



An empirical study of the experiences of modern foreign language teaching, learning and assessment in Irish post-primary schools within the context of Ireland's commitment to the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002) and its plurilingual vision for Europe.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Geraldine and Robert Flynn, my aunts, Lorraine McRann and Celine Flynn (RIP), my uncle, Patrick McRann, my grandparents, Kathleen McRann (RIP), Padraic McRann (RIP), Bríd Flynn (RIP) and Eddie Flynn (RIP), as well as my former Leaving Certificate French teacher, Dominica Crean. I am truly indebted to these individuals for fostering in me a deep appreciation for learning and a love for languages. I thank them for instilling in me the belief that education has the potential to change the world.

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Abstract

Ireland finds itself approaching almost a century of independence as a largely monolingual nation. Attempts to achieve a plurilingual populace, capable of speaking modern foreign languages (MFLs), through the post-primary education system have, for the most part, been unsuccessful. Official surveys conducted over the past decade indicate that up to three-quarters of Irish people claim they cannot speak a foreign language. Given all the benefits that being plurilingual offers as well as the incalculable missed opportunities Ireland is experiencing by not having a plurilingual populace (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a), the Irish government, amongst many others, have raised concern and advise that the learning of a foreign language is no longer a choice, it is a necessity. This realisation that the people of Ireland need to become plurilingual is not new. Indeed, in 2002, at an EU Heads of State meeting in Barcelona, Ireland became a signatory to an agreement (Barcelona Summit Agreement) that established the long-term ambition that all European citizens should be able to speak two languages in addition to their first language (Mother Tongue + 2).

Given that childhood and adolescence form a critical period for additional language learning, the education system can play a significant role in making the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002) a reality. As the traditional ways of developing plurilingual students have for all intents and purposes failed, innovative methods are required. The primary aim of this thesis is to research the feasibility of introducing three strategies that could, by way of a modern foreign language policy and planning document for schools, develop greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students. These are: a) Harmonising post-primary MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR); b) Replacing the current State MFL exams (Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate) with CEFR international exams; and c) Implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

Although developing a plurilingual populace through the education system is an onerous task, it is not without precedent. The European Schools system is an educational model, operating throughout the European Union, that has already successfully achieved the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (MT+2). Its system also demonstrates how various components of the three proposed strategies successfully operate to foster plurilingual second-level students. In this context, this thesis examines the European Schools system as an interesting educational model and explores if some of its elements could be adopted in the Irish education system.

The main methodological philosophy employed in this thesis is that of Grounded Theory. A mixed-methods case-study research project, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, in four different types of second-level schools in Ireland was conducted, involving MFL students, their MFL teachers as well as senior school management. Additional research was undertaken at national level in Ireland as well as with senior management in the European Schools system in Brussels. The findings indicate significant ground support amongst stakeholders for the three proposed strategies. The thesis concludes that these initiatives offer a viable step forward to making the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement a reality in Ireland.

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List of Abbreviations

AES	Accredited European Schools
CAO	Central Applications Office
CBA	Classroom-Based Assessment
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
CLIL	Content and Language Integrated Learning
COE	Council of Europe
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CPH	Critical Period Hypothesis
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CSPE	Civic, Social and Political Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DOE	Department of Education
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EC	European Commission
ECML	European Centre for Modern Languages
ELP	European Language Portfolio
ES	European Schools
ESS	European Schools System
EU	European Union
FL	Foreign Language
FLAG	Foreign Languages Advisory Group
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GOI	Government of Ireland
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
JCT	Junior Cycle for Teachers
JTC	Joint Teaching Committee (European Schools)
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
L3	Third Language
L4	Fourth Language
L5	Fifth Language
LAC	Languages Across the Curriculum

LP	Language Policy
LPP	Language Policy and Planning
MFL	Modern Foreign Language
MI	Multiple Intelligences
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MLPSI	Modern Languages in Primary School Initiative
MT	Mother Tongue
MT+2	Mother Tongue and 2 Additional Languages
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NPCPP	National Parents Council Post Primary
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
NUI	National University of Ireland
OECD	Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development
ONL	Other National Language
OSG	Office of the Secretary General (European Schools)
PDU	Pedagogical Development Unit (European Schools)
PE	Physical Education
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PPLI	Post-Primary Languages Ireland
SEC	State Examinations Commissions
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SLAR	Subject Learning and Assessment Review
SLSS	Second Level Support Service
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
SWALS	Students Without a Language Section (European Schools)
TC	The Teaching Council
TL	Target Language

Introduction

Ireland's education system has undergone significant developments since its inception in 1831. Such advances include: 'free' universal second-level education introduced in 1967 (Coolahan, 1981: 195), 'free' third-level undergraduate education in 1996 (Department of Education and Science, 2009: 4), as well as unprecedented educational developments in legislation and policies over the last three decades, from *Charting Our Education Future* (1995) to *Languages Connect* (2017). This progress shows no signs of abating, with the Irish government setting itself an ambitious plan to make the Irish education system the best in Europe by 2026 (Government of Ireland, 2018).

However, despite its significant advancements in many respects, Ireland finds itself approaching almost a century of independence with a largely monolingual populace. A bilingual nation of Gaeilge (the name of the Irish language in Irish) and English, envisioned by its forefathers (Constitution of the Irish Free State, 1922: Art. 4), remains as much a challenge today as it did at the foundation of the State (1922). Indeed, struggles with learning an additional language go beyond the Irish language. Attempts to achieve fluency in post-primary curricular foreign languages, namely, French, German, Italian and Spanish, have also been unsuccessful for the majority of the Irish population (European Commission, 2016: 3).

Indeed, the competences of Irish people in the first official language of their nation, Gaeilge, are poor. According to the 2016 census data for Ireland, only 39.8% of the population responded "yes" to the question, "Can you speak Irish?" (Central Statistics Office, 2016: 66). This percentage decreased to 30.1% for respondents aged between 10 and 19 years of age (CSO, 2016: 66). In fact, only 17.4% of the population (3 years of age and over) speak Gaeilge at all outside the education system (CSO, 2016: 67). This figure dramatically reduces to 1.7% of the population (3 years and over) who speak Gaeilge on a daily basis (CSO, 2016: 67).

The Irish populace also faces challenges with their linguistic competences in foreign languages. The Eurostat reports are a cause for serious concern. In the 2011 Eurostat Report, 72.7% of the respondents in Ireland (25 to 64 year olds) claimed they knew "no foreign language" (EC, 2016: 3). In the 2016 Eurostat report, the figure improved and 49.2% of respondents in Ireland (25 to 64 year olds) stated they knew "no foreign language" (EC, 2016: 3). The 50.8% who claimed knowledge in a foreign language was broken down as follows: 29.9% said they knew one foreign language, 15.4% said they knew two foreign languages, and 5.6% said they knew three or more foreign languages (EC,

2016: 3). On further analysis, of the 50.8% who claimed knowledge of at least one foreign language, when asked what level of command they had in their “best-known foreign language”, the breakdown was as follows: 31.9% said they were proficient, 22.2% stated they had a good command, with 45.6% saying they had a basic command of the foreign language (EC, 2016: 9). In summary, according to the 2016 Eurostat Report, only 50.8% of the population of 25 to 64 year olds in Ireland claim competence in a foreign language. However, for most of this cohort, they only have basic competences to a good level. As such, the findings indicate that a clear majority of the population of Ireland have either basic or no competences in a foreign language.

In terms of how Ireland compares with the EU-28 (28 countries in the European Union in 2016), in 2016, 35.4% of working-age adults (25 to 64 year-olds) stated they did not know a foreign language (EC, 2016: 1), compared to Ireland, at 49.2% (EC, 2016: 3); 35.2% of working-age adults in the EU-28 said they knew one foreign language (EC, 2016: 1), compared to Ireland, at 29.8% (EC, 2016: 3); 21% of working-age adults in the EU-28 reported they knew two foreign languages (EC, 2016: 1), compared to Ireland, at 15.4% (EC, 2016: 3); finally, 8.4% of working-age adults in the EU (EC, 2016: 3) stated they knew three or more foreign languages, compared to Ireland, at 5.6% (EC, 2016: 3). This data indicates that Ireland is performing more poorly than the EU-28 average. Perhaps if Gaeilge had been considered an additional language for the Eurostat report, the percentages would have been more positive. Nonetheless, given the 2016 census results for Ireland, it remains unclear how much of a real impact it would have made.

Ireland’s weaker skills in modern foreign languages are also evidenced in the 2012 European Commission Eurobarometer Report. The findings of the report indicate that Irish citizens lag behind most of their European counterparts in terms of foreign language competences. In 2012, Ireland was one of the lowest performing countries in Europe in terms of plurilingual citizens; only 40% of its population were able to hold a conversation in at least one foreign language, compared with an average of 54% in the EU (EC, 2012: 15). Only Hungary, Italy, Portugal and the UK had lower percentage rates. This means that 60% of Irish people in 2012 could not hold a conversation in any foreign language.

While the results of the 2011 and 2016 Eurostat reports (EC, 2016: 3), as well as the 2012 Eurobarometer Report (EC, 2012: 15), are a cause for concern in terms of the MFL competences of the population of Ireland, they nonetheless need to be understood in context. The fact that Ireland is largely an English-speaking nation needs to be considered in any objective understanding of international data (CSO, 2016: 55). The reality for most people in Ireland is that they are not exposed

to any other language on a daily basis, as is the case for the inhabitants of most Western non-native English-speaking countries. In the discussion paper on *Languages in the Post-Primary Curriculum*, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) highlights the challenges that Ireland, as a native English-speaking country, faces:

In many continental European countries English is part of daily life—via satellite television, pop culture, computer games, etc. – in a way that French and German are not part of daily life in Ireland. This, rather than superior teaching methods or textbooks, explains the high levels of proficiency that so many European school-leavers achieve in English (the fact that English has a greatly reduced inflexional morphology also helps). These considerations mean that language education policy cannot be the same in English-speaking as in non-English-speaking countries (Little, 2003: 30).

As such, comparing proficiency levels of MFLs in Ireland with those of English for non-native English-speaking countries is unreasonable. Nonetheless, this should not be interpreted as a rationale to abdicate reasonability to measure up to or exceed the best international MFL learning aims.

Although English remains the lingua franca, Irish people need to be able to speak MFLs. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) notes that:

English may be a global lingua franca but, in the world of international business, knowledge of English is increasingly taken for granted. It is companies with additional language capabilities and an understanding of local cultures that will enjoy competitive advantage in new but also in existing markets (2017a: 40).

Indeed, the NCCA cautions that it would be ill-advised to assume that the English language is the only language Irish people require. Little (2003: 20) notes:

- Firstly, it assumes that language serves a predominantly transactional purpose and ignores or dismisses the importance of language learning as the means by which we gain access to other societies and cultures.
- Secondly, it overlooks the fact that English is far from being a universal language. However much speakers of other languages may use English for purposes of international communication, they will continue to use their mother tongues at home; and those mother tongues will continue to provide the foundation for significant political, social, economic and cultural institutions.

In addition, the Department of Education and Skills states that the status quo cannot continue and real action is required:

Ireland can no longer be content that its citizens are proficient in English. In the context of Brexit, the increasing global importance of the non-Western countries, our diversifying markets for exports, and our increasingly diverse population, the assumption that English is the principal common language of international communication may no longer hold true (DES, 2017a: 34).

As such, the DES advises that “[l]earning a foreign language is no longer a luxury for some but a necessity for most. It is an international key which upon turning will open many doors and opportunities for those that embrace and enjoy the challenge” (2017a: 40). The DES asserts that “[t]his is not an easy task, but it is a vital one for our people, our multicultural society and our economy. The most difficult hurdle to cross will be that of changing the Irish mindset about the importance of foreign language learning” (DES, 2017a: 40).

The terms *multilingualism* and *plurilingualism* are not synonymous. According to the Council of Europe, *multilingualism* refers to the presence of more than one language in a given geographical area, while *plurilingualism* denotes the language repertoire of an individual: it is the person's first language, traditionally referred to as mother tongue, and another language/s or varieties he/she has competences in (2007: 8). Indeed, Ireland is already a multilingual country. According to the 2016 census in Ireland, 612,018 Irish residents spoke a foreign language at home (CSO, 2016: 54). This figure increased by 19% on the 2011 census figure (514,068). The most spoken foreign languages in the home in Ireland are as follows, in descending order: Polish, French, Romanian, Lithuanian, Spanish, German, Russian, Portuguese, Chinese, and Arabic (CSO, 2016: 54).

The challenge is to make all Irish citizens functional plurilinguals. The first part of the consultation document *Framework for Consultation on a Foreign Languages in Education Strategy for Ireland* (2014) lists a number of advantages to being plurilingual. It states that:

Language is one of the means by which we think, organise our knowledge, express our thoughts and feelings, and communicate with others. We live in a world which is rich in languages... As citizens of Europe and the world, we are also exposed to many other languages and cultures. Knowledge of those languages opens doors for us to understand other peoples and to engage with our neighbours in Europe and beyond (DES, 2014: 3).

The document further states that there is a significant body of research which demonstrates the many benefits associated with bilingualism and plurilingualism. Such benefits are:

cognitive, social, cultural, communicative and economic. People who are bilingual or plurilingual tend to be more flexible, more creative, and more fluent in their mother tongue. They communicate more clearly and accurately to diverse audiences and are much sought after by employers (DES, 2014: 5).

According to the European Commission's *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* (2019), being able to speak an additional language is one of eight key competences "essential to citizens for personal fulfilment, a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion" (EC, 2019: 4). Moreover, the European Union's strategic framework *Education and Training 2020* affirms that foreign language competences and attitudes are central to developing innovation (Council of the European Union, 2009: 4).

Not having a plurilingual populace can significantly impact the world of business. In its submission to the Department of Education and Skills' MFL consultation process (2014), IBEC (Irish Business and Employers Confederation) raised concerns. The organisation advised that the lack of additional language competences in Ireland is resulting in "unquantifiable missed opportunities" for Irish exporters (DES, 2017a: 36).

The *Languages Connect* (2017) document notes that according to the World Talent Ranking (2017), Ireland “ranked 44th for language skills that meet the needs of enterprise... Ireland is ranked below Australia (37th) and New Zealand (34th) but above the USA (47th) and United Kingdom (48th) (World Talent Ranking, 2017, as cited in *Languages Connect*, DES, 2017a: 14).

