

Advancing Teacher Knowledge to Foster Plurilingual Competence in the Irish Primary School Classroom: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

In an increasingly interconnected world, the cultivation of plurilingual competence has emerged as a global educational priority. Within this global context, Ireland has undertaken significant steps to enhance Modern Foreign Language (MFL) education with its formal phased introduction to the primary curriculum commencing the 2025/2026 school year. Prior to this new curriculum addition, MFL provision was offered on a voluntary basis through initiatives such as the Department of Education's (DE) *Say Yes to Languages Programme* (SYLP) from the *Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026* developed in the context of the *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019*. Targeting students from third to sixth class (8 to 12-year-olds), this sampler module has aimed to generate awareness among students of a range of languages (including Irish Sign Language [ISL]) to help support the inclusion and appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity in schools, communities and wider society. While investigating teacher knowledge (TK) as a key factor in successful language teaching, this research explores the central question: How can we enhance TK and plurilingual competencies in contemporary Irish primary classrooms? Through a systematic review (PRISMA, 2009), this study emphasizes the need for equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to navigate plurilingual classrooms effectively. It also underscores the role of implicit TK in fostering students' linguistic development. Consequently, the '*MEGA TEACHER Framework*' was developed, identifying nine essential dimensions of TK and practice crucial for MFL instruction. The elements of this framework align closely with the objectives of the SYLP and the redeveloped Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) by highlighting the importance of empowering teachers as leaders of linguistic and cultural diversity in the primary classroom. It is hoped that the *MEGA TEACHER Framework* will help provide a roadmap to support teachers in delivering MFL instruction in primary settings.

Keywords: Teacher knowledge; plurilingual competencies; modern foreign language (MFL); primary education

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Early Language Learning (ELL) (4 -12-year-olds) is widely acknowledged for its cognitive, social, and cultural benefits (Batardière et al., 2022; Dillon, 2009; Flynn & Singleton, 2025). Equipping educators with the necessary pedagogical skills to support language acquisition in ELL may better prepare teachers to create inclusive and responsive learning environments that reflect the realities of linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms (Miller et al., 2009; Ku, 2023).

Contemporary language education policies such as *Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026*, the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030*, and the *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of both the strengths and the challenges of ELL. These developments are particularly relevant in highlighting the TK base required for effective MFL and additional language implementation in primary settings. Furthermore, guidelines such as the *Céim Standards for Initial Teacher Education* (2020) underscore the importance of TK and aim to "develop (the) pedagogical expertise of student teachers, including subject-specific pedagogical content knowledge" (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 13). Similarly, *The Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning* identifies TK as "the hallmark of the teaching profession" - emphasising that teachers should "continue to learn so that they can continue to teach" and "strive to keep their subject knowledge current demonstrating an ongoing commitment to professional learning" (The Teaching Council, 2016, pp. 3-9).

However, in pursuit of this evolving knowledge base, it seems that teachers are increasingly expected to move beyond the sole focus of subject matter and enhance their linguistic repertoires to cater to the linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms of today. Rather than acting solely as "transmitters of linguistic knowledge" they are now envisioned as "facilitators of language learning experiences" - an evolution reflected in both national and international literature (Little & Thorne, 2017; Shukhratova, 2025; Shulman, 1987, p. 9).

Therefore, considering how these linguistic repertoires can be developed leads to the following questions:

1. What are the essential domains of MFL TK and what is the knowledge gap?
2. How do we measure satisfactory plurilingual competency amongst primary school teachers?
3. How can we enhance the plurilingual competencies of primary school teachers?

Considering the infancy of this recent curriculum addition in the Irish context, this review investigates how the literature conceptualises and addresses the development, reflection, support, and accreditation of TK for enhancing plurilingual competencies in Irish primary education. A systematic review is the most appropriate method for this research as it “uses explicit, systematic methods that are selected with a view to minimising bias” and supports the synthesis of international evidence to inform practice and policy (Munn et al., 2018, p. 2).

The following section is organized in a funnel-like structure. It begins by defining plurilingualism and pluriculturalism, before examining European language policy and international examples in situ. It then narrows the focus to the evolution of MFL provision in Irish primary schools, followed by a focus on the SYLP in both English-medium and Irish-medium schools. The review then explores the general linguistic context of primary education in Ireland and concludes with a discussion of the value of TK for the development of plurilingual competence.

Plurilingualism and Pluriculturalism

Plurilingualism is defined as “the potential and/or actual ability to use several languages to varying levels of proficiency and for different purposes” (Council of Europe, 2007, p. 10). It also accounts for the ways in which “individual linguistic repertoires overlap, intersect and develop in different ways with respect to languages, dialects and registers” (Choi & Ollerhead, 2018, pp. 1-2), offering a “holistic approach to language learning and teaching” (Piccardo & Payre-Ficout, 2022, p. 15). ‘Plurilingual competence’ further promotes “the emergence of linguistic awareness, and even of metacognitive strategies, which enable the social actor to become aware of and to control his own ‘spontaneous’ ways of handling tasks and, in particular, their linguistic dimension” (Coste et al., 2009, p. 12). Within Irish primary classrooms, this ‘social actor’ may be interpreted as the teacher, whose role increasingly involves managing and valuing linguistic diversity (Creese & Blackledge, 2010).

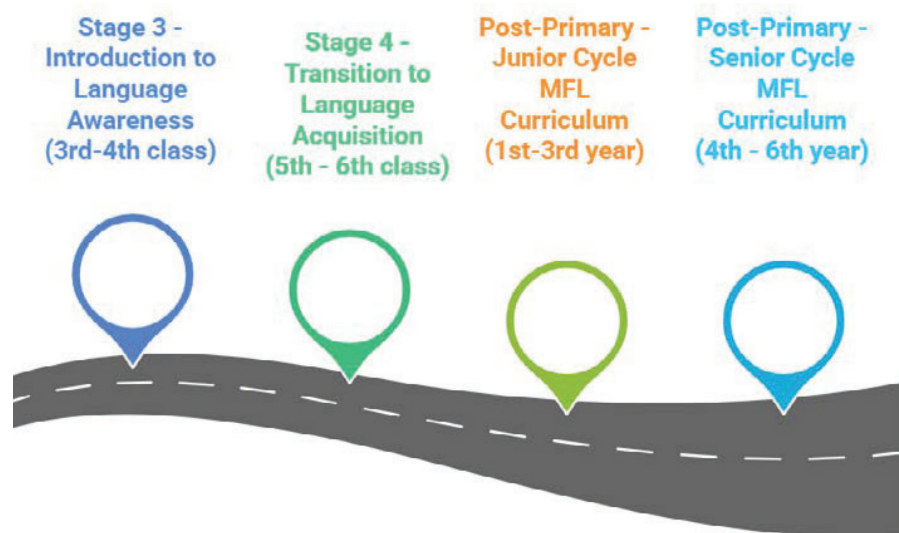
Closely linked to this is the notion of “culturally and linguistically responsive teaching”. An approach that seeks to “empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp. 17-18). Hollie (2015, p. 23) similarly describes it as “the

validation and affirmation of a child's home [...] culture and language for the purposes of building and bridging learner success in both school and mainstream society". The intersection of plurilingual competence and culturally responsive teaching may therefore offer a useful lens through which to consider emerging expectations of TK in the Irish primary context, particularly in light of increasingly diverse classroom populations and ongoing curricular reform. Recognising the value in all languages can help promote authentic learning, reflect the linguistic realities of contemporary classrooms, and support the development of global citizenship - equipping learners to "overcome the limitations of national citizenship in an increasingly globalized world" (Niens & Reilly, 2012, p. 103).

