”

Categories	Codes-operational definitions	Occurrences			
		GR	CY	BG	Total
<i>Early Foreign language learning</i>					
<b>12. Positive attitude to introducing Early Foreign Language Learning</b>	POEARLAL=Positive attitude towards early foreign language learning	27	33	28	88
	POEARENG=Positive attitude towards early English language learning	25	30	28	83
	YOUAQUI=Young children can learn easily and quickly	21	20	14	55



Categories	Codes-operational definitions	Occurrences			
	AWLINCU=Awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity	17	18	7	42
	SCHPEACH=School performance/achievement	11	8	3	22
<b>13. Concerns about early EFL learning</b>	NEGEARLE= Negative attitude towards early foreign language learning	20	10	13	43
	IMMLEL2=Children's immaturity for learning a second language	18	13	13	44
	CONACL1=Confusion in acquiring mother tongue	15	12	9	36
	MARMTO=Marginalization of mother tongue	10	12	-	22

### **Suggestions about plurilingual education**

Plurilingualism was regarded by the Greek, Cypriot and Bulgarian teachers as a principle on which to organise language teaching and reorganise the existing teaching methods in order to make FL teaching more effective (see table 5). More precisely, in quest for the improvement in standards of teaching, many factors need to be considered and reviewed, including:

**Institutional issues:** Institutional factors, such as the 'design of new FL curricula', the 'provision for new teaching materials', 'cooperation between family and school', and extra teaching aids and improvement of infrastructure.

**Teaching practice:** In addition, there was 'a call for continuity in teaching foreign languages through primary and secondary education' on behalf of the teachers who contended that there is a necessity to: a) reorganise 'stabilised' teaching principles and methods to address the requirements of the new era in teaching FL: "...to adapt communicative approach, modern methods and more communication- oriented programs. Communication is a basic factor of FL effective learning and teaching"(BG teacher), "...introducing projects on foreign languages and countries, CLIL

approach (Content and Language Integrated Learning) could change the structure and the way languages are taught. A curriculum which is flexible and gives more opportunities to students to participate in discovering and acquiring the knowledge" (GR teacher), "...for example, English language through Geography, simultaneously teaching students about London, attractions, museums and the English culture" (CY teacher). b) use a game-based context for teaching a FL to young learners. According to the majority of the three groups of teachers, games are a valuable activity for young learners, since they can motivate children and create an enjoyable and relaxing context of learning.

In-service training: Speculations were marked, by the majority of the three groups of teachers, on adequate training to teach English as a foreign language. They believed that modern language teaching both in primary and secondary schools should be supported by the establishment and provision of appropriate in-service training programmes. In fact, continuous in-service training is regarded indispensable in relation to two basic areas: a) training on teaching the special group of young learners, b) training on pedagogical issues.

Table 5. Categories and Codes of the thematic strand "Suggestions about plurilingual education"

Categories	Codes- operational definitions	Occurrences			
		GR	CY	BG	Total
<i>Suggestions about plurilingual education</i>		GR	CY	BG	Total
<b>14. Suggestions about institutional issues</b>	REDLACU=Redesigning Language Curricula	18	13	28	59
	PRONTEM=Provision for New teaching materials	14	12	7	33
	MOTAC2LA=Motivate students and parents to acquire basic skills in two languages	16	8	3	27
	COOFASCH=Cooperation between family and school	15	10	3	28
	EXTEAINF=Extra teaching aids and improvement of infrastructure	18	15	13	46
	LIMSTCL=Limited number of students in the language classroom'	4	-	15	19

Categories	Codes- operational definitions	Occurrences			
<b>15. Suggestions about teaching practices</b>	UPTEMETH=Updating teaching methods and practices	24	20	23	67
	MEDFLL1=Mediation between FL and mother tongue (L1)	11	4	8	23
	GAMYOUN=Game-based instruction for young learners	19	14	18	51
<b>16. Suggestions about in-service teacher training</b>	PRVINSCH=Provision for in-school training	2	8	4	14
	TRAYOUNC=Specialized training on teaching young learners	32	28	34	94
	PRCONTRA=Provision for continuous training	37	25	31	93
	PROPEDTRA=Special provision for pedagogical training	28	10	23	61

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The primary aim of this study was to elicit information about primary school teachers' views on issues of plurilingualism along with their attitudes to plurilingual education and FL teaching. The findings indicated the teachers' overall positive attitudes towards basic issues of plurilingual policies and suggested the need for improvement of plurilingual teaching in the Greek, Cypriot and Bulgarian educational systems. Moreover, English as a lingua franca occupies a status of prestige in the three countries and plays a central role in their educational systems. This recognition of the role of English language is based on its importance for further studies, touristic purposes, as well as occupational and mobility purposes.

The three group teachers reported that the acquisition of a plurilingual repertoire throughout life is thus associated with the development of multicultural awareness, interaction with people of other languages, mutual understanding, facilitating the mobility of citizens between countries, and strengthening economic growth and integration, opening doors to other cultures, and facilitating people's employability. This is in line with one of the key goals of language policy of the Council of

Europe claiming that European citizens should “be able to acquire and keep up their ability to communicate in at least two community languages in addition to their mother tongue” (1995, p. 47).

Although the teachers placed strong emphasis on recognising, supporting and promoting plurilingual competence in a variety of foreign languages, rather than focusing on a single language learning, their preference to ‘strong’ European languages was recorded. In addition, the benefits of learning a foreign language from a very young age were highlighted, since, according to the majority of the three groups of teachers, early foreign language learning gives pupils a head start with languages and builds the foundations for easier language learning in later life.

The teachers suggested that the educational policies of their countries should take initiatives in promoting the teaching of a wider range of languages than at present. Taken as a whole, the range on offered languages should be extended by also including languages of neighbouring countries, and migrant languages, as well as those with ‘national’ status. Policies for language education should therefore promote the learning of several languages for all individuals in the educational systems of the three countries, so that Greeks, Cypriots and Bulgarians become plurilingual and intercultural citizens, able to communicate with other Europeans in all aspects of their lives, able to participate actively in the multilingual and multicultural of Europe (see Council of Europe, 2003). Taken for granted the fact that the implementation of language educational changes and innovations are also dependent on teachers’ beliefs, it is suggested that the educational systems of the three countries could fully embrace plurilingual education, which offers possibilities for preparing coming generations to mutual understanding and mobility, as well as for fostering openness to linguistic and cultural diversity and finally developing democratic citizenship.

Concluding, we note that the study needs to consider some limitations. Given the limited number of the target population and the qualitative method of conducting this study, the results of the present study cannot be regarded conclusive. Further research in the educational contexts of the three countries is needed, including a larger sample of teachers and other stakeholders, such as school advisors and policy makers, as well as using quantitative instruments in order to have a more complete picture of the situation.

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