0.1 Developing plurilingualism through the education system

If Ireland aims to develop a truly plurilingual nation, the question arises as to how and when this should be best achieved. There is evidence to suggest that the school-going years form a significant part of a critical period to learn a new language, and that after this time, it becomes increasingly more difficult to learn it (Bhatia, 2006: 104). While there is no consensus amongst linguists as to whether such a critical period exists, Bialystok and Hakuta state that “on average, there is a continuous decline in ability [to learn an additional language] with age” (1994: 80). This topic is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three. In light of the research findings in favour of a critical period of childhood and adolescence for additional language learning (Johnson & Newport, 1989; Birdsong & Molis, 2001; Muñoz, 2006; Vanhove, 2013; Hartshorne *et al.*, 2018), it is reasonable to conclude that the education system is the ideal location to develop plurilingualism. Given its structures and remit, primary and post-primary schools offer an auspicious setting for inculcating language learning and developing plurilingual students.

In order to have an effective education system that results in greatly increased numbers of plurilingual students, developing a language policy (LP) is crucial. Indeed, Shohamy notes that “[i]n a large number of nation-states, LP implicitly or explicitly is the main mechanism for manipulating and imposing language behaviours, as it relates to decisions about languages and their uses in education and society” (2006: 47). Ferguson notes that the reality is that the education system is “probably the most crucial, sometimes indeed bearing the entire burden of LP implementation” (2006: 33). This is due to a number of reasons: education is mainly controlled and funded by the state in most countries; to a large extent schools act as mechanisms for student socialisation; and schools are in a unique position to shape attitudes and behaviours of each generation (Ferguson, 2006: 33).

While the education system is indeed a realistic conduit to develop additional language competences, the remit of this thesis primarily examines how the post-primary education system can best develop plurilingualism. Undoubtedly, pre-school, primary school, as well as the tertiary education system, all have important roles to play. Nonetheless, the second-level education system is where modern foreign language learning is officially introduced to students in Ireland, and as such, it is where changes can be most realistically implemented.

The reality is that foreign language learning – including modern foreign language learning – has been part of the post-primary education system in Ireland for more than 150 years. Indeed, the classics – Greek and Latin – were the cornerstone of language curricula in schools up to the 19th century (Ruane, 1990: 6). Ruane notes that, during the 19th century, MFL teaching “put down solid roots in the education system” (1990: 6) as religious orders from around Europe started to establish Catholic schools in the country. Given that a number of these religious orders came from France, it explains to some extent how the French language became, and remains to this day, the main MFL taught at post-primary schools (State Examinations Commission, 2016). Schools that taught an MFL were known as ‘superior’ schools (Coolahan, 1981: 55), with Ruane noting that in the 1871 census, 21,225 students were enrolled in such schools (1990: 7). By 1911, 40,840 students attended superior schools, amounting to only 6% of the school-going population (Coolahan, 1981: 55). The Intermediate Act (1878) included MFLs in the public examinations (Ruane, 1990: 7). French, German, and Italian were examined from 1879 under the Intermediate Board. Spanish was not examined until the early 1890’s (Ruane, 1990: 7). Around a century later (mid 1980’s), an oral exam component as part of the MFL Leaving Certificate examinations was instituted (Ruane, 1990: 11). French, German, Italian and Spanish remain to this day the only curricular modern foreign languages taught throughout the full duration of the second-level education system in Ireland.

The teaching of MFLs in Ireland has evolved considerably since the foundation of the Free State in 1922. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2003: 30) states that three key MFL teaching and learning methods have been used in the Irish educational system:

- a) the grammar-translation method,
- b) the audio-lingual and audio-visual methods,
- c) the communicative method.

For most of the twentieth century, the grammar-translation method “dominated language classrooms” in Ireland (Little, 2003: 30). The grammar-translation method is a:

way of studying a language that approaches the language first through detailed analysis of its grammar rules, followed by application of this knowledge to the task of translating sentences and texts into and out of the target language. It hence views language learning as consisting of little more than memorizing rules and facts in order to understand and manipulate the morphology and syntax of the foreign language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 5).

In Ireland, in order to practise speaking the target language, one had to go a *Gaeltacht* area (any of the regions in Ireland in which the Irish language (Gaeilge) is the vernacular) or travel abroad. Given this, Little advises that the “grammar-translation method did little for the great majority of learners, for whom living in the target language community was not an option” (2003: 30).

The audio-lingual and audio-visual methods were widely promoted and adopted in the Irish context (Little, 2003: 30). The audio-lingual and audio-visual methods proposed that learning languages was “no different from learning anything else: it was a matter of forming the right habits. Grammar was replaced by “structures” – essentially sentence patterns – and the learner’s task was to practise basic “structures” and their variants until mastery was achieved” (Little, 2003: 30). The audio-lingual and audio-visual methods “banned the explicit treatment of grammar and attached no importance to knowledge about the target language or reflection on, for example, its grammatical patterns” (Little, 2003: 30). The promotion of the audio-lingual and audio-visual methods was closely linked to the introduction of the language laboratory in second-level schools.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) summarizes the weaknesses of the grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual and audio-visual methods as follows:

The weakness of the grammar-translation method was its assumption that language could be taught as content, whereas communicative proficiency is a procedural skill and so must be taught (at least partly) as process. The audio-lingual and audio-visual methods acknowledged this, but assumed that human beings are essentially robots and that conscious awareness and reflection are irrelevant to learning (Little, 2003: 30).

In the 1980’s, a significant development in the Irish educational system occurred with the realization that speaking the language was of crucial importance to successful additional language learning. The NCCA points out:

Communicative theory recognised that language learning involves process as well as content, but it also recognised that explicit knowledge about language, including grammar, is essential to the development of communicative efficiency. However, communicative theory was more than a combination of the best elements of the grammar-translation and audio-lingual/audio-visual methods. One of its key principles was that meaning should always have priority over form (2003: 30).

As such, the communicative language approach became the third method employed in MFL teaching and learning in Irish classrooms. Communicative language teaching (CLT) “sets as its goal the teaching of *communicative competence*” (Richards, 2006: 2). For students, the new approach meant that:

Learners now had to participate in classroom activities that were based on a cooperative rather than individualistic approach to learning. Students had to become comfortable with listening to their peers in group work or pair work tasks, rather than relying on the teacher for a model. They were expected to take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning (Richards, 2006: 5).

The role of MFL teachers also evolved:

[T]eachers now had to assume the role of facilitator and monitor. Rather than being a model for correct speech and writing and one with the primary responsibility of making students produce plenty of error-free sentences, the teacher had to develop a different view of learners’ errors and of her/his own role in facilitating language learning (2006: 5).

Nonetheless, the early communicative approach had its criticisms. The NCCA highlights its central issues:

- a) It tended to reach classrooms in an attenuated form,
- b) Textbooks were not fit for purpose as they resembled too closely with the audio-lingual and audio-visual methods,
- c) The role of grammar was not clearly defined (Little, 2003: 31).

While such issues were identified, the communicative approach has evolved over the years into a more successful one. In fact, the new Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages specification (2015) (years 1 to 3 of second-level education in Ireland – explained in the next section of this chapter) places a strong emphasis on developing communicative competences but stresses that “grammar, syntax and pronunciation have been embedded so these aspects of language learning are taught in a communicative context” (DES, 2015: 11). While the Senior Cycle MFL curricula (years 5 and 6 of the second-level education system) are currently under review, MFL students and teachers continue to follow the 1995 curricula for Leaving Certificate French, German, Italian and Spanish, all of which focus on attempting to successfully harmonise the dual focus of the communicative and grammar-translation methodologies.

While the methodologies have evolved over the last century, the extent to which the current educational system truly supports the communicative approach is questionable. The fact is that the MFL oral exam only accounts for 20% at Leaving Certificate (final exam at the end of the Irish second-level education system) ordinary level and 25% at higher level (Department of Education, 1995c: 24; DOE, 1995d: 30; DOE, 1995e: 28; DOE, 1995f: 24). For the vast majority of students, this fifteen-minute oral exam, which takes place a few weeks before students leave second-level education, is the first truly official oral assessment they will have ever undertaken. Naturally, one oral exam at the end of one’s schooldays may not encourage teachers and students to prioritise the oral component of the language.

It should be acknowledged that under the new Junior Cycle MFL specification (2015), there is a communicative classroom-based assessment (CBA) in Second Year. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this is not an oral examination in any real sense of the term. Each student only needs to speak for a few minutes on their topic, a topic that they can do in pairs or as part of a group and they are given a three-week period in advance of the assessment to memorise it and practice (NCCA, 2019: 7 – 11). The only truly genuine oral part of this assessment is when the MFL teacher asks each student a few unscripted questions relating to the oral assessment topic at the end of the task (NCCA, 2019: 12). The student’s MFL teacher is the assessor who consults with their MFL colleagues

in a Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meeting to award a final CBA grade (NCCA, 2019: 15). While the result of this assessment is noted on each student's Junior Cycle certificate, the oral component carries no weight in the actual marks of the Junior Cycle MFL examinations.

0.2 Irish education system today

In the Republic of Ireland, students generally commence post-primary education at 12 to 13 years of age. The second-level education system is divided into two cycles – Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle. Junior Cycle takes place over a period of three years (First Year, Second Year and Third Year). At the end of this period, students undertake a series of State examinations in subjects they generally study at school (students can also do a Junior Cycle examination in a subject they study outside of school). These exams, traditionally called the Junior Certificate Examinations, are now called Junior Cycle Examinations. The change of name reflects the new Junior Cycle programme as well as revised marking schemes applicable to all Junior Cycle subjects (SEC, 2019a). In keeping with the new Junior Cycle programme, a new Specification for Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages (DES, 2015) came into effect in the academic year 2017-2018. This specification “aims to develop communicative language skills broadly aligned with the A band (A1 to A2, basic user) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” (DES, 2015: 6). The minimum number of class-contact hours for MFLs in the new Junior Cycle has been reduced from 240 hours to 200 hours over the three-year period (DES, 2015: 11). The first new Junior Cycle MFL examinations were scheduled to take place in June 2020.

The Senior Cycle is composed of two years (Fifth Year and Sixth Year). However, all schools can offer their students a “bridge year” between the Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle programmes (DES, 2019e). This year is known as Transition Year and the scope of the curriculum is generally more diverse. As part of the programme, students commonly engage in some work experience. For most students, this year is optional, although it may be a mandatory year in some schools (DES, 2019e). The Senior Cycle programme takes place in Fifth Year and Sixth Year. Students have to do a minimum of 180 class-contact hours in their MFL over the two-year period (DOE, 1995c: 4; DOE, 1995d: 7; DOE, 1995e: 6; DOE, 1995f: 4). The current Senior Cycle syllabi have “not been aligned to the CEFR, but Ordinary and Higher level candidates typically perform in the range A2 – B1, with a minority of candidates achieving elements of B2” (DES, 2017a: 21). Students take the Leaving Certificate examinations at the end of the programme and are awarded points based on how well they do in their exams and, where applicable, project assessments. These points primarily determine the opportunities available to students to access various courses in further education.

In the Senior Cycle programme, students have the option of taking an MFL Leaving Certificate examination at either ordinary level or higher level. Although the ordinary level exam is easier, students can only be awarded a maximum of 56 points in the Leaving Certificate MFL exam while higher level students can earn a maximum grade of 100 points (Central Applications Office, 2017). The pass mark for both examinations is 40%. The MFL Leaving Certificate examinations assess all four traditional language skills: reading, writing, aural and oral. The percentages allotted to each part are noted in Table 0.1 below.

	Ordinary Level	Higher Level
Reading	40%	30%
Writing	15%	25%
Aural	25%	20%
Oral	20%	25%
Total	100%	100%

*Table 0.1: Percentage breakdown of Leaving Certificate MFL exams
Source: Department of Education (1995c; 1995d; 1995e; 1995f)*

While the scope of this thesis is largely confined to that of the post-primary education system, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the primary school education system and its efforts, or lack thereof, in the teaching and learning of modern foreign languages.

In Ireland, there has been no requirement to teach MFLs as part of the primary school curriculum. Nonetheless, Ireland has experimented to some degree with the teaching of MFLs at primary level. The Modern Languages in Primary School Initiative (MLPSI) was established in 1998. Its three original aims were to “foster positive attitudes towards language learning”, “ensure that greater numbers of children were able to access modern foreign languages in primary level”, and “promote diversification in the languages taught at primary level” (DES, 2012: 6). The programme was intended for fifth and sixth class students in participating schools and the languages offered were French, German, Italian and Spanish. By June 2012, 546 schools were involved in the programme (DES, 2012: 5). Although the initiative was a success (DES, 2012: 39), the MLPSI ceased to exist in June 2012 due to “a very challenging budgetary environment” (Holden, 2013). It is encouraging to note that the Department of Education and Skills is examining the possibility of introducing MFLs at preschool level and commencing the studying of MFLs as part of the primary-school curriculum (O’Brien, 2020).

At present, in terms of languages at primary-school level, the focus is on the new Primary Language Curriculum for Irish and English, with both languages being mandatory subjects. One of the key ambitions of this revised curriculum is to promote bilingualism (Irish and English) amongst primary school students. This curricular reform for junior infants to second class pupils was phased in during the academic year 2016 – 2017, to be fully implemented by September 2018 (DES, 2016). In September 2019, the programme started the process of being phased in for third to sixth class pupils (DES, 2019d).

At post-primary level, while Irish and English are compulsory subjects for almost all primary and post-primary students (NCCA, 2019), the learning of foreign languages is, at present, optional (except in the Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (DES, 2017a: 29)). While MFLs are non-mandatory, almost 90% of students study an MFL at Junior Cycle and almost 70% of students study an MFL at Senior Cycle (DES, 2017a: 16). This relatively high number of students taking an MFL at Senior Cycle may, in part, be attributable to the National University of Ireland's third language matriculation requirement for many of its courses (National University of Ireland, 2019).

In terms of the take-up of curricular MFLs at Leaving Certificate level, in 2012, 49.4% of students who sat the Leaving Certificate examinations took French. This figure slightly declined to 46.2% in 2016, according to the most-recent Chief Examiner Reports (State Examinations Commission, 2016a). In relation to the other curricular MFLs, in 2012, 12.9% of Leaving Certificate students took German. This number increased modestly to 13.7% by 2016 (SEC, 2016b). A similar trend is witnessed with Italian. In 2012, 0.7% of Leaving Certificate students elected to do Italian. By 2016, this percentage somewhat increased to 0.9% (SEC, 2016c). As for Spanish, in 2012, 12.1% of Leaving Certificate students did Spanish. This figure reduced by almost a third to 8.4% by 2016 (SEC, 2016d). These statistics demonstrate that French remains the most widely taken MFL exam. They also indicate that there has been little change in the take-up of MFLs in the second-level education system in recent years.