Similarly, pluriculturalism emphasises individuals' ability to navigate and integrate multiple cultural and linguistic identities, aligning with some characteristics of plurilingualism as outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). Learners act as social agents to draw on their linguistic repertoires and cultural resources in pragmatic ways to produce meaningful communication (Council of Europe, 2001). In Ireland, a reconfiguration of the PCF is timely (DE, 2023), providing "an integrated curriculum that promotes a participative approach to language learning and makes connections across and within languages" (NCCA, 2024b, p. 2).

FIGURE 1

Roadmap to MFL learning: A continuum from primary to post-primary



As illustrated in Figure 1, Ireland's evolving continuum for language learning begins with language awareness in third to fourth class (stage 3 of primary education), advances to language acquisition in fifth to sixth class (stage 4 of primary education)

and concludes with post-primary MFL curricula. This reflects a growing emphasis on plurilingual competence and curricular coherence, situating Irish policy within broader European approaches to language education.

European Language Policies: A Blueprint for Irish Plurilingual Education

While this review is grounded in the Irish context, it is framed within debates that are prominent across European language education. Across Europe, plurilingualism is promoted as a core educational value, as articulated in several key policy documents, including the *Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Companion Volume* (2020), *The Council Recommendation on a Comprehensive Approach to the Teaching and Learning of Languages* (Council of the European Union, 2019), *The Language Policy of the European Schools* (Office of the Secretary-General of the European Schools, 2019), and *The European Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027* (European Commission, 2020). Countries such as Luxembourg, Finland, France, Germany, and Spain (to name but a few), offer rich examples of plurilingualism in action and may be viewed as potential blueprints for Ireland's future linguistic endeavours.

In Luxembourg, for instance, the education system is explicitly plurilingual: Luxembourgish, German, and French each function as languages of instruction at different stages of schooling, reflecting a societal norm of plurilingual competence (Kirsch & Aleksić, 2021; Kirsch & Seele, 2022). In Finland, both Finnish and Swedish are recognised as national languages of instruction, although individual students typically follow one primary language stream; English and other foreign languages such as German and French are widely taught as additional languages through the curriculum, reinforcing a plurilingual ethos at the policy and curricular level (Kantelinen & Pollari, 2008; Latomaa & Nuolijärvi, 2002). By comparison, Ireland may be viewed as a relative 'late-comer' in the explicit conceptualisation and curricular embedding of plurilingual education in line with European frameworks such as the CEFRL (Council of Europe, 2020). However, this emergent status presents a strategic advantage: Irish policymakers and educators can draw on established European frameworks - such as the CEFRL - while adapting them to the national contexts and aligning them with national curriculum reform, teacher beliefs, and classroom realities. Similarly, the council recommendation calls for "ensuring support for schools to define their own approach to language learning, while respecting national legislation and helping schools to actively value and use their linguistic diversity" (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 18). This aligns closely with the *Language Policy of the European Schools* (2019), which frames plurilingual education not only as a pedagogical imperative, but also as a way to foster intercultural understanding and strengthen learners' identities. In the Irish context, this underscores the importance of supporting schools - whether English-

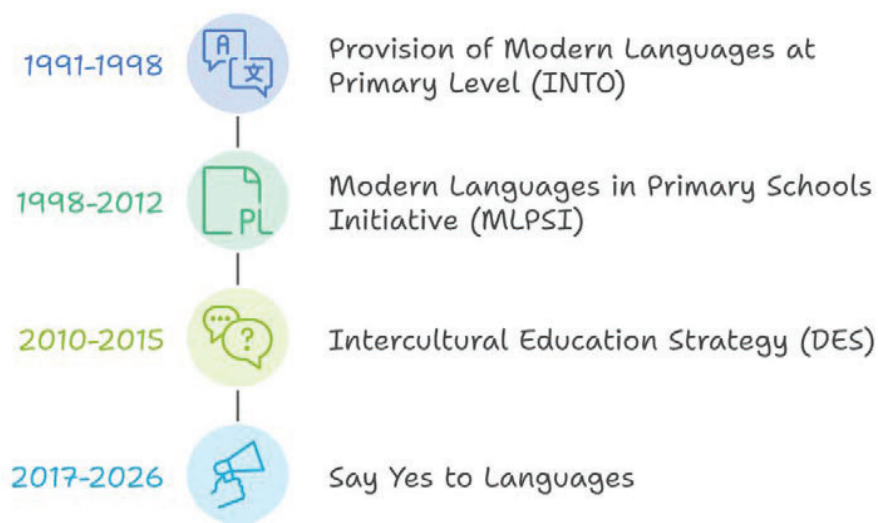
medium, Irish-medium, DEIS, Special education or culturally diverse - in tailoring plurilingual pedagogies to their unique student populations. National initiatives such as SYLP reflect a growing commitment to these broader European ideals, while Ireland's long-standing bilingual tradition offers a distinctive foundation for research-informed, context-sensitive innovation in language education. To understand the trajectory of this emerging plurilingual vision, it is contextually imperative to consider Ireland's own historical relationship with MFL provision at primary level as a journey shaped by policy shifts, discontinued initiatives, and important lessons for sustainable future implementation.

MFL Provision in Irish Primary Schools

Primary education in Ireland is delivered across diverse linguistic and educational settings, including English-medium schools, Irish-medium immersion schools (gaelscoileanna), and increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse mainstream classrooms. English-medium schools account for approximately 92% of primary education, while Irish-medium education represents around 8% of provision (DEY, 2025). Irish holds constitutional status as the first official language of Ireland and also functions as both a core subject in English-medium schools and as the language of instruction in Irish-medium education. In response to shifting linguistic and educational realities, Ireland has had a varied history of MFL provision, including *The Provision of Modern Languages at Primary Level* (INTO, 1991-1998), the *Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative* (MLPSI) (NCCA, 2008), and the *Intercultural Education Strategy* (DES, 2010) (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Evolution of language initiatives in Irish primary schools



The illustration above presents a timeline of MFL initiatives in Irish primary schools from 1991 to the present day. In 1991, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) disseminated a nationwide survey collecting data from over "1,834 primary schools nationally", revealing that "24% of schools were already providing a modern language to their classes" (NCCA, 2008, p. 19). The findings indicated that foreign languages were more likely to be taught in "scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge, multi-denominational and larger schools", with provision predominantly in French and delivered by "existing staff members (46%), Irish external teachers (37%) and teachers from other countries (17%)" (NCCA, 2008, p. 19). However, it was not until 1998 that a formal pilot project to introduce modern languages to fifth- and sixth-class pupils was implemented. This programme, later known as the *Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative* - a state-funded initiative under the *National Development Plan* (Department of Finance, 1999) - and was intended to "foster positive attitudes to language learning through the use of active learning approaches including drama, songs and games and by promoting an awareness of being European among the pupils" (NCCA, 2008, p. 11). Provision focused primarily on French, German, Italian and Spanish, reflecting Ireland's European orientation at the time; however, as classroom linguistic diversity increasingly extended beyond European languages, questions emerged regarding the adequacy of this framing. Alongside this evolving linguistic and cultural landscape, economic and budgetary pressures, together with "curriculum and school day-time constraints, teacher supply issues and the lack of progression between primary and post-primary level foreign language curricula" (Fitzpatrick, 2017, p. 3), contributed to the cessation of the initiative in 2012.