During the five-year period, 2012 to 2016, there was an overall rise in the number of Leaving Certificate candidates taking higher level. In 2012, 47.2% of students sitting the French Leaving Certificate exam took ordinary level while 52.8% took it at higher level. By 2016, almost 60% (59.2%) of French Leaving Certificate candidates took the exam at higher level (SEC, 2016a). A positive movement is also observed with two other curricular MFLs. In 2012, 64.3% of students sitting the German Leaving Certificate exam chose higher level. This percentage increased to 68.9% in 2016

(SEC, 2016b). With regards to Spanish, in 2012, 58.5% of students sat the Leaving Certificate exam at higher level. This number increased by 8.5% to 67% in 2016 (SEC, 2016d). Italian is the only MFL where the number of students taking the Leaving Certificate exam declined according to the latest Chief Examiner Report (2016). In 2012, 72.4% of students took the exam at higher level. This figure marginally decreased to 71.5% in 2016 (SEC, 2016c). It should nonetheless be noted that Italian year-on-year has the highest percentage of students taking the Leaving Certificate exam at higher level.

While there are greater percentages of students taking MFLs at higher level, the results the students obtain are important to consider. As highlighted in Table 0.2, below, according to the most recent Chief Examiner Reports (2016), in French, in 2016, at higher level, 73.6% of student received an honours exam result (grades A, B or C) (13% received an A grade), 23.4% got a pass grade (grade D) and 3.1% failed (E, F or NG (no grade)). At ordinary level, in 2016, 62.5% achieved an honours exam result (1.1% received an A grade), 30% were awarded a D grade while 7.6% failed. Table 0.2 delineates the breakdown of results for all curricular MFLs at both higher and ordinary levels for the Leaving Certificate exams in 2016.

Exam	A	B	C	A, B, C	D	E	F	NG	E, F, NG
<i>Fr HL</i>	13.0	28.2	32.4	73.6	23.4	2.9	0.2	0	3.1
<i>Fr OL</i>	1.1	20.1	41.3	62.5	30.0	6.2	1.3	0.1	7.6
<i>Ger HL</i>	13.0	27.0	31.4	71.4	24.5	3.9	0.2	0	4.1
<i>Ger OL</i>	2.2	28.4	41.3	71.9	21.5	4.6	1.7	0.2	6.5
<i>It HL</i>	23.8	28.2	26.8	78.5	19.4	1.9	0.3	0	2.2
<i>It OL</i>	4.8	15	47.9	67.8	28.1	3.4	0.7	0	4.1
<i>Sp HL</i>	17.1	28.7	29.8	75.6	21.6	2.7	0.1	0.0	2.8
<i>Sp OL</i>	3.2	28.9	38.2	70.3	23.3	5.1	1.3	0.0	6.4

Table 0.2: Percentage breakdown of MFL Leaving Certificate exam results (2016)

Higher Level (HL) and Ordinary Level (OL) – French (Fr), German (Ger), Italian (It) and Spanish (Sp)

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016a; 2016b; 2016c; 2016d)

These statistics indicate that there are strong numbers of students achieving an honours result (A, B or C grade) in their MFL Leaving Certificate exams (2016). However, what these grades mean in terms of the actual MFL proficiency standards of students is unclear. For example, a 'C' grade at higher level cannot be benchmarked against any international MFL competence scale. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the MFL Leaving Certificate examinations remain unaligned even to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001). It should be noted that, in 2017, at Leaving Certificate

level, the points system migrated to an 8-point grading scale at both higher and ordinary levels. As such, the system of A, B, C, D, etc., as noted in Table 0.2 above, was replaced with a new marking format: H1 – H8 (higher level) and O1 – O8 (ordinary level) (Irish Universities Association, 2015) (see Appendix N).

Each of the latest curricular MFL Leaving Certificate Chief Examiner Reports is very insightful in terms of understanding how second-level students are both performing in and engaging with their MFL exams in the current post-primary education system in Ireland. The Chief Examiner Reports for French (2016), German (2016), Italian (2016) and Spanish (2016) present a largely positive picture in terms of student achievement and commitment. Indeed, the French Chief Examiner Report noted that in the oral exam, there was a “great willingness to communicate. Many had achieved a high degree of proficiency and fluency” (SEC, 2016a: 30). The German Chief Examiner Report praised students for their “obvious enthusiasm for the language” (SEC, 2016b: 32). The Italian Chief Examiner Report stated that “[b]oth candidates and teachers are to be commended on the work they undertook in preparation for the orals” (SEC, 2016c: 13). The Spanish Chief Examiner Report advised that “[o]verall a very good standard of oral communication skills was demonstrated by many... candidates of Spanish” (SEC, 2016d: 28). In terms of the three other examined components of the Leaving Certificate MFL exams, reading, writing and aural, the reports advised that there was a range of abilities represented but overall students did well.

Nonetheless, the French, German and Spanish reports raised issue with student reliance on rote learning. The French Chief Examiner Report stated that many candidates “relied too heavily on learned-off material” (SEC, 2016a: 30). The German Chief Examiner Report stated that many candidates “relied heavily on learned-off material” (SEC, 2016b: 30). The Spanish Chief Examiner Report advised that “some examiners reported that a number of candidates were taught in a ‘rote learning’ manner” (SEC, 2016d: 13). In terms of the Italian Chief Examiner Report, it raised concerns with many students being unable to communicate their ideas, even basic concepts, effectively (SEC, 2016c: 36).

Based on their findings, each of the four Chief Examiner Reports provided a list of recommendations for both students and teachers in terms of improving student performance in the MFL Leaving Certificate exams. While all four reports provided specific recommendations on various parts of the respective exams, each of them strongly advocated for greater preparation for the oral exam. In particular, they advised both students and teachers to use the target language in the classroom. The reports also encouraged students to use the MFL in a natural way as opposed to using memorized

material. The French Chief Examiner Report advised to “use French as the language of communication in the classroom as much as possible” (SEC, 2016c: 32). The German Chief Examiner Report stated that “[s]tudents should speak and listen to as much German as possible in and out of class” (SEC, 2016b: 36). The Italian Chief Examiner Report encouraged students and teachers to “speak as much Italian as possible in the classroom” (SEC, 2016c: 34). Finally, the Spanish Chief Examiner Report affirmed that the “target language should be used as much as possible in everyday classroom interactions” (SEC, 2016d: 30).

The reports indicate that, while students have done well in their exams, there is concern that students are achieving their linguistic competences through rote learning. The Chief Examiner Reports (2016) expressly state that they wish for students to be able to communicate in a natural way, and to achieve this aim, they advise to speak as much of the target language as possible in the MFL classroom.

The Irish government has certainly highlighted to its citizens the importance of being able to speak modern foreign languages. On a policy level, the Department of Education and Skills’ *Languages Connect* (2017) document states that “[k]nowledge of foreign languages is essential for Ireland’s cultural, social and economic well-being. English may be a lingua franca of international communications, but knowing English is not enough. Competence in a number of languages is a key skill that our citizens should be encouraged to achieve” (2017a: 13). Moreover, the document states that “languages connect our citizens with one another and our country with the world” (2017a: 5). In addition, “[l]anguage is one of the means by which we think, organise our knowledge, express our thoughts and feelings, and communicate and connect with others” (2017a: 13). In terms of the Government’s vision as set out in the *Languages Connect* document, it is one in which “Ireland’s education system will promote a society where the ability to learn and use at least one foreign language is taken for granted, because of its inherent value for individuals, society and the economy” (2017a: 18).

The *Languages Connect* (2017) document advises that in order to achieve its vision, it will require the co-operation of the Irish Department of Education and Skills’ Inspectorate, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the State Examinations Commission (SEC), the Post-Primary Languages Initiative, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Teaching and Learning Forum and the Teaching Council.

The Post-Primary Languages Initiative organisation, now known as Post-Primary Languages Ireland, has played a key role in developing plurilingualism at post-primary level in the Irish education system over the last two decades. Similar to the *Modern Languages in Primary School Initiative* (MLPSI), the Irish government established the *Post-Primary Languages Initiative* in September 2000 with the remit of:

diversifying, enhancing and expanding the teaching of languages in second-level schools throughout Ireland. Its focus is on enhancing and broadening the opportunities available to students for learning foreign languages that are relevant to Ireland's future cultural, social and economic needs (Post-Primary Languages Ireland, 2019).

The Post-Primary Languages Initiative aimed primarily to enhance and expand the teaching of languages (specifically Spanish and Italian) in post-primary schools as well as to introduce new ones (Russian and Japanese). Schools that participated in the initiative were entitled to apply for extra funding to purchase relevant pedagogical materials and were given much improved teacher-pupil ratios.

The Post-Primary Languages Initiative was originally established to run for a period of six years (2000 – 2006). However, the programme still continues to this day, albeit with a larger remit. The scope of the organisation now encompasses responsibility for implementing the key actions in *Languages Connect – Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026*. The organisation is also a member of the Foreign Languages Advisory Group (FLAG), which is chaired by the Department of Education and Skills. *Post-Primary Languages Initiative* has also had a small change to its name – it is now known as *Post-Primary Languages Ireland* (PPLI). Its 2018 annual report presented largely positive outcomes of its work and progress in fulfilling the goals of the *Languages Connect* strategy. Indeed, the then-Minister for Education and Skills, Mr Joe McHugh TD, stated that he wishes to “congratulate PPLI on the significant and impressive body of work that they have successfully managed to accomplish” (PPLI, 2018: 3).

Ireland is also playing a positive role in advancing its linguistic competences through its participation in many European organizations. The country became a founding member of the Council of Europe, an organization that actively promotes multilingualism and plurilingualism, in May 1949. Moreover, since 2002, Ireland has been a member of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), a Council of Europe institution based in Graz, Austria. The centre's objective is to “help its member states implement effective language teaching policies” (ECML, 2019a). Furthermore, Ireland worked closely with the Council of Europe's Language Policy Division in Strasbourg towards developing a language education policy profile for Ireland (2005 – 2007). As a country, Ireland should be commended for its

participation in such organizations. The challenge for the country is to maximise its membership of such organizations in order to develop a truly plurilingual nation.

0.3 Barcelona Summit Agreement

At a European level, Ireland has committed itself to achieving ambitious plurilingual goals. In fact, the aspiration for Europeans to be able to speak additional languages is in fact stipulated in the *Presidency Conclusions of the Barcelona European Council* (2002). In 2002, at an EU Heads of State meeting in Barcelona, the European Council called for further action to “improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age” (European Council, 2002: 19). This initiative became known as ‘mother tongue plus two other languages’. By July 2003, the European Commission advised in its *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004 – 2006* that in relation to post-primary students “Member States agree that pupils should master at least two foreign languages” (Commission of the European Communities, 2003: 8). In 2005, the European Commission re-affirmed its position and advised that the European Union’s “long-term objective is to increase individual multilingualism until every citizen has practical skills in at least two languages in addition to his or her mother tongue” (Commission of the European Communities, 2005: 4).

The Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002) was a watershed moment for both Ireland and Europe. Nonetheless, almost two decades later, Ireland has not delivered on its commitments. In no real sense of the term can Ireland lay claim to having a truly plurilingual populace. The key question therefore is: how can Ireland fulfil its Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002) obligations? As discussed earlier, the role of the education system is central to developing plurilingualism. Given this, the primary aim of this thesis is to explore if the post-primary education system in Ireland can make the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002) a reality.

0.4 The three strategies and research questions

The author of this thesis desired to put forward for exploration a series of strategies that the Irish education system could implement in order to make the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002) a reality. However, the researcher only considered grounded strategies that would meet certain criteria. Below is a list of these criteria as well as an explanation of what is meant by each term:

- *Feasible*: it should be possible for the Irish education system to implement the strategies.
- *Support*: the strategies should have a reasonable chance of obtaining support by stakeholders in the Irish education system.

- *Achievable*: the strategies should be achievable within the Irish education system.
- *Cost-Neutral*: the strategies should be relatively cost-neutral to implement within the Irish post-primary education system.
- *Measurable*: it should be possible to clearly measure the success of the strategies.
- *Deliver results*: the strategies should have real potential to greatly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students.

The above criteria are loosely based on the SMART goals principle (Kenny & Savage, 1997: 97), an acronym which establishes that projects should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound. However, based on the author's experience in the Irish second-level education system, these principles were somewhat adapted. The author added 'support' as obtaining the support of stakeholders is essential to the success of any project in the Irish education system. Moreover, being relatively 'cost-neutral' would increase the likelihood of the strategies becoming adopted.

Having defined the strict criteria, the author made the decision to research the feasibility of introducing three strategies that could potentially, by way of an MFL policy and planning document for schools, develop greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students:

1. Harmonising post-primary MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR);
2. Replacing the current State MFL exams (Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate) with CEFR international exams;
3. Implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

Nonetheless, these three strategies cannot be considered in a vacuum and need to be understood within a larger context of post-primary schooling in Ireland. As such, in order to ascertain the feasibility of the three strategies, the researcher set forward three key research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of key stakeholders of modern foreign language (MFL) teaching, learning and assessment in post-primary schools in Ireland?
2. To what extent would the three proposed strategies that aim to advance the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs at post-primary level in Ireland be feasible within the current education system?
3. What are the implications of the responses to a) the above questions, as well as b) the qualitative research carried out beyond Irish shores, for future language-in-education policies and practices in the Irish post-primary education system?

The answers to these key research questions should then allow the author to conclude if the three proposed MFL strategies at post-primary level in Ireland, as well as other recommendations arising from the research, could reasonably result in fostering greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students. If the answers are positive, Ireland could then have a clear and viable pathway forward to make the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002) a reality.

0.5 The European Schools system

Exploring whether the Irish education system can make the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002) a reality is the principal focus of this research project. However, it would be ill-advised to assume that this is a purely hypothetical endeavour. There is an education system in place in the European Union that has already successfully achieved the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (MT+2). It is also a proven educational model of how various components of the three proposed strategies successfully operate to foster plurilingual second-level students. This educational body is called the European Schools system.

In examining the European Schools model, it should be noted that its education system is highly elite. It primarily caters for the children of parents who work in European Union institutions (e.g. European Commission). It is possible for students whose parents do not work in an EU institution to attend one of their schools; however, in this case, school fees need to be paid. The schooling system is very generously funded, far greater than a school in a national education system. Teachers in the European Schools are much better remunerated compared to teachers in the national systems. Given these reasons, the profile of students, parents, teachers, as well as the teaching and learning environment, a European School is very different to an average national second-level school. This thesis does not propose that the European Schools model can simply be duplicated and implemented in Ireland, as some of the elements may not work in practice. Nonetheless, there are some components of their model that may be helpful to adopt in Ireland, where feasible.