Following the discontinuation of the MLPSI, policy attention shifted away from MFL provision and towards broader questions of linguistic diversity, inclusion, and educational equity. *The Intercultural Education Strategy* (IES) sought to promote inclusivity by addressing systemic inequalities in Irish schools, advocating for widespread EAL teacher education and equitable education (DES, 2010). However, as the IES was considered a time-bound initiative, its termination aligned with a predetermined timeframe and was neither extended nor renewed.

This discontinuity in MFL provision underscores the urgent need to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and plurilingual competencies to sustainably integrate language learning into the Irish primary curriculum. In this context, the SYLP has emerged as a timely and strategic initiative, reinvigorating national efforts to re-establish MFL at primary level and respond to Ireland's evolving linguistic landscape.

SYLP in Irish Primary schools

To date, there has been over 1,300 participating primary schools in the SYLP (Languages Connect, 2024). Deriving from the Irish and English curricula of 1999 (NCCA, 2023), the DE recognised the need to implement a more formal and innovative approach to

the teaching and learning of plurilingual education, while fostering stronger alignment with the redeveloped *Primary Curriculum Framework* (PCF) (DE, 2023). As part of this shift, the revised *Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC) allocates one hour per week to MFL and/or ISL, aiming to support “children to progress in their language learning and development through the primary years” (NCCA, 2023, p. 4). This initiative represents a significant step towards continuity in language learning across the primary and post-primary divide (Figure 2). As noted by *Post-Primary Languages Ireland* (PPLI), the SYLP marks “the first time that MFL has officially formed part of the Primary School Curriculum, rather than operating as a pilot” (NCCA, 2017, p. 5). By aligning the PLC’s strands, elements, and learning outcomes with Junior Cycle specifications, the framework aims to promote a more cohesive and connected progression in pupils’ language learning trajectories throughout the 8-year primary education cycle and beyond (NCCA, 2017, pp. 6-14) (see Figure 1).

SYLP in Gaelscoileanna

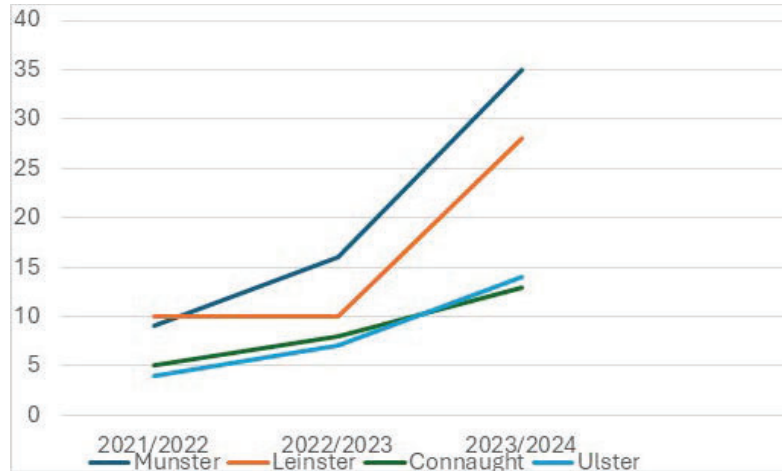
Figure 3 illustrates the number of schools that have participated in the SYLP across the provinces between 2021 and 2024. Of the approximately 1,300 participating schools, 160 were Irish-medium (Gaelscoileanna) (PPLI, 2024).

In the broader context of Irish primary education, Irish-medium schools account for approximately 8.3% of all primary schools nationally (Gaeloideachas, 2024). Of the 296 Irish-medium primary schools in Ireland, 230 have participated in the SYLP, representing a participation rate of approximately 77.7% within the Irish-medium sector (PPLI, 2024). In terms of overall programme participation, these 230 schools represent approximately 17.7% of the total 1,300 participating schools (PPLI, 2024).

English-medium schools form the majority of primary schools nationally and of the approximate 1,300 English-medium primary schools in Ireland, 1,070 have taken part in the SYLP representing a participation rate of 82.3% within the English-medium sector (PPLI, 2024).

FIGURE 3

No. of participating Gaelscoileanna in the 'Say Yes to Languages Programme' (2021-2024)



While English-medium schools dominate numerically and demonstrate a higher participation rate overall (82.3%), the level of engagement among Irish-medium schools remains notable. Although the participation rate within the Irish-medium sector (77.7%) is modestly lower, Irish-medium schools represent a substantially smaller proportion of the national primary school sector. When viewed in this context - that is, relative to the smaller size of the Irish-medium sector rather than individual school size - the extent of Gaelscoileanna participation in the SYLP is noteworthy. This pattern suggests a strong sectoral openness to engagement with additional language initiatives and plurilingual practices, despite Irish-medium schools comprising a minority within the national primary education landscape.

The Linguistic Context of Primary Education in Ireland

Ireland's approach to language learning presents a unique case. For context, Irish, as the first national language, holds a complex linguistic status whereby, depending on the educational, geographical, and cultural context, it may be considered either a first language (L1) or a second language (L2), thus possessing dual linguistic identity. This dual role of Irish foregrounds the need for careful consideration of how other languages - and associated cultural knowledge - are introduced in the primary curriculum. These considerations are shaped by local school contexts as well as broader influences such as "teacher supply, language capability, demographics, socio-political demands and educational policy" (Coyle, et al., 2010, p. 178; PPLI, 2024).

Furthermore, given the steady increase in the number and variety of home languages represented in Irish primary classrooms, it is timely to note that approximately 15% of primary pupils speak a home language - or 'non-curricular language' (Kavanagh & Neville, 2024, p. 924) - other than Irish or English (Bruen, 2023). In light of this demographic shift, Wallen & Kelly-Holmes (2017) highlight the importance of teacher language awareness for teachers of emergent bilingual learners, while Finch et al. (2020, p. 629) point to the growing pedagogical complexity that accompanies rising enrolments in multilingual settings. By recognising established linguistic diversity within classrooms and the importance of MFL implementation, teachers - when adequately supported in developing plurilingual competence - can facilitate both dimensions "as a levelling dynamic in the multilingual classroom" (Finch et al., 2020, p. 633). As such, the concept of plurilingualism warrants further consideration in the planning and delivery of primary language education.

Teacher Knowledge for Plurilingual Competence

Extant studies denote multiple definitions of TK. Tamir (1991) argued that "knowledge is not only found 'in the mind' but also 'in the body' and 'is seen in our practices'" (Clandinin and Connelly, 1988, p. 25). He posited that the "interaction between professional and personal knowledge surpasses subject matter" (p. 265) and "honours personal experiences and knowledge gained in practice" (Ben-Peretz, 2011, p. 5). Recognising educators as active practitioners who model target language use and culturally responsive teaching is critical to effective MFL instruction (Wallen & Kelly-Holmes, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Connelly et al. (1997, p. 665), reinforced the concept of "personal-practical knowledge", emphasising that "what teachers know and how their knowing is expressed in teaching" is paramount. Bringing physicality through cultural idioms, intercultural awareness, and appropriately acknowledging the linguistically diverse demographics in Irish contemporary classrooms is a cornerstone in enhancing effective TK and plurilingual competencies (Mann & Walsh, 2017). Much of the contemporary understanding of TK is shaped by Shulman's foundational work particularly his 1987 framework which offers a compelling perspective on TK.

FIGURE 4

Shulman's key domains of teacher knowledge (1987)

1. **Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)** - The blending of content knowledge with pedagogy in order to understand how to effectively teach specific content
2. **General Pedagogical Knowledge (GPK)** - Covering broad teaching strategies and classroom management principles across all subjects
3. **Curriculum Knowledge** - The use of instructional programmes and resources outlining specific subject aims and content
4. **Knowledge of Learners and Their Characteristics** – Understanding student backgrounds, learning styles and educational needs
5. **Knowledge of Educational Contexts** – Pertains to the broader environment of teaching, including school systems and community
6. **Knowledge of educational ends, purposes, values** – Addresses the philosophical and ethical dimensions of education

Building on Shulman's (1987) work, Ball et al. (2005) introduced subject-specific pedagogical frameworks such as Mathematical Knowledge for Teaching (MKT). Similarly, Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK¹) has enhanced classroom practice by integrating digital tools (Cheng, 2017, p. 692). Morton (2018) applied these concepts to language teaching through the Language Knowledge for Content Teaching (LKCT) framework, which holds particular relevance to Ireland's increasingly diverse classrooms. Morton (2018) expands Shulman's framework by embedding language awareness across all TK domains. This evolving conceptualization of TK underscores the necessity of integrating plurilingual competencies into pedagogical frameworks, equipping educators to navigate diverse linguistic contexts and provide inclusive and responsive MFL instruction.

1 TPACK - Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge is a framework proposed by Mishra and Koehler (2006). It consists of "three sources of knowledge, namely, content knowledge (CK), pedagogical knowledge (PK), and technological knowledge (TK) as the prerequisite for understanding teachers' knowledge of information and communication technology (ICT) integration" (Cheng, 2017, p. 693).

Systematic Review

This systematic review aims to bridge research and practice by analysing, synthesising, and evaluating existing literature on TK for plurilingual competence in the MFL classroom, ultimately guiding effective practice in the Irish context.

Search Terms and Databases

The search terms were carefully chosen to encompass a range of related topics and were combined using the Boolean operators (AND/OR) as seen below.

FIGURE 5

Boolean operators and key terms

("modern foreign languages" OR "mfl" OR "foreign languages") AND ("teacher knowledge")
AND ("elementary school" OR "primary school" OR "primary education" OR "elementary education")

The initial search yielded 71 records. These records were screened to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria of the above terms. A comprehensive literature search was conducted between the years 2003 and 2024 to ensure contemporary research was to the forefront of the investigation, reflecting the substantial curricular and pedagogical changes in MFL education over the past two decades. EBSCOHost was chosen as the search location/database due to the platform's specialized educational nature and its extensive index of peer-reviewed journals.

Exclusion Criteria and Screening Process

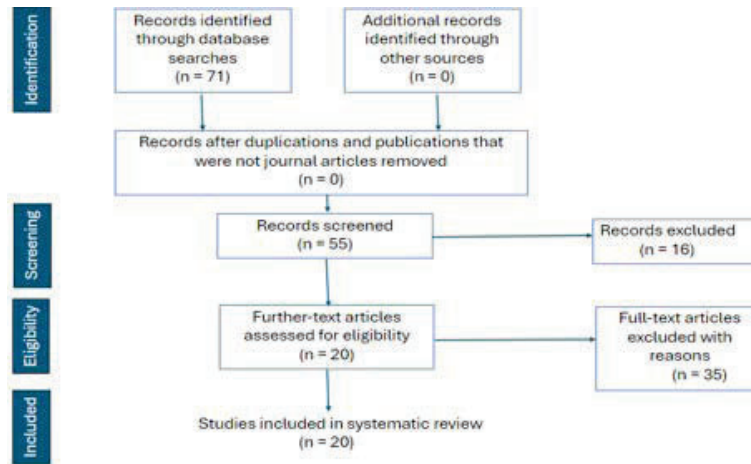
Although the initial 71 articles all included elements of MFL, TK and primary school environments, they were not exclusively limited to these key factors. This led to the exclusion of a further 16 studies bringing our first wave of exclusion to 55 records (see appendix A).

The second wave of screening resulted in the exclusion of a further 35 studies, as these did not align with the components of the Population Intervention Outcome (PIO) framework that guided the review (see Appendix D). The PIO framework is used in systematic reviews to structure research questions by specifying the population under study, the intervention examined, and the relevant outcomes. Accordingly, studies were excluded at this stage if they did not address one or more of the PIO components underpinning this review.

Mapping Results of Search Strategy

FIGURE 6

PRISMA flow diagram demonstrating search strategy, Moher et al. (2009)



1. Barton, A. (2009)
2. Birova, J. (2023)
3. Bui et al. (2023)
4. Butler et al. (2021)
5. Chaharabashloo et al. (2020)
6. Chan, A. (2023)
7. Cheng, K.H. (2017)
8. Davis, E. et al. (2012)
9. Driscoll, P. (2013)
10. Hosoda, Y. (2014)
11. Luo, et al. (2020)
12. Moats, L. & Foorman, B. (2003)
13. Moodie, I. & Feryok, A. (2015)
14. Ní Dhíorbháin, A. & Ó Duibhir, P. (2022)
15. Panev, V. (2015)
16. Pritchard, A. et al. (2010)
17. Tsou, W. (2022)
18. Vo Thi, K. A (2022)
19. Woodgate-Jones, A. (2008)
20. Zhao. J. et al (2016)

Results of Systematic Review Search

The following section briefly outlines the more noteworthy patterns and trends uncovered in the included empirical literature. To summarise, the studies excluded from the final corpus predominantly addressed non-related contexts, were not peer reviewed or were related to other subjects or disciplines (see Appendix A). Similarly, an investigation into the languages and the format in which they were presented

was considered due to global accessibility (see Appendix C). Additionally, in the continental breakdown - highlighting the most prominent geographical areas of the studies - we learn that both Europe and Asia generated the most traction in relevant publications, precisely 35% from both continents (see Appendix B). Finally, The PIO Framework illustrated the participants and key documents - such as the *'Primary Language Curriculum - including draft Modern Foreign Languages'* NCCA (2024b) that helped the researcher reach some noteworthy outcomes as seen in Appendix D. These findings provide a foundational overview of the empirical landscape, offering insights that help frame the subsequent discussion of the research questions.