The European Schools system are “official educational establishments controlled jointly by the governments of the European Union” (Offices of the Secretary General of the European Schools, 2019b). The mission of the European Schools is to “provide a multilingual and multicultural education for nursery, primary and secondary level pupils” (OSG, 2019a). There are 13 European Schools in six countries (Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Spain and Luxembourg). There are currently more than 27,000 pupils who attend the European Schools. There are also 18 Accredited European Schools in 13 countries (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Slovenia). The Accredited European Schools

(AES) differ from the European Schools in that while they “offer a European education that meets the pedagogical requirements laid down for the European Schools”, they do so “within the framework of the national school networks of the Member States and hence outside the legal, administrative and financial framework to which the European Schools are compulsorily subject” (OSG, 2019c). In essence, the Accredited European Schools allow for the wider dissemination of the European Schools curricula and standards but are administered and financed by the individual member states.

The European Schools system operates under an intergovernmental protocol named *The Convention Defining the Statute of the European Schools* which came into force in October 2002. This protocol replaced previous agreements (1957 and 1984). The Board of Governors is the governing body of the European Schools. However, the day-to-day management of the European Schools system is run by the Office of the Secretary General of the European Schools. The vehicular languages of the European Schools system are English, French and German.

The primary purpose of the European Schools system is to provide a multilingual and multicultural education for the children of staff of the European institutions. The school system is divided into nursery, primary and secondary education. Pupils attend 2 years for early education (nursery cycle), five years of primary education, and seven years of secondary education. Table 0.3, below, details its organisation of studies.

Cycle	Classes	Age
'Early education' (Nursery)	1 – 2	4 – 5
Primary	1 – 5	6 – 10
Secondary		
Observation cycle	1 – 3	11 – 13
Pre-orientation cycle	4 – 5	14 – 15
Orientation cycle	6 – 7	16 – 18

Table 0.3: European Schools system: Organisation of studies
Source: Offices of the Secretary General of the European Schools (2019b)

The European Schools system is a unique education system. All national languages of the 27 European Union countries are taught. Each school is divided into language sections; where possible, students study their subjects through their mother tongue. As an example, a school can have anywhere from 3 to 16 language sections. So, although the students may be in a European School in Germany, if Spanish is their mother tongue and if the language section is available, they will attend the Spanish section of that school to do their studies through Spanish. Where a school cannot

provide a specific language section for students (there may be an insufficient number of mother-tongue students of this language), these students are known as SWALS (Students Without a Language Section) and they follow a specific course of studies. In this case, students would attend L1 (first language) classes in their mother tongue and would do the remaining subjects through their L2 (second language).

At primary level, the children are taught their first foreign language (L2). This language may be English, French or German. In years 1 and 2, students study 2 hours 30 minutes a week of L2. This increases to 3 hours 45 minutes a week in years 3, 4 and 5. In the case where students have a second national language (e.g. Irish in the case of Ireland), students have the option to study their ONL (Other National Language) in addition to their L2. In the case of Irish and Maltese, students receive tuition for 1 hour 30 minutes weekly throughout their full primary school education. However, Finnish and Swedish are only taught for 1 hour 30 minutes weekly in years 3, 4 and 5. Arrangements for ONLs are made by agreement between member states and the European Schools system.

Students generally enter the secondary education system the year they turn 11 years of age. In the first three years (observation cycle), the students follow a common curriculum. In year 1, students start their studies of a second foreign language (L3) (L4 in the case of students who study two national languages). In years 4 and 5, students have the option to study a third foreign language (L4) (L5 in the case of students who study two national languages). Years 5 and 6 prepare students for the European Baccalaureate (the equivalent of the Leaving Certificate examinations). During these two years, students can study a fourth foreign language (L5) (L6 in the case of students who study two national languages) as a complementary course. The L3 and L4 can be “chosen from among the official languages of the European Union depending on local expediencies [while the] L5 can be any language” (OSG, 2019b: 13).

In terms of the three proposed strategies set forth in this thesis, the European Schools system offers a general working framework of how elements of the implemented strategies could work in practice. Although the European Schools system does not harmonise second-level MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), all languages (except L1) taught in the European Schools system are aligned to the CEFR. While students remain in mixed ability classes according to their school year, they are nonetheless expected to achieve the required CEFR standard of that school year. All syllabi and course descriptors are aligned to prepare students to meet their CEFR level commitments.

Moreover, in terms of the second strategy, students are tested based on their CEFR level. By the end of second-level education (European Baccalaureate examinations), students are expected to have achieved a CEFR C1 standard in L2 and a CEFR B1 level or higher in L3 (OSG, 2019b). In the case where students have a second national language and do the European Schools programme in that language (e.g. Irish in the case of Ireland), they are expected to achieve a CEFR B2 standard. This CEFR standard is determined by the respective member state. If the state in question wishes to increase that standard to a higher CEFR level, this can be facilitated. Table 0.4 below outlines the proficiency levels the students should achieve throughout their education in the European Schools system.

	Early education	Primary	Secondary Year 3	Secondary Year 5	Secondary Year 7
L2	0	A2	B1	B2	C1
L3	0	0	A1+	A2+	B1+
L4 advanced 4h	0	0	0	A1	A2+
L4 basic 2h	0	0	0	A1	A2
ONL (Other National Language)	A1.1 oral	A1.2	A2	B1	B2

Table 0.4: European Schools system: Basic proficiency levels in the different cycles

Source: European Schools (2019b)

In terms of the third proposal this thesis puts forward, the European Schools system offers an impressive model of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). At primary level, in years 3 to 5, the subject *European Hours* (where pupils of different nationalities work together on common projects relating to an aspect of European cultures, traditions, etc.) is taught through the pupils' L2 or in the language of the host country. Moreover, at second level, in years 1 to 5, "art, music, ICT and physical education are taught to mixed language groups in one of the three L2s (English, French or German) or in the language of the host country" (OSG, 2009b). From year 3 of secondary education, "all pupils study human sciences and religion or ethics in their first foreign language" (OSG, 2019b). In addition, from second-level year 4, history, geography and economic courses are taught through the students' L2 (English, French or German). In secondary years 6 to 7, art, music and physical education continue to be taught through the students' L2 (OSG, 2019b). Furthermore, each school

can offer other subjects through the L2 or the language of the host country if approved by the Administrative Board of the respective European School.

Whilst the European Schools system is not an exact model of how the three proposed strategies would work in practice, it is nonetheless an advanced educational framework which demonstrates how various components of the strategies successfully operate to foster plurilingual second-level students across the European Union. The European Schools system indeed offers an interesting operational model, elements of which could work in the Irish education system, and will be referenced throughout this thesis.

0.6 Context and research decisions

The only languages this thesis considers under the heading “modern foreign languages” (MFLs) in the Irish education system are French, German, Italian and Spanish, as these are the only MFL curricular subjects taught throughout all years of the second-level education system in Ireland. As for Arabic, Japanese and Russian, these are only taught as curricular subjects at senior-cycle level. As the researcher wished to conduct research with sixth year students based on their experiences of learning MFLs throughout their second-level education, as opposed to their experiences of learning languages over just their last year or two, Arabic, Japanese and Russian were not considered in the research. In addition, this thesis does not consider Ancient Greek or Latin, as these are not modern foreign languages and they are only taken as a Leaving Certificate exam by a minority of students (11 students took the Ancient Greek Leaving Certificate exam and 117 students sat the Latin Leaving Certificate exam in 2015) (SEC, 2015a: 5; SEC, 2015b: 6). This thesis acknowledges that under the Nice Treaty (Article 149), the State Examinations Commission has committed to providing Leaving Certificate examinations in a number of non-curricular European languages. These languages are not considered in this thesis for two primary reasons: firstly, they are non-curricular MFLs, and secondly, in order to take the exam in one of these languages, it needs to be the student’s mother tongue (SEC, 2019b).

Moreover, this thesis does not consider the Irish language as a modern foreign language in the Irish education system, as Irish is the first official language of the Irish State (Constitution of Ireland, 1937: Art 8:1). In government policy, Irish as the official language, is deemed the indigenous language (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Dhonnabháin, 2015: 179 – 189) and therefore does not fall under the “foreign” language designation. It should be noted that, in the 2018-2019 academic year, only 8.1% of primary school pupils and 3.6% of post-primary students were taught through Irish-medium education (McCárthaigh, 2019). As such, the vast majority of post-primary students in Ireland study

Irish as an additional language (L2). Furthermore, this thesis does not consider the English language in the Irish education system as an MFL as English is a national language of Ireland and the first language spoken by the majority of the population (CSO, 2016: 55). While the researcher acknowledges that English is taught as an additional language in many schools in Ireland, it is largely in the form of English language support (DES, 2018: 9) and the students undertaking these studies are immersed in a largely English-speaking country.

In addition, the research involving student participation was confined to those in Sixth Year only. The reason for this selection was because these students would likely be the longest learners of MFLs within their respective schools, and as such, they would be in the best position to reflect upon and provide feedback on their overall MFL experiences throughout the second-level education system. They would also be best placed to furnish a more thorough appraisal of the three proposed strategies of this research project.

Furthermore, the Irish State examinations' data discussed in this thesis relates primarily to the Leaving Certificate examinations. The main rationale for this is because the MFL Junior Cycle specification changed for the academic year 2017-2018 for first year students. These students were due to sit the new MFL Junior Cycle examinations in June 2020. However, given the closure of schools from March to May 2020 due to the declared Coronavirus pandemic, no State examinations for the Junior Cycle took place in June 2020. Given this, examination data pertaining to the new MFL Junior Cycle cannot be included in this thesis. Nonetheless, the current MFL Leaving Certificate examinations date back to 1997. As such, there are ample data and trends available to make reasonable inferences in terms of the MFL Leaving Certificate examinations.

0.7 Structure of the thesis

Chapter One explores the various facets of language policy and planning (LPP) in second-level schools. In particular, it explains what language policy and planning is; it delineates how a successful language policy could be devised; and it also outlines how that language policy could be implemented. The chapter also considers the European Schools language policy in the context of it being a central tenet to developing plurilingual second-level students.

Chapter Two reviews language policy and planning (LPP) in the Irish second-level education system from an historical perspective. Educational developments in legislation, policies and guidelines on school planning are outlined. In addition, efforts to develop a bilingual nation of Irish and English are

discussed. Finally, recent progress to develop a plurilingual second-level education system in Ireland, through the *Languages Connect* strategy, is discussed.

Chapter Three examines in detail the three strategies this thesis proposes as central components to future language policy and planning in second-level schools in Ireland. The strategies are: a) harmonising post-primary MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), b) replacing the current State MFL exams (Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate) with CEFR international exams, and c) implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The chapter also considers the European Language Portfolio as a method to develop plurilingualism.

Chapter Four outlines the methodologies employed in this research project. In particular, this chapter discusses the various components of the research: the case study design, Grounded Theory, the selection of research participants, as well as the quantitative and qualitative instruments employed. The rationale for using the various research methods is explained, and the advantages and disadvantages of using each research instrument is given. The process of conducting the data collection, as well as the analysis, is then expounded.

Chapter Five analyses the data from the research conducted. It examines the current experiences of second-level MFL students and teachers in Ireland. It also explicates the data concerning the three proposed strategies to develop greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students. The chapter then analyses the data from the qualitative research in the European Schools system, with the aim of extrapolating elements that could be successfully implemented in the Irish education system.

Chapter Six, entitled *Recommendations and Conclusion*, presents a series of recommendations, based on the research project, that aim to establish a viable pathway forward to make the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement a reality through the Irish post-primary education system.

Chapter One

Language Policy and Post-Primary Schools

In 2010, the Government of Ireland introduced the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010 – 2030, which aims to “increase on an incremental basis the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language” (2010: 3). Moreover, in 2017, the government published *Languages Connect: Ireland’s Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017 – 2026*, which aspires to “enable learners to communicate effectively and improve their standards of competence in languages” (2017a: 6). While the aforementioned documents are not official language policies, Earls argues that the *Languages Connect* strategy can, for all intents and purposes, be considered Ireland’s national foreign language policy document (Earls, 2019). Language policies are instrumental in developing plurilingualism as they can act both implicitly and explicitly in effectuating changes in behaviour, especially in the context of schooling (Shohamy, 2006). This chapter will discuss the various aspects involved in developing a language policy for second-level schools.

Devising an all-inclusive agreed definition of the term ‘language policy’ is difficult to provide, given that various researchers define the term differently. Kaplan and Baldauf define language policy as “a body of ideas, laws, regulations, rules and practices intended to achieve the planned language change in the societies, group or system” (1997: xi). Conversely, McCarthy believes that language policy is neither top-down nor bottom-up but rather multi-layered. She defines language policy as a “complex sociocultural process [and] modes of human interaction, negotiation, and production mediated by relations of power” (2011: 8). Spolsky provides an even wider interpretation of the term. He states that language policy refers to “all the language practices, beliefs and management decisions of a community or polity” (2013: 9). Schiffman defines language policy as, “not only the explicit, written, overt, *de jure*, official and “top-down” decision-making about language, but also the implicit, covert, *de facto*, grass-roots, and unofficial ideas and assumptions, which can influence the *outcomes* of policy-making just as emphatically and definitively as the more explicit decisions” (2006: 112). In essence, language policy is a “mechanism that impacts the structure, function, use, or acquisition of language” (Johnson 2013: 9).

The above definitions consider the general concept of language policy (LP). However, in the case of schools, Corson defines language policy as a:

document compiled by the staff of a school, often assisted by other members of the school community, to which the staff members give their assent and commitment. It identifies areas in the school’s scope of operations and program where language problems exist that need the commonly agreed approach offered by a policy. A language policy sets out what the school intends to do about these areas of

concern and includes provision for the follow-up, monitoring, and revision of the policy itself in the light of changing circumstances. It is a dynamic action statement that changes along with the dynamic context of a school (1999: 1).

This thesis adopts Corson's definition of language policy as the most apt in terms of a language policy for schools. However, it is acknowledged that the above citation may not tally with the reality in practice in many schools where top-down decision-making can be present, e.g. the selection of MFLs available to students in the school, the amount of hours students study their MFL, the number of students and composition of MFL classes, the MFL skills examined, and so on.

1.1 What is language policy and planning (LPP)?

In order to have a successful language policy, language planning is essential. The terms *language policy* and *language planning* are often used interchangeably. Shohamy (2006) notes that oftentimes the distinction between language policy and language planning is far from clear, especially in terms of the educational system. Nonetheless, the two terms are distinct. A language policy is generally a written text with clear goals and objectives. Language planning, on the other hand, is essentially how the policy will be implemented. Kennedy states that language planning is "the organised pursuit of solutions to language problems" (1983: 55). Unlike language planning, language policy attempts to be less interventionist. It refers generally to principles in terms of language use. Although it may state general aims to be achieved, it does not outline how these should be achieved or implemented.

Language policy and planning (LPP) as an activity has been taking place for centuries. However, the academic discipline is relatively recent on a historical level. Cebollero (1945) is the first book in the Library of Congress that includes the term *language policy*. The field of language policy was developed in parallel with sociolinguistics in the 1960's. Sociolinguistics aimed to deal with practical issues relating to language development. As language policy and sociolinguistics complemented one another, the term and use of *language policy* came to be more greatly recognised.

The first official use of the term *language planning* can be attributed to Haugen (1959), who employed the term to describe the development of a new standard language in Norway after it gained independence from Denmark in 1814. Traditionally, the term was used at national level and, in particular, for nation building. Fishman defined *language planning* at the time as "the organised pursuit of solutions to language problems, typically at the national level" (1974: 79). Ferguson notes that by the 1980s and early 1990s the discipline and activity of LPP had "become the object of a battery of criticisms deriving from Marxist, post-structural and critical

sociolinguistic perspectives” (2006: 3). The argument was that LPP essentially served the interests of the elites in society while presenting itself as ideologically neutral.

The 1990s witnessed a period of increased interest in language policy and planning (LPP) due to the spread of English as the lingua franca and other languages throughout the world. This created a challenge for minority and endangered languages and, as such, language policy and planning became a useful tool to maintain languages, revitalise languages and to curb the influence of global dominant languages on smaller ones.

By the early 2000s, *language policy* and *language planning* were gaining traction and the terms were used in journal articles and books. Such articles include *Current Issues in Language Planning* (2000) and *Language Policy* (2001). The terms were also published in two major books, *Language Policy and Language Planning* (Wright, 2004) and *Language Policy* (Spolsky, 2004).

Ferguson (2006: 9) notes that the scope of language policy and planning has widened beyond that of nation building and curbing the influence of global dominant languages. The need for and the remit of language policy and planning has evolved to have many new purposes. These include globalisation, supranational political communities (e.g. the European Union), migration, harmonisation of standards (e.g. CEFR), the spread of English, minority language rights, language revitalisation, and bilingual and multilingual schooling.

For reasons highlighted in the Introduction Chapter, the school-going years are the ideal time to develop plurilingualism. As students are obliged to attend school, they are in an environment that facilitates language learning over a large number of years. As such, students have time to learn the language. Ferguson notes that the reality is that the education system is “probably the most crucial, sometimes indeed bearing the entire burden of LP [language policy] implementation” (2006: 33). Ferguson (2006: 33) affirms that this is for a number of reasons: education is controlled and funded by the state in most countries; to a large extent schools act as mechanisms for student socialisation; and schools are in a unique position to shape attitudes and behaviours of each generation. As such, schools are a natural setting for inculcating language learning and developing plurilingual students.

Ricetto defines language planning as the “development, implementation, and evaluation of specific language policies” (2006: 18). Ricetto notes that there is a lack of research on language planning. He advises that there is a multitude of reasons for this: the traditional focus on language policy to some extent still remains; there is a lack of training in the policy sciences amongst

sociolinguists and applied linguists; and there is a dearth of “clearly articulated models for analysing and comparing different policy approaches in defined contexts, and ways to evaluate the outcomes that can be applied in different settings” (2006: 18). Understandably, this is not easily achieved, given the numerous variables that are required to be deliberated in proposing policies. Moreover, success is not easy to measure, given that stakeholders’ expectations can vary.

Fettes (1997: 14) outlines the link between language planning and language policy:

Language planning... must be linked to the critical evaluation of language policy: the former providing standards of rationality and effectiveness, the latter testing these ideas against actual practice in order to promote the development of better... language planning models. Such a field would be better described as language policy and planning, LPP.

Language policy and language planning are therefore inextricably related, with no consensus on the extent to which one relates to the other. Fettes (1997: 14) believes planning subsumes policy, while Ricento (2000: 209) and Schiffman (1996: 4) believe policy subsumes planning. Given the lack of agreement, Hornberger notes that language policy and planning (LPP) “offers a unified conceptual rubric under which to pursue fuller understanding of the complexity of the policy-planning relationship and in turn of its insertion in processes of social change” (2006: 25). Fettes suggests that LPP is a “set of theories and practices for managing linguistic ecosystems” (Fettes 1997: 19, citing Mühlhäusler, 1996). Hornberger notes that, while it is true that there have been great advances in language theory, “it is also true that LPP remains, crucially, a field poised perpetually between theory and practice” (2006: 35).

Given the essential relationship between language policy and language planning (LPP), both terms will be considered in this thesis. In examining language policy and planning, it is important to note that policy and practice can oftentimes be quite different. Thus, what is intended in writing may not translate in practice. Shohamy notes that it is “often the case that even when policies are stated explicitly it still does not guarantee that the language policy will in fact turn into practice” (2006: 51). In essence, a gulf of varying degrees exists between the intended policy and actual practice. Baldauf (1994) believes that the reason for this chasm between policy and practice is that people will go at their own pace and do things their own way. Baldauf advises language planners to be under no illusions about the challenges they face, as there will always exist those who wish to craft their own language agenda and resist from bottom-up that which is imposed from the top-down.

In recognising and accepting that such a chasm exists between language policy and implemented practice on the ground, language policymakers should also be mindful that each school has its own ethos, culture and history. Each school is unique, with its own set of circumstances and challenges. In Ireland, there are various school types: single-sex schools, co-educational schools, all-Irish speaking schools, non-denominational schools, multi-denominational schools, schools located in areas of vastly different economic households, and so on. Ball, Maguire and Braun believe that school policies are shaped and influenced by many factors and that these factors “act as constraints, pressures and enablers of policy enactments” (2012: 19) which are oftentimes neglected. Ball, Maguire & Braun state that:

Policies enter different resource environments; schools have particular histories, buildings and infrastructures, staffing profiles, leadership experiences, budgetary situations and teaching and learning challenges (e.g. proportions of children with special educational needs (SEN), English as an additional language (EAL), behavioural difficulties, ‘disabilities’ and social and economic ‘deprivations’) and the demands of context interact. Schools differ in their student intake, school ethos and culture, they engage with local authorities and experience pressures from league tables and judgements made by national bodies (2012: 19).

Moreover, as Corson notes, there are hierarchical issues in schools that also affect policy implementation. He states that “[p]resent-day high schools are usually very large bureaucracies. They are multi-purpose organizations with a chain of command that can be highly diversified and rather weak” (1999: 4). The above factors are pertinent as they highlight that it is not simply a matter of introducing a language policy; rather, it is implementing one that will be successful. To be successful, one should not disregard or minimise the large complexities, challenges, and obstacles involved in bringing a language policy text from a vision to a reality.

While the school context is a very important consideration, it is equally important to recognise the considerable demands that teachers face on a day-to-day basis. Passe notes:

Teachers are under enormous pressure to ‘cover’ the curriculum. State mandates, district policies, and especially standardised tests have forced many teachers to rush through the required content, despite substantial evidence that doing so results in a lack of student motivation, interest, and long-term learning. Clearly, there is not enough time in the school day or year to adequately address all the required topics. In the meantime, new content is constantly added while student time in class is steadily being reduced (1996:88).

Given the onerous demands on schools and teachers, it is important that any language policy for schools be mindful of the limitations and, as such, be realistic in terms of what can be achieved.

Language policies (LPs) are employed for a myriad of reasons, with the main reason being that they are instrumental in effectuating changes in behaviour, especially in the context of schooling.

Shohamy states that:

in a large number of nation-states, LP implicitly or explicitly is the main mechanism for manipulating and imposing language behaviours, as it relates to decisions about languages and their uses in education and society (2006: 47).

Having a strong and robust national language policy in place for post-primary schools is therefore most advantageous in encouraging changes in behaviour and ameliorating the status quo. Indeed, the importance of language policies goes beyond the school. Ricento points out that LPs affect everyone. He notes that “[w]hen we begin to think of language issues as personal rather than abstract and removed from daily concerns, we quickly see how we all have a stake in language policies, since they have a direct bearing on our place in society and what we might (or might not) be able to achieve” (2006: 21). This understanding and personal appreciation of language learning to our everyday lives is emphasised in the Department of Education and Skills’ *Languages Connect* strategy (DES, 2017a: 10). This national strategy will be discussed in the next chapter.

Language policies can have multiple layers that have the potential to affect people’s futures to varying degrees. Indeed, as Ricento notes:

Schools, the workplace, the neighbourhood, families – all are sites where language policies determine or influence what language(s) we will speak, whether our language is “good/acceptable” or “bad/unacceptable” for particular purposes, including careers, marriage, social advancement, and so on (2006: 21).

Although language policy and planning has proven advantageous in many regards, Ferguson notes that there are indeed limitations. He states that “there now seems to be a greater readiness to acknowledge its often limited efficacy” (2006: 12). Romaine highlights the “weak linkages between policy and practice” (2002: 3). She points out that policies are oftentimes created but rarely implemented. Ferguson believes that this fatalism in terms of language policy and planning exists for a myriad of reasons. These include the “unimpressive record of planning success... and an intellectual climate both distrustful of planning as potentially authoritarian and sceptical as to its ability to deliver” (2006: 13).

School stakeholders can play a considerable role in language policy. Indeed, language policy places an onus on the school and key stakeholders to reflect on MFL issues, take stock of the current challenges and obstacles, devise a plan, evaluate that plan, carry out reviews and amend the language policy where needed. If properly executed, language policy encourages buy-in, cultivates a sense of ownership, and establishes agreed aspirational goals. Nonetheless, as noted earlier in this chapter, a language policy does not guarantee the desired outcome. A language policy should therefore be considered an initial blueprint of a jigsaw for a successful pathway forward. With trial and error, diligent planning, solid implementation, and a

welcoming procedure to make amendments, gradually, each piece of the jigsaw can be put together to ensure that the desired vision evolves and becomes a reality.

The European Schools system offers a pertinent example of how a language policy for schools can be very effective. Its official language policy essentially acts as a language policy and planning document. The *Language Policy of the European Schools* (2019) states that the aim of its language policy is to “provide a source of information on the ways in which the European Schools put principles into practice” (Office of the Secretary General of the European Schools, 2019: 4). In essence, the language policy outlines the various facets of language learning in their schooling system. The document emphasises the importance of language learning; it clearly defines the diverse linguistic terms it employs; it stipulates the minimum number of languages that students have to study by a given school year; it advises the reader of the options to study additional languages; it explains how the schooling system organises language learning; it specifies the minimum proficiency level, aligned to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), that all students are expected to achieve by certain years of their schooling; it details the various teaching and learning methodologies employed, including Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL); it informs the reader of the educational supports available to students; it delineates the roles of stakeholders; and it presents its decision making and appeals processes.

An important component of the European Schools language policy is that it is possible to amend it; it is not a document that takes decades to revise, as is often the case in Ireland (e.g. Junior and Senior Cycle MFL programmes). The document advises that “[t]his Language Policy will be revised on a regular basis when changes require it and at least every ten years” (OSG, 2019: 10). Factors such as there being substantially fewer European Schools than second-level schools in Ireland as well as generous funding arrangements for the European Schools system may explain why it is easier to effectuate reforms in their system. Nonetheless, it could also be argued that the European Schools system has schools across the entire continent and deals with dozens of European languages, but still manages to have efficient procedures in place to effectuate amendments and implement them across Europe.

The European Schools language policy, with its facility to effectuate changes, is most beneficial to fostering plurilingual second-level students. Indeed, Van Lingen notes that the pedagogical structures of the European Schools are a central component to the success of their system enabling “alumni to pursue successful academic and professional careers anywhere in the world” (2012: 129).

1.2 Theory in language policy and planning

The word *theory* is derived from the Greek word *theoria*, which means ‘seeing’, in the sense of being a ‘spectator’. Ricento states that a theory is a “statement, or series of statements, proposed by an individual or group of individuals, about a position on an understanding of the world” (2006: 3). Ricento believes that there is “no overarching theory of LP and planning” (2006: 10). Indeed, Cooper notes that “we have as yet no generally accepted language planning theory, if by theory we mean a set of logically interrelated, empirically testable positions” (1989: 41).

Nonetheless, Spolsky advises that a “language policy exists even where it has not been made explicit or established by authority” (2004: 8). He proposes that a language policy can still be determined through his theory of language policy which consists of four main features. The first feature is Spolsky’s tripartite division of language policy into three principal components: ecology (language practices), ideology (language beliefs), and language management (language planning) (Spolsky 2004: 39).

Ecology is “the study of the interactions between any given language and its environment” (Haugen, 1971: 20). In essence, ecology is the language practices in place on the ground. In the context of second-level schools, ecology would be the language practices at school level, e.g. are MFLs promoted, is sufficient time given to develop fluency, how much time do teachers speak the target language in the classroom, are certain languages prioritised, etc.?

Ideology concerns the “beliefs that the members of a speech community attach to each language within their linguistic repertoires” (Earls 2014: 16). At second-level schooling, ideology would largely relate to the beliefs that students, teachers, school management and parents would have concerning the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs. Some examples may include: do I believe I can learn this language, do I believe one language is better than the other, do I believe that language learning is a skill worth developing, etc.?

Language management (planning) is the “formulation and proclamation of an explicit plan or policy, usually but not necessarily written in a formal document, about language use” (Spolsky 2004: 11). Language management could be a school policy on languages; it could be the number of MFL hours allocated in the school timetable; it may be a limitation on what languages can be studied and how many can be studied; it might be the decision to have a strong MFL department that has a clear remit and convenes regularly, it may be the school’s position that the MFL co-ordinator meets with the

school principal on a number of occasions throughout the academic year to discuss issues, targets and progress, etc.

Ecology, ideology and language management are reciprocal, each deriving from and influencing the other. Earls notes that “[b]y synthesising the complex ecology, ideology and planning dimensions... a *de facto* language policy can be inferred” (2014: 19).

The second key feature in Spolsky’s language policy theory is that “language policy is concerned not just with named varieties of language, but with all the individual elements at all levels that make up language” (Spolsky 2004: 40). As such, the focus of language policy could be on spelling, pronunciation, grammar, etc.