Findings and Discussion

RQ1: What are the essential domains of MFL TK and what is the knowledge gap?

The Domains of MFL TK

The domains identified in the systematic literature review are both presented and discussed below (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 7

Table of MFL TK domains

Reflective and Practical TK	Chaharabashloo et al., (2020), Cheng (2017), Ariffin et al. (2018), Gibbs., (1995), Ibrahim et al., (2013), Robbs & Broyles (2012)
Holistic approaches to TK	Barton et al., (2009), Ollerhead & Choi (2018), Hosoda (2014), Tsou (2005)
Metalinguistic Awareness and TK for Literacy Instruction	Moats & Foorman (2003), Luo et al (2020), Zhao et al. (2016), Ní Dhíorbháin & Ó Duibhir (2022)

Reflective and Practical TK

Chaharabashloo et al. (2020) emphasise the critical role of reflective practices and practical knowledge. They refer to this combination as “the epistemology of practice” (2020, p. 2). The notion of extending *existing* knowledge as a means of effective practice, thus consolidating the significant role of teachers as “key agents of knowledge” and not “passive users of academic research findings” (2020, p. 2). The exemplary teacher is a reflective practitioner who mentors colleagues, shares knowledge and skills, and takes on additional co-curricular responsibilities, ultimately contributing to academic leadership (Ariffin et al., 2018; Gibbs, 1995; Ibrahim et al., 2013; Robbs & Broyles, 2012).

Therefore, reflection is not only a foundational pedagogical tool, but also a way in which educators can evolve professionally. From a practical perspective, Cheng (2017) underscores the potential of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and digital tools in enhancing MFL pedagogy. While acknowledging their inherent challenges such as teacher confidence, professional experience, and demographic differences (i.e. gender and age), the theory of TPACK provides invaluable insights into the integration of L1 language education.

Holistic Approaches to TK

With regards to a more holistic approach to TK, Barton et al. (2009) illustrate the importance of language awareness programmes and the notion of teachers themselves being “one-step ahead of their students” in the language learning process (2009, p. 157). In alignment with Barton, Choi and Ollerhead (2018) acknowledge teachers “taking up a plurilingual stance” and recognised that “plurilingual teaching strategies outside the expertise and experience of the teachers (should) place the responsibility back on the students” (2018, p. 5).

Hosoda (2014) consolidates this notion by viewing students “as not-yet-competent interactants in the target language” (p. 13). However, by recognising this within oneself as the teacher, one can create a supportive and empathetic learning environment that values the process of language acquisition and encourages students to actively engage without fear of making mistakes. Moreover, when teachers demonstrate error tolerance at the early stages of plurilingual acquisition, accuracy will subsequently follow in quasi-naturalistic stages.

Lastly, Tsou (2005) reaffirms the notion of holistically implementing cultural awareness into the classroom and discusses the idea of integrating the teaching of culture which subsequently has positive effects on foreign language acquisition.

To summarise, holistic approaches to teacher knowledge, incorporating co-learning, cultural awareness, and reflective practice, have the potential to enhance plurilingual competencies in the MFL classroom and can help support educators in fostering more inclusive and linguistically responsive teaching.

Metalinguistic Awareness and TK for Literacy Instruction

TK of metalinguistics and literacy refers to the understanding of linguistic constructs (such as phonology, syntax, and morphology etc.) and the ability to apply this knowledge to develop students’ literacy and language skills. This domain is especially critical in MFL pedagogy where cohesion across all linguistic variables is highly valued (NCCA, 2024b). Therefore, teachers’ literacy and metalinguistic knowledge is pivotal for aligning language teaching with MFL learning objectives. For instance, Moats and Foorman (2003) emphasise the foundational nature of phonology and morphology and consider

it to be “fundamental to differentiated instruction” (2003, p. 38) while Zhao et al. (2016) argue for the psychological impact of metalinguistic confidence and imply that its derivation lies in the “understanding of basic language constructs and the ability to use the terminology to explain these constructs explicitly” (2016, p. 142).

When referring to Irish-Medium Education (IME) contexts, Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Duibhir (2022) identify a lack of explicit metalinguistic instruction, highlighting the dearth of “linguistic proficiency and explicit knowledge in Student Primary Teachers (SPTs)” (2022, p. 742) and recommend empirical-based guidance with the view to improving practice and informing ITE policies. Finally, Luo et al. (2020) extend this discussion to reading instruction, pointing to missed opportunities for linking literacy and oral language development.

To conclude, a culmination of all linguistic variables should be woven into the MFL classroom, drawing from all comprehensive dimensions of MFL TK such as Reflective and Practical TK, Holistic Approaches to TK and Teacher Metalinguistic Knowledge for Literacy Instruction.

RQ2: How can we enhance plurilingual competencies of primary school teachers?

Existing studies provide valuable insights into plurilingual competence and its acquisition. However, Karjagdi Çolak et al. (2025) argue that “professional identity reconstruction” must also be considered, with school leadership fostering “teacher education environments and platforms that empower teachers to construct their own professional trajectories and identities” (p. 2). This process is especially crucial as Ireland’s primary school teachers transition into a more linguistically diverse educational landscape. One promising pathway to fostering these individual and collective professional trajectories is through Cross-Sectoral Communities of Practice (CCOP).

CCOP: Primary & Post-Primary School Teachers

CCOP offers a collaborative framework for enhancing TK through shared expertise and professional development opportunities. Pritchard et al. (2010) report that secondary school MFL teachers supporting primary teachers through video-conferencing positively impacted non-specialist teachers’ linguistic and pedagogical knowledge. Additionally, linking primary classes with international peers provided authentic language experiences, enhancing both teacher and student exposure to real-world linguistic interactions. Pritchard et al. (2010) also claim that secondary school teachers recognised they had underestimated incoming students’ abilities and gained a greater appreciation for primary teachers’ effective classroom organization.

Hunt et al. (2005) also highlight the benefits of “secondary specialist teachers working alongside primary teachers” (p. 219) while Sharpe (2001) emphasizes that the optimal MFL instruction model combines the expertise of both generalists and specialists. However, this approach has been largely absent in Ireland’s initial teacher education (ITE). The structured integration of CCOPs could therefore facilitate stronger links between primary and secondary teachers, ensuring continuity in language education across different stages of schooling.

Sharing Education Programme: A Blueprint for Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

The Sharing Education programme (SEP) in Northern Ireland (2007-2010) serves as a useful model for potential CCOP initiatives in Ireland. SEP sought to build collegial partnerships and collaborative networks between students and teachers (Gallagher, 2016). The programme’s success was based on five core elements, including shared professional development, resource-sharing, and cross-sectoral collaboration, offering insights into the structuring of MFL education in primary schools. As Wenger (2002) states, “good community design requires an understanding of the community’s potential to develop and steward knowledge, but it often takes an outside perspective to help members see the possibilities” (2002, p. 3). Applying these principles to MFL education could facilitate new collaborations and resource-sharing that benefit both students and teachers.