The third fundamental part in Spolsky’s language policy theory is that “language policy operates within a speech community, of whatever size” (Spolsky, 2004: 40). In the case of this research project, the speech community is second-level students with their educators. These students are still developing their L1 competences. In most cases, they are doing Irish as their L2 (McCárthaigh, 2019). Students’ MFL studies (generally their L3) only officially commence in First Year of second-level education.

The fourth principal component in Spolsky’s language policy theory is that “language policy functions in a complex ecological relationship among a wide range of linguistic and non-linguistic elements, variables and factors” (2004: 41). These extra-linguistic elements can have a bearing on the language policy. At a school level, these could be political (e.g. patronage of the school) or type of senior management in the school. School finances may also play a role in a language policy: if the funds and resources are made available. The socio-economic background of the students may also have a bearing: if they have the means to develop their language skills online outside of school. The role that parents play is another variable: if they are there to encourage their children in their MFL learning. These are some extra-linguistic factors that will affect a language policy.

In terms of gaining an appreciation for a theory in language policy and planning, Ricento (2006: 8) makes three pertinent observations:

1. While language-policy debates concern language, political, economic, and social theory insights can provide those creating a language policy with the tools to explain what is at stake, the importance of taking action, and the likely effects of the policy/policies.

2. Ideologies concerning language, or indeed specific languages, have significant effects on language policies and practices. These ideologies can limit to a large extent what is possible in terms of LPP-making.
3. Research in language policy and planning should be considered as a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary activity, in which “conceptual and methodological tools borrowed from various disciplines need to be appropriately integrated and applied to real-world problems and challenges involving language” (Ricento, 2006: 9).

The aim of a language policy and planning is to provide realistic remedies to MFL issues in schools. Ricento advises that “[g]ood research may not lead to effective policies but bad research weakens the legitimacy of good research by casting doubts on the field as a whole” (2006: 12).

Tollefson (1991) discusses two distinct approaches that have impacted on language policy – the neo-classical approach as well as the historical-structural approach. Tollefson states that the neo-classical approach is scientifically neutral and focuses on the interest of the individual, while the historical-structural approach places the emphasis on social and historical influences that bring about language policies.

In terms of a brief history of a theory in language policy, Tollefson believed that language policies or plans benefit the dominant groups. He states that “language policy is viewed as one mechanism by which the interests of dominant socio-political groups are maintained and the seeds of transformation are developed” (1991: 32). This view led Tollefson to devise the critical language policy (CLP). CLP “acknowledge[s] that policies often create and sustain various forms of social inequality, and that policy-makers usually promote the interests of dominant social groups” (2006: 42). Foucault conceived the notion of governmentality, which calls for the inclusion of all stakeholders in the running of a system. Pennycook (2002) proposed the application of governmentality to language policy and planning. Pennycook’s governmentality aims to unveil the methods by which policies generate inequality with the ambition of removing the focus from “the state as an intentional actor that seeks to impose its will on the people, and instead draws our attention to much more localized and often contradictory operations of power” (2006: 65). The desire is that the power is not simply embedded in the policy text, but rather, it is enacted at the micro-level. As Foucault notes, to “govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others” (1982: 790). When other stakeholders can contribute, language policy and planning fosters greater support, which in turn strengthens LPP.

1.3 Devising a language policy

In terms of creating a successful language policy, establishing clear goals is of central importance.

Cooper (1989) employs the word 'ends' in terms of language policy and planning, while others in the field refer to 'goals', 'aims' or 'purposes'. In any case, to achieve these 'ends', Ager believes the following are required:

- An *ideal* (vision, intention) is the “idealistic future state, unlikely to be achieved but essential as an end-point towards which planning is ultimately directed” (2001: 8).
- An *objective* (mission, purpose) is the “way of achieving the vision, or at least a realisable 'end' on the way towards it” (2001: 8).
- A *target* is the “precise, achievable, identifiable point on the way towards the objective. Achievement of the target is measurable and often quantifiable” (2001: 8).

Corson states that the “goals of a language policy are to identify the language problems that the school has, and then to find and agree on solutions to those language problems” (1999: 3).

Hornberger notes that it is the “goals that are assigned to LPP activities that determine the direction of change envisioned” (1990: 21).

When considering a language policy for schools, as Ager notes above, setting achievable targets is important. This is necessary, as schools are institutions dealing with considerable daily demands. As such, the SMART goals principle (Kenny & Savage, 1997: 97) would be appropriate. As noted in the Introduction Chapter, SMART is an acronym which means that the goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. One should have realistic expectations of teenage school-goers. In the European Schools system, students are expected to have achieved a C1 CEFR level (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) in their L2 by the end of their second-level studies (OSG, 2019: 18). This proficiency standard is possible in the European Schools system as students commence their L2 programme at the start of their primary school studies. In Ireland, at least initially, expecting students to achieve a C1 CEFR level is not reasonable as Irish is the L2 of most students in Ireland (McCárthaigh, 2019) and students only officially commence their MFL (generally their L3) in First Year of second-level education. As noted in the Introduction Chapter, MFL students in Ireland do a minimum of 380 tuition hours in their MFL at post-primary level. Given this number of hours, a realistic CEFR level should be set. By employing a SMART approach, with 380 hours of MFL tuition, a B1 or even a B2.1 CEFR level of competence in their MFL should be achievable for most students. This will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

In addition to adopting a SMART approach, a number of other components are important when devising a successful language policy. The role of schools in fostering greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students cannot be seen in isolation. It should be considered in the wider context of politics, economics, society and culture. With this in mind, Ferguson points out that the term *language policy* should be regarded as an interdisciplinary endeavour. He states:

The language problems addressed by LP are not just, or only, problems of language and communication but typically arise from, and can only be fully understood against, a background of political, economic, social and cultural struggle. And, for this very reason, the study of LP cannot help but remain an interdisciplinary enterprise (2006: 14).

There is no one fixed type of language policy. Each policy depends to a large extent on what it wishes to achieve and how it aims to achieve it. Johnson delineates the different language policy types as well as the dichotomies involved. He advises that the model in the table below is “offered as a starting point and heuristic, not a definitive framework” (2013: 10). He also believes that there can be an “overlap within and across categories; that is, a policy can be both top-down and bottom-up: top-down and covert; bottom-up and explicit; etc.” (2013:10).

Type	Dichotomies	
Genesis	<i>Top-down</i> Macro-level policy developed by some governing or authoritative body or person	<i>Bottom-up</i> Micro-level or grassroots generated policy for and by the community that it impacts.
Means and Goals	<i>Overt</i> Overtly expressed in written or spoken policy texts	<i>Covert</i> Intentionally concealed at the macro-level (collusive) or at the micro-level (subversive)
Documentation	<i>Explicit</i> Officially documented in written or spoken policy texts	<i>Implicit</i> Occurring without or in spite of official policy texts
In law and in practice	<i>De jure</i> Policy “in law”; officially documented in writing	<i>De facto</i> Policy “in practice”; refers to both locally produced policies that arise without or in spite of <i>de jure</i> policies and local language <i>practices</i> that differ from <i>de jure</i> policies; <i>de facto</i> practices can reflect (or not) <i>de facto</i> policies

Table 1.1: Types of language policies and dichotomies

Source: Johnson (2013: 10)

In the Genesis type, there are two approaches – top-down and bottom-up. A top-down approach could be from government while a bottom-up approach could be one created by teachers and students. Nonetheless, a language policy can be created at multiple levels. Definitions such as top-down and bottom-up can be relative. A school policy created by stakeholders at the school could be considered bottom-up. However, for teachers and students in the school, it could also be considered top-down depending on who at school level created the policy. In addition to a policy being top-down or bottom-up, a policy can also be either overt or covert. Overt language policies are “explicit, formalized, *de jure*, codified and manifest” (Shohamy, 2006: 50) while covert ones are “implicit, informal, unstated, *de facto*, grass-roots and lenient” (Shohamy, 2006: 50).

A language policy can also be either explicit or implicit. Schiffman (1996: 13) uses the terms *explicit* and *implicit* instead of *overt* and *covert*. For Johnson (2013), the terms *explicit* and *implicit* refer to the official status of a policy. An explicit policy is usually one documented in the written form. For example, Irish and English are explicitly the official languages of Ireland. Nonetheless, it is possible to have an implicit policy which can be very powerful. One such example is that there is no explicit language policy in the USA that declares the official language to be English.

The difference between overt/explicit and covert/implicit is intention. Johnson notes that *covert* “carries with it strong connotations of something that is intentionally concealed and, therefore, a covert policy is one which is intentionally hidden or veiled... for either collusive or subversive reasons” (Johnson, 2013: 11). Due to these negative connotations, Earls (2016: 46) favours the use of the term *implicit* instead of *covert*. Schiffman argues that, in any examination of policy, one should not only consider the “explicit, written, overt, *de jure*, official, and “top-down” decision-making about language”, one should also study the “implicit, unwritten, covert, *de facto*, grass-roots, and unofficial ideas and assumptions” in place, as these can “influence the outcomes of policy-making just as emphatically and definitively as the more explicit decisions” (2006: 112).

Corson (1999) argues that all schools have a language policy; if it is not an explicit language policy, schools will have an implicit one. In effect, in Ireland, the importance of learning MFLs and indeed which MFLs to learn are strongly influenced by both explicit and implicit policies. French has traditionally held great importance in the Irish second-level education system. It remains to this day the most studied MFL by second-level students (see Appendix M). There are three other curricular MFLs from First Year through to Sixth Year – German, Italian and Spanish. The fact that matriculation requirements for many courses in the National University of Ireland universities (NUI, 2018) require students to have passed one MFL in their Leaving Certificate is an example of an explicit policy. An

example of an implicit policy is the importance given to speaking the MFL. If a teacher chooses to teach an MFL class through English, it could be reasonably inferred by students that making an effort to speak the MFL is not a high priority.

De jure means ‘concerning law’ while *de facto* signifies ‘concerning fact’. In essence, *de jure* policies are in law and *de facto* policies are those in practice. *De facto* policies could be “locally produced policies that arise without or in spite of *de jure* policies and local language practices that differ from *de jure* policies; *de facto* practices can reflect (or not) *de facto* policies” (Johnson, 2013: 10).

Making decisions in terms of classifying, examining and analysing language policies has been traditionally differentiated in terms of *corpus* versus *status*. *Corpus* refers to the structure of the language itself while *status* concerns language use and language choice. Therefore, *corpus* is less ideological than *status*. Fishman questions such a distinction and believes that there is a greater linkage between the two in terms of ideology. He states that *corpus* can have a ‘hidden’ ideology (2000: 44).

Agency is a further important term in language policy. It may be defined as “the role(s) of individuals and collectives in the processes of language use, attitudes, and ultimately policies” (Ricento, 2000: 208). Johnson defines language education policy as “the official and unofficial policies that are created across multiple layers and institutional contexts (from national organizations to classrooms) that impact language use in classrooms and schools” (2013: 54). Corson (1999) contends that within schools there can be two types of language policies – the first being a school-wide policy that essentially acts as an umbrella for the various MFLs in the school as well as dealing with external commitments on the school. The second policy type is departmental, which deals with the needs of each MFL department and generally focuses more on pedagogy and evaluation.

Johnson notes that language policies in the education system have historically been used for positive and negative intentions. He highlights that while such language policies have been employed to promote indigenous and minority languages, they have also been employed as a method to “eradicate, subjugate, and marginalize minority and indigenous languages and their users and are, therefore, instruments of power that influence access to educational and economic resources” (2013: 54). Language policies in the education system can therefore serve good and bad purposes. This thesis will consider the positive contribution that language policies can make to greatly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students in the Irish education system.

1.3.1 Critical policymaking

In order to lead to a robust language policy in schools, Corson (1999: 54) proposes the introduction of critical policymaking. In short, critical policymaking is the process whereby each stage of the policymaking process is evaluated in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders. He outlines the four-stage process:

- *Stage 1: Identifying the real problem(s):* The start of critical policymaking occurs when stakeholders identify an issue of some sort in their school. The problem is then clearly articulated by those in a position to effectuate change. Stakeholders are then invited to criticise the articulation of the problem. If it is agreed that there is a real problem, this problem is considered the start of the policymaking process.
- *Stage 2: Trial policies:* A trial solution to the problem is worked out with relevant stakeholders in a critical and open manner. The aim is to resolve the problem with a wanted policy.
- *Stage 3: Testing policies against the views of participants:* The effectiveness of the solution is tested by participants involved in the change process. At this stage, small-scale research of different kinds takes place, e.g. observe the policy in action and provide relevant feedback, search alternative solutions, or devolve decision making to a smaller grouping within the school.
- *Stage 4: Policy adoption and implementation:* When each policy solution meets the needs of relevant participants, it is adopted and implemented. The policymaking process therefore comes to an end. In the case where solutions have not been found, the policymaking process can be either modified or rejected.

1.4 Implementing a language policy

When schools are required to adopt a new policy, Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) advise that interpretation and translation play an important role. Interpretation is the initial reading and understanding of the policy. Ball (1993) refers to this as 'decoding' the policy. At this stage, key stakeholders wonder what they have to do. Translation is more closely aligned with the languages of practice; it is the space between policy and practice. Ball, Maguire and Braun define it as an "iterative process of making institutional texts and putting those texts into action, literally 'enacting' policy using tactics which include talk, meetings, plans, events, 'learning walks', as well as producing artefacts and borrowing ideas and practices from other schools, purchasing and drawing on commercial materials and official websites..." (2012: 45).

Mechanisms play a vital role in how language policies are interpreted at grassroots level. In essence, mechanisms are “overt and covert devices that are used as the means for affecting, creating and perpetuating *de facto* language policies” (Shohamy, 2006: 54). Spolsky (2004) argues that mechanisms are at the heart of the struggle between the ideology and the practice on the ground. While mechanisms can be used on many levels, Shohamy notes that it is “those in authority who can use the mechanisms more powerfully, as they have better access to sanction, penalties and rewards, including financial resources” (2006: 54). Shohamy highlights how assessment is a powerful mechanism and that those tested are likely “not aware of how influential this mechanism is in affecting their view of which languages count and which do not, not least the effect of the language on the scores they obtain on the tests and the consequences it has on their lives” (2006: 55).

Shohamy notes that:

mechanisms serve as major tools affecting language perceptions, people’s behaviour and eventually the *de facto* LPs. Mechanisms then are tools for managing language policy, but they are also considered forms of policymaking in terms of perceptions, choice and actual use (2006: 55).

Some mechanisms are often official and stated in documents such as language policy documents and educational policies. However, other times, mechanisms can be more subtle and indirectly affect language behaviours. Thus, it is important to recognise that mechanisms can be a very powerful method to achieve the desired goals of a policy. It should also be acknowledged that mechanisms can be used to undermine a policy.