CCOP: Primary School Teachers and External Stakeholders

CCOPs integrate institutions, practitioners, and community members, creating professional networks that enhance subject-specific pedagogy. When a CCOP aligns both practically and culturally with the linguistic and cultural needs of primary schools, it supports a critical approach to intercultural education (Briggs, 2012; Batardiere et al., 2023).

The Role of Gaelscoileanna in Supporting Plurilingual Competence

Given the longstanding role of Gaelscoileanna in language revitalization, there is significant potential for collaboration between IME and English-medium schools to support plurilingual education. As Ní Dhiorbháin & Ó Duibhir (2022) highlight, IME schools have demonstrated success in bilingual literacy instruction, yet gaps remain in explicit metalinguistic training.

In conclusion, the absence of structured CCOPs in Irish primary schools presents a significant gap in the development of plurilingual competence and TK. If direct primary-secondary collaboration is unfeasible, alternative models, such as partnerships between

English-medium and IME schools, should be explored. By fostering collaborative frameworks that bridge the expertise of generalist and specialist teachers while integrating external linguistic resources, educators can develop the confidence and skills necessary to support Ireland's evolving linguistic landscape. Strengthening these collaborative models has the potential to sustain and enhance plurilingual education in primary schools, equipping both teachers and students with the tools to navigate increasingly multilingual environments.

In addition to internal collaboration, Irish primary schools are encouraged to engage external stakeholders to support MFL instruction. Heritage language speakers, migrant parents, educators from *The Migrant Teacher Programme*, and post-primary MFL teachers could provide invaluable expertise, offering linguistic and cultural insights that enrich the learning experience. Utilising such external resources can alleviate the pedagogical pressures of MFL implementation and create a more sustainable model of language instruction.

Additionally, and particularly if leveraged appropriately, Gaelscoileanna could serve as key facilitators in integrating plurilingual methodologies into broader primary school contexts. Cross-collaborations between IME and English-medium schools may provide a sustainable model for MFL implementation, reinforcing teachers' confidence in language instruction and enhancing students' exposure to diverse linguistic practices.

RQ3 - How do we measure satisfactory plurilingual competency amongst primary school teachers?

Measuring teachers' content knowledge is a complex and multifaceted process, particularly in the domain of linguistic competence. The empirical literature suggests that satisfactory plurilingual competency among primary school teachers is best assessed through three interconnected pillars:

1. Evaluation
2. Accreditation
3. Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Evaluation

Whole-school evaluation in professional development assesses the effectiveness and alignment of training initiatives in enhancing teacher competencies and instructional quality (DE, 2022; DE, 2023a; Teaching Council, 2016; Teaching Council, 2020). Given the implementation of foreign languages as part of the newly redeveloped PCF in 2025, schools require structured evaluation processes to assess teacher preparedness and support their professional growth.

Panev (2015) examined English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' perception of their MFL pedagogical competencies in the primary school classroom, highlighting concerns about inadequate preparation and the need for further professional development opportunities. In particular, participants expressed uncertainty regarding their post-qualification readiness in relation to the 'International Reference Framework languages levels and skills', as well as a perceived need for "more reflexive practice and commitment to the integration of multicultural and multilingual competence in teaching aims" (2015, p. 49). In addition to these concerns, teachers highlighted the absence of a merit-based system through which professional growth from entry-level to advanced positions might be recognised and rewarded. These findings resonate with ongoing discussions in the Irish context regarding the recognition and support of teachers' professional learning in MFL.

While resource constraints may limit direct implementation, recognising professional engagement - such as participation in *'The MFL Teacher Upskilling Scheme'* Languages Connect (2024) - could foster a supportive culture of continuous learning. Encouragingly, 140 teachers participated in upskilling in a foreign language as part of the 2023/2024 pilot Languages Connect, (2024), demonstrating growing interest in professionalizing MFL instruction.

Accreditation

Accreditation involves the certification of individual teachers, endorsement of training programmes, and institutional recognition by authoritative bodies. Participation in accredited training enhances professional skillsets through structured career development (Birova et al., 2023). Birova et al. (2023) further highlight the benefits of engaging with external institutions for professional development, particularly for authentic linguistic exposure. Opportunities like job shadowing, peer observations, and pedagogical reflection, facilitate the exchange of innovative teaching techniques, methods, and tools for immediate classroom application (Birova et al, 2023).

In the context of Ireland's SYLP, external collaborations could provide invaluable opportunities for linguistic immersion and methodological upskilling. As Ireland continues to expand MFL offerings at the primary level, aligning accreditation models with European benchmarks could further strengthen teacher competencies and standardize instructional quality.

Evolve

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is a key driver of teacher effectiveness. Moats and Foorman (2003) found that professional development programmes significantly enhance teachers' disciplinary knowledge, positively impacting student achievement in reading.

These findings highlight the critical link between teacher upskilling and student learning outcomes. In the context of MFL instruction, definitive CPD requisites for primary school teachers remain unclear. Ní Dhiorbháin et al. (2022) emphasise the need for structured training in metalinguistics and reports that “the development of explicit knowledge, including metalanguage, needs to be systematically planned for, taught, and assessed in language teacher education” (p. 742). Furthermore, Ní Dhiorbháin et al. suggest that “language teachers need to be supported and incentivized to continue their language education on completion of their ITE” (2022, p. 741). However, current gaps in structured accreditation for MFL educators at the primary level create uncertainty about training pathways and competency benchmarks. Ní Dhiorbháin & Ó Duibhir (2021) also note that “shortages of language teachers in many jurisdictions have required generalist teachers to upskill and teach languages, thus compounding concerns about language teachers’ content knowledge” (2021, p. 732). Establishing clearer CPD requirements for primary school teachers would enhance pedagogical preparedness, allowing educators to confidently develop their own plurilingual repertoires and instructional strategies. A useful comparison can be made with post-primary MFL teaching in Ireland, where educators must meet stringent linguistic criteria. Secondary school teachers are required to achieve a B2.2 proficiency in their target language, demonstrate immersive experience in the language’s native country, and engage with literary texts in the target language (The Teaching Council, 2026). While primary education has different instructional objectives, an adapted accreditation framework - contextualized for younger learners - could provide valuable guidance for aspiring MFL educators.

In summary, satisfactory plurilingual competency among primary school teachers can be effectively measured through structured evaluation, formal accreditation, and ongoing CPD. A systematic evaluation framework would ensure that professional development aligns with curriculum objectives and school needs, while accreditation would establish clear benchmarks for teacher competency. Furthermore, embedding CPD as a core component of MFL teacher education would enhance linguistic proficiency and pedagogical confidence.

By addressing these three pillars - evaluation, accreditation, and CPD - Ireland can create a sustainable model for MFL instruction in primary schools. Aligning teacher education with European language policies and providing structured professional development opportunities will empower primary educators to confidently navigate the evolving linguistic landscape and foster meaningful plurilingual competencies in their classrooms.