Moreover, all stakeholders need to be in support of any initiative designed to substantially increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students. Simply having a top-down approach can prove largely ineffective. In Ireland, having Irish as a mandatory language in schools has not guaranteed success in revitalising the Irish language. Ferguson notes that “teaching the minority language (Irish) has not proven to be an effective instrument for language revitalisation” (2006: 34). Ferguson notes that a language policy is “insufficient and likely in fact to be ineffective in the absence of actions in other domains that reinforce the effects of teaching” (2006: 34). The ineffectiveness of pedagogical approaches also act as a contributory factor in the general failure to revitalise the Irish language. MFL pedagogical approaches historically employed in the second-level education system in Ireland will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Moreover, Hornberger (2006: 32) points out that both opportunity and incentive are very important components in addition to language policy and planning. If students have the opportunity to use the language as well as an incentive to do so, it should lead to higher success in achieving the goals of the policy.

Ager states that motivation is central to language policy and language planning (2001: 1). He believes that language attitudes are key to motivation (2001: 125), that, in essence, a positive attitude to the language – and in the case of schools, the MFL the students study – is important. Dörnyei notes that although “‘motivation’ is a term frequently used in both educational and research contexts, it is rather surprising how little agreement one can find in the literature with regard to the exact meaning of the concept” (1998: 117). In terms of language learning, Gardner defines motivation as “the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language” (1985: 10).

Ager notes that in order to develop motivation, knowledge about the language is required. This does not simply relate to its grammar or syntax but rather to the “structure, history and comparative advantages of a language” (2001: 126). Students should understand why they are studying their MFL and the numerous advantages that knowing that MFL offers. Furthermore, Ager highlights the importance of ‘feelings’ about language. He notes that “feelings in matters of language are often extreme, one either likes the language... or one does not” (2001: 131). It is therefore important to cultivate a positive disposition towards the learning of MFLs in schools.

Moreover, Ager states that in order to effectuate change in policy or planning, attitude is very important as the “attitude of an individual or group also reflects some readiness to take action” (2001: 132). In the case of support for change and intervention in language policy and/or planning, Ager believes that it affects all three types of language planning: corpus planning (about language), status planning (about society) and language-in-education/acquisition planning (about learning). Corpus planning and status planning were first introduced by Kloss (1969). Corpus planning refers to changes in language (e.g. structure, vocabulary, morphology, etc.) while status planning concerns the language’s “standing with respect to other languages or to the language needs of a national government” (Cobarrubias & Fishman, 1983: 42). Alongside corpus planning and status planning, Cooper (1989) believes that language-in-education/acquisition planning is a fundamental type of language planning. He states that acquisition planning is “far more than the planning of language instruction... [it] is a feature of the instructional enterprise at every level of organization, from the Director General of the Ministry of Education to the classroom teacher” (1989: 160).

Haarmann (1990) proposes an additional type of language planning: prestige planning. The aim of prestige planning is to influence how the language is perceived. It influences how both “corpus and status planning activities are acted upon by actors and received by people” (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997: 50). Haarmann argues that language planning takes place at different levels (i.e. governmental

activities, activities of agencies, group activities and activities of individuals) for several purposes. These levels represent a “differential prestige or efficiency of organisational impact levels and that this may affect the success of the language plan” (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997: 50).

Educators should note that while readiness to act is to be welcomed, Ager states that such readiness is “not the same thing as a motive for action” (2001: 133). He states that a motive implies “not merely readiness to act but action itself: a goal, a strategy for achieving this and an anticipated outcome” (2001: 133). Thus, developing a motive to effectuate change is crucial to greatly increasing the numbers of plurilingual second-level students in the Irish education system.

Ager also highlights the importance of finding ways to measure motivation towards a language. He proposes one method that he refers to as the ‘scale of excellence’. In such a scale, the attributes of a language can be measured (using semantic opposites) in a survey which is completed by respondents (2001: 129). Although this measure would be subjective, it nonetheless does provide valuable feedback to issues relating to motivation in learning a modern foreign language.

While many MFL enthusiasts will embrace all reasonable arguments for change, it would be unwise to believe that consent by all will be given to undertake such changes. Nicolò Machiavelli (1515) lays out the very real human hurdles to overcome:

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new (2010: 21).

Lo Bianco and Aliani highlight the dichotomy of policy ambition versus policy implementation in the case of Australia. They argue that in terms of creating an effective policy that achieves what it sets out to achieve, it is important to recognise that any preferred ‘new order’ will result in those who are in favour as well as those who are against. They believe that success depends on “cleverness of design and on pragmatic constraints, but also on the interplay of supporters and opponents” (2013: 1).

Lo Bianco and Aliani’s work focuses on language planning and the introduction of two new policy ambitions in Australia: Asia literacy and multiculturalism, with the first term referring to the linguistic reconstruction of Australia being linked to part of Asia, and the second to reconstructing Australian society as one that is both linguistically and culturally plural. Both scholars’ work provides us with a relatively unique insight given that there is a dearth of research on the complex process of language

policy implementation in education systems. Menken and García contend that much of the research that has taken place on language policies has been done so on the written language policy document as well as on the restrictive power of policies, and that not enough research has taken place on the language policy implementation in the classroom (2010: 1). Research at grassroots level is very important as policies “often have different results from those intended by policymakers” (2010: 1).

Since the 1970’s, Australia has issued several language policies for a number of reasons including social, cultural, economic, regional and political. In their research, Lo Bianco and Aliani’s main focus was on “policy-making, and specifically with how policies are received, perceived and enacted in schools and among learners” (2013: xv). In particular, they examined the context of students in four schools in Australia studying Italian and Japanese under the remit of Australia’s language policies.

The primary aim of Lo Bianco and Aliani’s research was to “ascertain how and why the ambitious policies on language education in Australia... had met such uneven success and to document and describe the concrete reality of language education in ordinary schools and among ordinary learners” (2013: 64). The findings of their research are very interesting as the researchers repeatedly highlight the “gulf between policy making and policy implementation” (2013: 125). Lo Bianco and Aliani assert that for the intended language policy to become a reality, real-world policymakers should refrain from placing blame on the implementers. Instead, Lo Bianco and Aliani believe that policymakers ought to address the concern that they “rarely draw on the skill of language planners, or the research evidence and concepts of language planning theory” (2013:126). They also believe that policymakers should welcome greater input and interaction from stakeholders at school level. Lo Bianco and Aliani argue for cross-faculty collaboration as a desirable component in order to garner support and enhance student learning (2013: 128).

Furthermore, Lo Bianco and Aliani contend that successful language policies require endorsement and support in addition to “deep change and commitment” (2013: 127). They also believe that communicating the vision of any language policy is crucial. They state that the “benefits of learning another language and the cumulative nature of language learning are not generally understood, and this itself becomes a factor. It makes the policy feel unreal” (2013: 127). In the case of Ireland, progress has been made in these respects. The *Languages Connect* strategy (2017) acts as a strong endorsement of MFL learning, provides a welcomed plurilingual vision, and assures a strong commitment of support to help make it a reality. This strategy will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

Simply having a school language policy in place does not guarantee any level of success. The teacher is the key agent to the success of any policy that involves maximising learning in the classroom. However, MFL teachers do not all figuratively fit into the one box; what one teacher may view as progress another may view as a retrograde step. Corson highlights the dynamics involved in order to effectuate change in second-level schools. He notes:

There will be teachers located at every point in the career cycle. Some will be young and enthusiastic. Some will be older and also enthusiastic. But many lose their enthusiasm as they experience the difficult conditions in some school systems. Even young teachers can have their ideals crushed when they come up against the realities of schools and school systems. These variations in commitment and enthusiasm can show up in the attitudes that teachers have about working closely with their colleagues or with the community. Some teachers prefer to collaborate with others, whereas others prefer a more solitary professional life (1999: 41).

As such, Corson notes that there will be a continuum between those teachers who are collaborative and those who are exclusionary. Therefore, to bring about a language policy within schools, Corson suggests trying to reach a balance between these two attitudes in order to achieve maximum participation. One such way to do this is to provide staff with continuous professional development so that they can appreciate the vision and take ownership of it.

The process of language planning also poses its own challenges. Hornberger points out that “language planning is not merely a technical undertaking and can often result in creating conflicts rather than solving them” (2006: 33). As such, Corson calls for a more inclusive approach in language planning that would “devolve its research and decision-making processes down as much as possible to the least of the stakeholders” (1999: 177). Corson argues that in “large organizations like high schools, policymaking on all but the most routine aspects of management is often best carried out at the level of the small departmental organization” (1999: 4). Devolving the power to schools to create a school policy is recommended, with Corson arguing that “planners who want to reform a social institution really need to devolve decision making so that they can consult the reasons and accounts of participants and stakeholders at each policymaking stage” (1999: 64). In such a scenario, all relevant stakeholders should be invited to partake in the creation of the language policy.

Corson (1999) contends that the devolution of power to schools in terms of creating a language policy can lead to real emancipatory potential where often intangible benefits accrue. He argues that such devolution can bring stakeholders closer together. As a result, he advises that stakeholders can overcome constraining relationships to advance the interests of the school and the community. Smyth (1996) also believes that, where possible, power should be devolved to schools and within schools. However, he warns that it must be real devolution to schools. He contends that traditionally,

where devolution is given to schools, it is, in fact, permitted in order to increase centralised control. It gives the illusion of decentralising power, and does not encourage real educational reform coming from grassroots levels.

Corson (1999) advises that there are a series of potential drawbacks to devolving power to schools. Devolution can result in a top-down approach, where all relevant stakeholders are not properly involved. In addition, there could also be a lack of human capital and resources at school level on how to create a policy, with a lack of consistency and adhering to standards in policy and planning across schools. The creation of a language policy and planning document could also be very time-consuming, leading to a lack of consensus amongst stakeholders. Indeed, some schools may simply take the policy of another school and make minor amendments to present it as their own school policy. Given these concerns, where necessary, devolution of power to schools needs to be properly organised, with appropriate training provided so that it does not lead to undesirable outcomes.

A just policy is therefore one that devolves real decision-making power to those who are affected by the policy (Bhaskar, 1986). Tollefson (1991) believes that while language policies can mirror power relationships, they can also be employed to transform them. Corson believes that this involvement should go much further than simply sending out questionnaires to gauge feedback or collecting aggregate data. Rather, it should be truly engaging and purposeful. Indeed, Menken and García argue that a language policy should be negotiated amongst all stakeholders, as “ultimately, a language education policy is as dynamic as the many individuals involved in its creation and implementation” (2010: 1). Menken and García (2010) contend that through a collaborative process at school level, stakeholders can negotiate the policy that works best for their institution. Menken and García (2010: 28) believe that by following the above approach, one is moving from considering language policies as being mechanisms of power to instead being examples of stakeholders taking ownership of the policy process. Having a sense of ownership, that one has created something with one’s colleagues and students as well as with other stakeholders, is excellent practice in effectuating positive and significant changes in the education system (Schrum & Levin, 2015).

Hornberger (2010: 14) advises that language policy development should also include both an *implementational space* as well as an *ideological space*. An *implementational space* is essentially room to manoeuvre at local level to adapt the policy to be most advantageous to the school and community contexts. The *ideological space* is the opportunity to facilitate changes in attitudes about

the various aspects of the language policy; and where stereotypes or dominant discourses exist, these can be challenged to strengthen the policy.

To highlight the complexity of language policy and planning, Ricento and Hornberger (1996) put forward the analogy of a multi-layered “onion”. Figure 1.1 below illustrates an adapted model which details the agents, levels and processes involved in language policy and planning. The layers are ordered from the outer layer to the centre one. The outer layer is the national level with the national language policy, the middle layer is the institutional level composed of the school community, while the inner layer is the interpersonal level involving the practitioners in the classroom. Each of the layers interacts with and is impacted by the others to enact language policies. At national level, the language policy is articulated in legislation, which may result in a series of regulations and guidelines. These are then interpreted and a school-based language policy and planning (LPP) document is formulated. The agreed LPP is then implemented in the classroom.

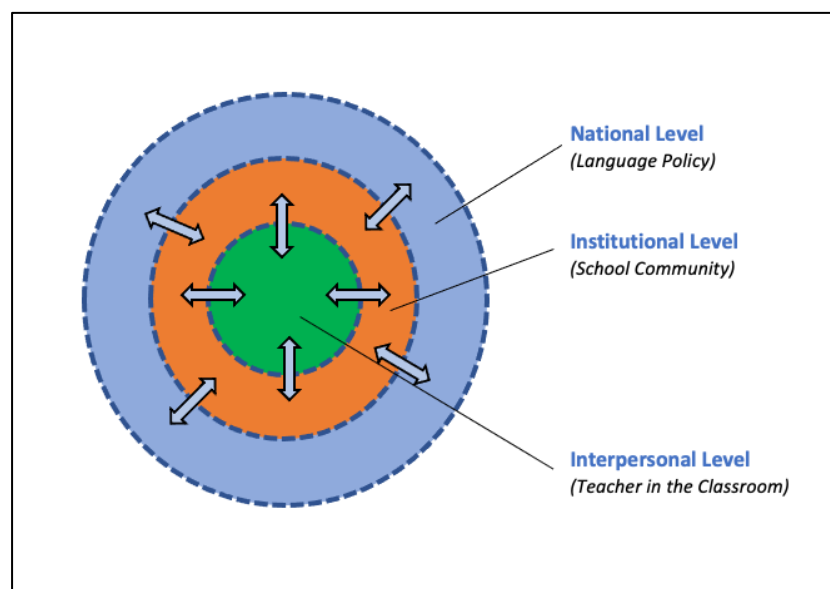


Figure 1.1: Analogy of multi-layered onion (LPP)

Source: Adapted from Ricento and Hornberger’s Model (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996: 409)

In conclusion, developing a language policy for schools is certainly achievable. However, it is not a straightforward process. A top-down policy is not the most efficacious route to develop true plurilingualism. In reality, to address the plurilingual needs of students in any given institution, the policy should be created and developed by stakeholders at school level. Moreover, the language policy should be closely aligned with language planning, forming a symbiotic relationship that evolves. While developing an effective language policy and planning document is in truth a complex tapestry to get right, it is nonetheless a very successful method to develop plurilingualism in the second-level education system.

Chapter Two

Language Policy and Planning in the Irish Post-Primary Education System

As discussed in the Introduction Chapter, the most opportune time to develop plurilingualism is during the school-going years. However, as noted in Chapter One, to foster truly plurilingual students, it requires a structured approach through robust language policy and planning (LPP). Cultivating a plurilingual nation is no easy task; it indeed necessitates a national concerted effort. This chapter will examine the history of language policy and planning in the Irish post-primary education system, with a particular focus given to recent developments.