Conclusion

The MEGA TEACHER Framework

The findings of this systematic review highlight the critical role of TK in shaping plurilingual competencies in Irish primary schools. By fostering the essential nine components of TK as seen in Figure 8 below, i.e. the *MEGA TEACHER Framework*, educators may confidently navigate the evolving linguistic landscape of the redeveloped PCF seen in primary schools today. The *MEGA TEACHER Framework*, developed from the findings of this systematic review, encapsulates nine essential dimensions of TK and practice required to enhance plurilingual competencies in Irish primary school classrooms. Rooted in theoretical and empirical insights, this framework aligns with the broader goals of the redeveloped PCF and SYLP (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8

The MEGA TEACHER framework

Me	G.A	T	E	A	C	H	E	R
Metalinguistic Knowledge	General Appreciation	TPACK	Evaluation	Accreditation	CCOP	Holistic Approaches	Evolve	Reflective and Practical Practices
Ni Dhiorbháin & Ó Duibhir (2022), Moat & Foorman (2003), Luo et al. (2020), Zhao et al. (2016)	Moodie & Feryok (2015)	Cheng (2017), Pritchard et al. (2010)	Panev et al. (2015)	Birova (2003), Ni Dhiorbháin & Ó Duibhir (2020)	Woodgate-Jones (2008), Pritchard et al. (2010)	Barton et al. (2009), Ollerhead & Choi (2018), Hosoda (2014), Tsou (2005)	Moats & Foorman (2003), Ni Dhiorbháin & Ó Duibhir	Chaharabaslou et al. (2020), Cheng (2017), Ariffin et al. (2018), Gibbs, (1995), Ibrahim et al., (2013), Robbs & Broyles (2012)

Me: Metalinguistic Knowledge: Teachers must understand key language constructs to support cross-linguistic connections, fostering literacy across multiple languages and enhancing students' plurilingual abilities.

G.A: General Appreciation (Languages and Culture): Encouraging respect for linguistic and cultural diversity promotes an inclusive environment, fostering intercultural awareness and appreciation among students and teachers.

TPACK: Integrating digital tools enhances engagement and supports MFL instruction, equipping teachers with digital literacy skills for plurilingual contexts.

Evaluation (School Contexts): Systematic evaluation ensures professional development aligns with institutional goals, supporting sustainable language education and improving MFL instructional practices.

Accreditation: Formal recognition of teacher qualifications validates linguistic and pedagogical competencies, fostering professional growth and ensuring high standards in MFL instruction.

CCOP: Partnerships between schools and external stakeholders enhance MFL pedagogy through shared expertise, promoting best practices and collaborative language learning.

Holistic Approaches: Co-learning and cultural awareness foster a supportive environment, encouraging a growth mindset and reinforcing teachers' adaptability in plurilingual instruction.

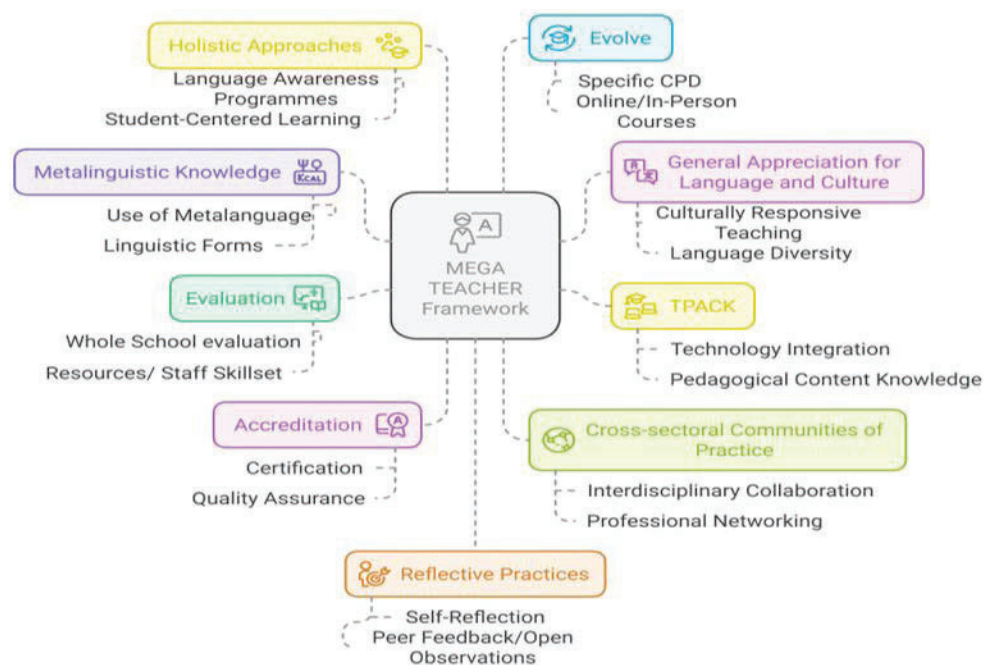
Evolve (CPD/ITE): Opportunities for tailored MFL CPD can enhance linguistic and pedagogical skills whilst strengthening TK and improving plurilingual competencies over time.

Reflective Practices: Encouraging self-assessment bridges theory and practice, enabling MFL teachers to refine strategies and adapt to diverse classroom needs.

Finally, the *MEGA TEACHER Framework* provides a structured model for equipping teachers with the necessary skills to promote inclusive, multilingual learning environments, ensuring that MFL education is sustainable, effective, and aligned with national curricular goals.

FIGURE 9

Illustration of Mega Teacher Framework



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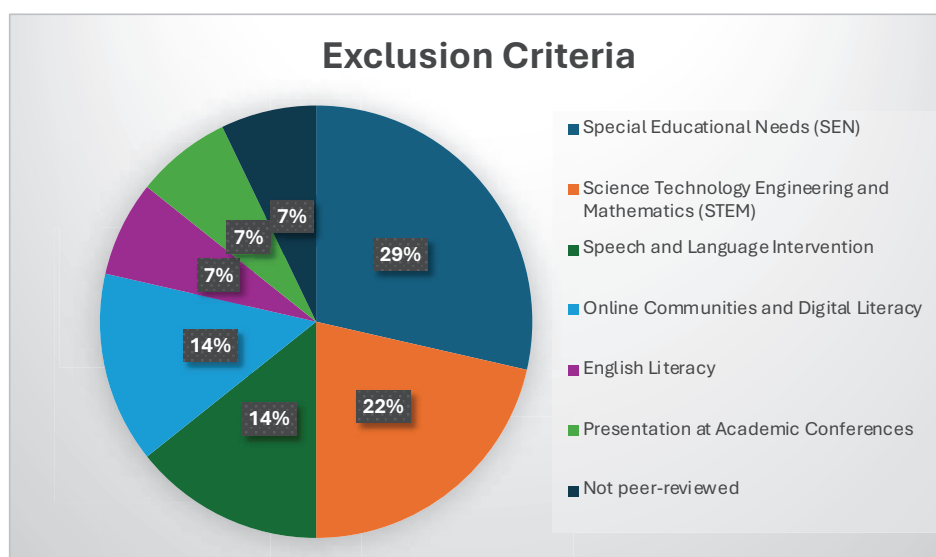
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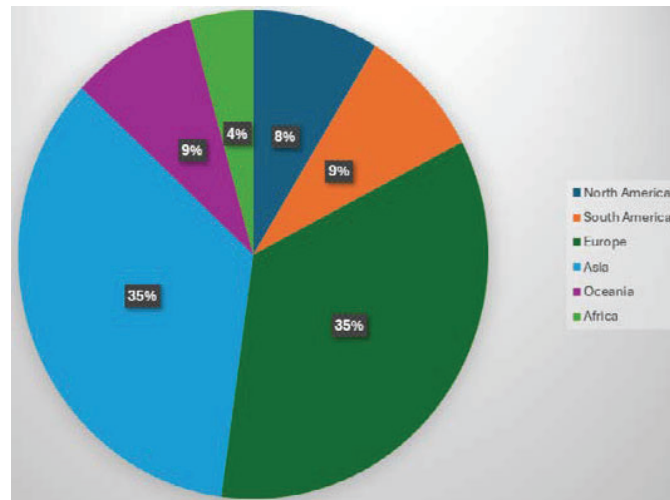
Appendix A

Distribution of studies by research focus / exclusion criteria context



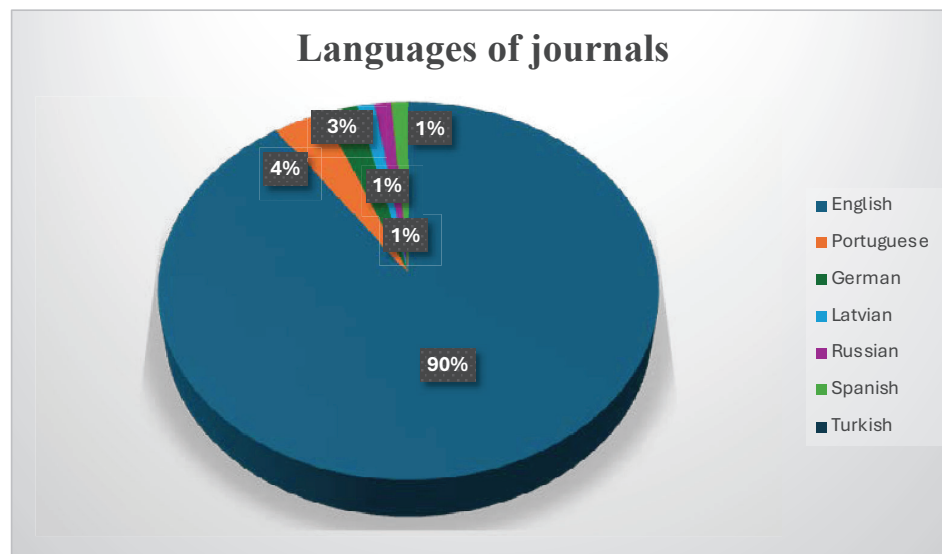
Appendix B

Geographical distribution of studies included in the review



Appendix C

Most frequently occurring target languages in the reviewed journal literature



Appendix D

The PIO framework

Component	Description
Population	1) Primary school pre-service teachers Initial Teacher Education students (ITE) 2) Primary Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) 3) Post-qualification Primary school teachers and Senior primary school Management 4) Primary school students & parents
Intervention	- The integration of the new Modern Foreign Language Scheme ‘Languages Connect - Ireland’s Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017 – 2026’ as implemented in the RPCF. - Primary Language Curriculum – including draft Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)’ NCCA (2024).
Outcome	- Teacher knowledge - Essential domains of MFL knowledge - Enhanced plurilingual competencies - Effective practice

Appendix E

Corpus of 20 academic journals for systematic review

1. Barton, A, Bragg, J & Serratrice, L (2009).	<i>‘Discovering Language’ In Primary School: An Evaluation Of A Language Awareness Programme.</i>
2. Berberian, A. P, Bortolozzi, K. B, Massi, G, Biscouto, A. R, Enjiu, A. J & de Oliveira, K. F. P (2013).	<i>Knowledge analysis Of Teachers Working In Elementary School On The Written Language From The Perspective Of Literacy Proficiency.</i>
3. Bui, T. L. D & Dao, P (2023).	<i>Primary school children’s Peer Interaction: Exploring EFL teachers’ Perceptions And Practices.</i>
4. Butler, Y. G., Peng, X & Lee, J (2021).	<i>Young Learners’ Voices: Towards A Learner-Centered Approach To Understanding Language Assessment Literacy.</i>
5. Chaharbashloo, H, Gholami, K, Aliasgari, M, Talebzadeh, H & Mousapour, N (2020).	<i>Analytical Reflection On Teachers’ Practical Knowledge: A Case Study Of Exemplary Teachers In An Educational Reform Context.</i>
6. Chan, A (2023).	<i>Chinese Immigrant Families’ Aspirations For Children’s Bilingual Learning In New Zealand’s Social Spaces</i>
7. Cheng, K.H (2017).	<i>A Survey Of Native Language Teachers’ Technological Pedagogical And Content Knowledge (TPACK) In Taiwan.</i>

8. Davis, E & Agbenyega, J. S (2012).	<i>Language policy And Instructional Practice Dichotomy: The Case Of Primary Schools In Ghana</i>
9. Driscoll, P, Earl, J & Cable, C (2013).	<i>The Role And Nature Of The Cultural Dimension In Primary Modern Languages.</i>
10. Hosoda, Y (2014).	<i>Missing Response After Teacher Question In Primary School English A Foreign Language Classes.</i>
11. Luo, M, Main, S, Lock, G., Joshi, R. M & Zhong, C (2020).	<i>Exploring Chinese EFL teachers' knowledge and Beliefs Relating To The Teaching Of English Reading In Public Primary Schools In China.</i>
12. Moats, L. C & Foorman, B. R (2003).	<i>Measuring Teachers' Content Knowledge Of Language And Reading.</i>
13. Moodie, I & Feryok, A (2015).	<i>Beyond Cognition To Commitment: English Language Teaching In South Korean Primary Schools.</i>
14. Ní Dhiorbháin, A & Ó Duibhir, P (2022).	<i>Exploring Student Primary Teachers' Linguistic Knowledge Of Irish.</i>
15. Pritchard, A, Hunt, M & Barnes, A (2010).	<i>Case Study Investigation Of A Videoconferencing Experiment In Primary Schools, Teaching Modern Foreign Languages.</i>
16. Şavli, F (2014).	<i>The Opinions Of The 4th Grade Students Of French Language Teaching Departments About The School Experience Lesson.</i>
17. Panev, V & Barakoska, A (2015).	<i>The Need Of Strengthening The Pedagogical Competencies In Teaching From The English teachers' Perspective.</i>
18. Vo, T. K. A (2022).	<i>English teachers' Attitude And Challenges In Facing Immediate Online Teaching: A Case Study In Vietnam.</i>
19. Tsou, W (2005).	<i>The Effects Of Cultural Instruction On Foreign Language Learning.</i>
20. Zhao, J, Joshi, R, Dixon, L, Huang, L, Joshi, R. M & Dixon, L. Q (2016).	<i>Chinese EFL teachers' knowledge of Basic Language Constructs And Their Self-Perceived Teaching Abilities.</i>