2.1 A historical perspective of LPP and official guidelines on school planning

While Ireland has a national modern foreign languages strategy, *Languages Connect* (2017), which will be discussed later in this chapter, the country does not have a national language policy for MFLs, nor does it require schools to devise one. Nonetheless, over the last three decades, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) has made some progress in this regard.

Although the Department of Education and Skills provides non-prescriptive guidelines on the creation of some school policies (Admissions, Anti Bullying, Child Protection, Data Protection, etc.) that second-level schools are required to implement, the DES has not outlined how policies in general are to be created at post-primary level. The closest document relating to general guidelines on developing post-primary policies dates back to 1999: *School Development Planning: An Introduction for Second Level Schools*.

The *School Development Planning* (1999) document proposes a succinct framework of school development planning, process and product which should be used in the creation of school policies at post-primary level. The document notes that “schools require a proactive approach to managing change” (Department of Education and Science, 1999: 8) and that schools “need a systematic approach to planning” (DES, 1999: 8) as well as a “process for integrating all their planning activities into the coherent structure of an overall plan” (Department of Education and Science, 1999: 8).

In order to gain a deeper appreciation for the *School Development Planning* (1999) document, it is important to consider the years preceding its publication. The 1990’s marked a watershed period in the Irish education system with progressive and far-reaching papers and acts at national level. The

1992 Green Paper, *Education for a Changing World*, proposed the requirement for second-level schools to develop a school plan. Such a plan would identify the school's goals and state the school's policy on key issues, including curriculum (Department of Education and Science, 1992: 146). Moreover, the 1995 White Paper, *Charting our Education Future*, formally required schools to develop a school plan (DES, 1995a: 169). Under this policy document, the Board of Management of each school became obliged to publish a short report "on the school's activities, outlining how various elements in the school plan were implemented" (DES, 1995a: 170).

The 1998 Education Act was the culmination of almost a decade's work of advances in numerous areas in the Irish education system. The Education Act required the Board of Management of each second-level school to prepare a school plan and importantly to ensure that it is regularly reviewed and updated. The Education Act also required the participation of all stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, etc.) in the development of the school plan. The Education Act lay the foundation to the 1999 document *School Development Planning: An Introduction for Second Level Schools*. The *School Development Planning* document highlights the importance of having thorough policies in place at second level. It states that "[t]he quality of a school's education provision is the product of a complex interaction of factors, which must be planned for in a co-ordinated way" (Department of Education and Science, 1999: 12). Based on this premise, if the Irish education system is to foster greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students, schools should have a policy and plan in place to achieve this.

The *School Development Planning* document accepts that each school is unique. It states that in order to create a successful plan, school development planning needs to be systematic, collaborative, ongoing, progressive, as well as enhancing the quality of the educational experience (Department of Education and Science, 1999: 13). The document highlights that school development planning boasts a number of benefits, such as school effectiveness, school improvement, quality enhancement in terms of teaching and learning, staff development, as well as empowering stakeholders to manage change collaboratively and effectively (1999: 14 – 15). The document states that the school development planning framework should be a planning cycle that revolves around a central core. This core consists of the school's mission, vision and fundamental aims. The *mission* refers to a "general statement of the overall *raison d'être*" (1999: 17) or founding purpose of the school. The *vision* is considered a "statement of the desired future of the school" (1999: 17), while the *fundamental aims* are the "broad statements of the educational goals that the school seeks to attain" (1999: 17).

The document states that the function of the statement of mission, vision and aims is:

- To give a clear sense of direction to the work of the school;
- To inspire the school community with a common sense of purpose;
- To provide a framework from which policies and priorities can be derived;
- To establish a reference point against which the school can evaluate the success of its activities (Department of Education and Science, 1999: 17).

The planning cycle, as illustrated in figure 2.1 below, involves four main operations: review, design, implementation and evaluation. Review refers to a “full-scale in-depth review of all aspects of school life” (Department of Education and Science, 1999: 20). The design stage “encompasses designing the structure of the overall school plan, devising action plans to address the priorities, and drafting and compiling the component sections of the plan” (Department of Education and Science, 1999: 21). During the implementation process, the tasks outlined in the action plan are carried out (Department of Education and Science, 1999: 23). Evaluation is the final phase. Here the school community evaluates the success of the implementation and ascertains if they have successfully achieved the objectives of the Action Plan.

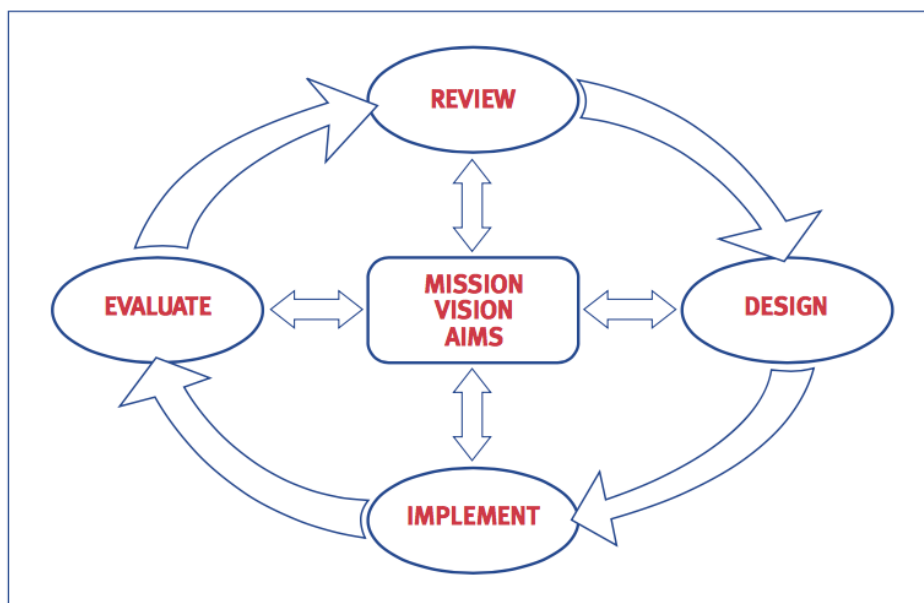


Figure 2.1: Basic framework of school development planning process

Source: Department of Education and Science (1999: 16)

2.2 The Irish language question

Although developing plurilingual second-level students in terms of modern foreign languages is the remit of this thesis, one cannot consider this ambition in complete isolation from the Irish language. It needs to be acknowledged that problems surrounding additional language learning in Ireland are not limited to MFLs. Indeed, the Irish language is the second language (L2) of most students in the

education system in Ireland (McCárthaigh, 2019); yet students' proficiency levels in the Irish language are a serious cause for concern (CSO, 2016: 66).

In the same way that one's "first language (L1) is so crucial to second language acquisition" (Theoharis & Brooks, 2012: 160), having a solid foundation in one's L2 is most advantageous to learning one's L3. Research carried out by the University of Haifa discovered that bilinguals find it easier to learn an L3 (University of Haifa, 2011). They also concluded that gaining "command of a number of languages improves proficiency in native languages" (University of Haifa, 2011). Given these findings, prior to students commencing their L3 studies (MFL), they should have a strong foundation in their L2 (the Irish language for most second-level students in Ireland).

In the European Schools system, in order to start learning one's L3, students must have achieved a minimum standard of A2 in their L2. As such, when students commence their L3 studies at A1 level, they already are studying their L2 at B1 level. By comparison, in Ireland, if a student's level of Irish is at A1 level and their MFL standard is also at A1 level, they are essentially learning two languages at more or less the same level and at the same time.

As a populace, the vast majority of citizens in Ireland cannot reasonably claim proficiency in the Irish language (Central Statistics Office, 2016: 66). Given that the Eurobarometer reports, *Europeans and their Languages*, largely only consider foreign languages, in order to gauge fluency levels in the Irish language (Gaeilge), the 2016 census of Ireland results are referred to. In both the Eurobarometer and census reports, the respondents self-reported their language competences. The 2016 census results establish that only 39.8% of the population of Ireland responded "yes" to the question, "Can you speak Irish?" (CSO, 2016: 66). As highlighted in the Introduction Chapter, this percentage decreased to 30.1% of respondents aged between 10 and 19 years of age (CSO, 2016: 66). Indeed, only 17.4% of the population (3 years of age and over) speak Gaeilge at all outside the education system (CSO, 2016: 67). As for those speaking Gaeilge on a daily basis outside the education system, this percentage significantly decreases to just 1.7% of the population (3 years and over) (CSO, 2016: 67).

The above statistics are a cause for real concern given the following reasons:

- The Irish language is the first official language of Ireland according to its constitution (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*) (Irish Constitution, Art. 8);
- A bilingual nation of Irish and English has been a *de facto* tenet of almost every government since the founding of the Irish Free State;

- The Irish language is taught at primary and secondary levels and is a core part of the daily curriculum;
- Considerable investment in terms of time and resources are dedicated to the Irish language in the education system.

Ireland has failed, in any reasonable sense of the word, to foster a bilingual nation of both Irish and English. As Barbour (2000: 37) notes, “no other European language that is the first national language of a sovereign independent state is spoken by only a small minority of the population”. Spolsky contends that the lack of success in developing a strong revival of the Irish language is “the classic case of the failure of language management” (2004: 191). Ó Riagáin (1997) argues that this is particularly the case in terms of a lack of closely aligning Irish-language planning with social and economic planning. As highlighted in Chapter One, language management is crucial to develop plurilingualism.

This thesis acknowledges that Ireland continues to experience significant issues becoming a bilingual nation of Irish and English. It also recognises that students’ L2 can have a significant bearing on their learning of their L3. In the context of Ireland, the degree to which learning the Irish language affects students’ MFL attitudes and general learning is explored in the research. The findings will be discussed in Chapter Five.

2.3 Pathway to a languages strategy

Ireland has made significant progress in its path to develop a national languages strategy. The 2007 *Language Education Policy Profile* (Ireland) document, a joint publication by the Council of Europe and the then-Department of Education and Science, identified that the main challenge for Ireland was “to move away from ‘an official but lame bilingualism’ to become a truly multilingual society, where the ability to learn and use two and more languages is taken for granted and fostered at every stage of the education system and throughout lifelong education” (DES, 2017a: 8).

Another important document is the *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* which aims to make Ireland’s education system the best in Europe by 2026 (DES, 2016a: 1). In terms of MFLs, objective 1.6 of the Action Plan is to “enable learners to communicate effectively and improve their standards of competence in languages” (2016a: 24). To achieve this objective, it will entail:

- increasing the “diversity and provision of foreign language learning opportunities” (2016a: 25);
- enhancing the “quality of teaching and learning and [ensuring] a supply of skilled teachers and educators of foreign languages in schools and in the higher education sector” (2016a: 25);
- improving “awareness of the benefits of language learning for career opportunities and for opportunities for studying abroad” (2016a: 25).

In 2017, the Department of Education and Skills published *Language Connect: Ireland’s Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017 – 2026*. While it is not an official MFL policy, for all intents and purposes, it can be considered Ireland’s first national foreign languages policy document (Earls, 2019). The document commences with a visionary tone that outlines the importance of becoming plurilingual citizens. The then-Minister for Education and Skills, Mr Bruton, emphasised the key role of the education system in developing plurilingualism:

The education system must support learners of all ages to gain the skills and confidence to be not only Irish and EU citizens but also global citizens, to understand other cultures and societies, as well as to develop the skills to function and thrive in our modern global economy (DES, 2017a: 5).

In a similar way to a language policy, the *Languages Connect* document (DES, 2017a: 3) sets out four main goals:

1. Improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment.
2. Diversify and increase the uptake of languages learned and cultivate the languages of the new Irish.
3. Increase awareness of the importance of language learning to encourage the wider use of foreign languages.
4. Enhance employer engagement in the development and use of trade language.

The document notes that Ireland is already well positioned in terms of realising these goals. Given that both Irish and English are taught in the primary school education system, the citizens are at an advantage, as they are accustomed to learning a second language from a very young age. Moreover, the strategy highlights that Ireland is generally well exposed to several different cultures and languages as 11% of the population is from immigrant communities that come from almost two hundred countries (DES, 2017a: 5).

Notwithstanding the above, as discussed in the Introduction Chapter, Ireland lags significantly behind many of its European counterparts in terms of modern foreign language competences. The *Languages Connect* (2017) document particularly highlights that a psychological hurdle needs to be overcome. It states that the citizens of Ireland “need to change our mindset around language learning” (DES, 2017a: 9).

As noted above, the *Languages Connect* document has set four goals to be achieved over the lifespan of the strategy (2017 – 2026). Given that the *Languages Connect* document is extensive, only the principal components that relate to the objectives of this thesis are noted below.

Goal 1 sets out to “[i]mprove language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment” (DES, 2017a: 8). In particular, the DES aims to require all newly qualified teachers (NQTs) of modern foreign languages to have a minimum B2.2 standard (CEFR) across all four language skills. In addition, the DES wishes to support short-term teacher exchanges. They also plan to have greater supports for teaching and learning MFLs. They advise that this could be done by expanding the language assistants scheme, and reforming the inspectorate system to provide greater support for self-evaluation, planning and assessment to improve standards in foreign language education. Carrying out periodic surveys amongst students about their experiences is also proposed. Finally, the document envisages the possibility of introducing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). In the next chapter, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) will be discussed in greater detail.

Goal 2 is entitled “[d]iversify and increase the uptake of languages learned and cultivate the languages of the new Irish” (DES, 2017a: 8). The DES will explore future language needs as well as incentives to upskill teachers who may be qualified to teach an MFL but have not had the opportunity to do so. They will also examine ways to encourage schools to diversify the MFLs available to students. In addition, they wish to explore short courses in other languages for Junior Cycle students. They also endeavour to diversify the number of curricular MFLs at Senior Cycle. They further aim to provide L1 support, where possible, in immigrant languages.

Goal 3 wishes to “[i]ncrease awareness of the importance of language learning to encourage the wider use of foreign languages” (DES, 2017a: 8). To achieve this goal, the *Languages Connect* document states that it will carry out an awareness-raising campaign in order to “highlight the personal, social, professional and economic benefits of language learning [and it will] [t]arget school principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, parents and students, and all stakeholders in the third-level sector” (DES, 2017a: 10). The DES aims to also obtain the support of embassies and other relevant bodies, such as Enterprise Ireland and IBEC (Irish Business and Employers Confederation). A new specification for the Junior Cycle MFLs will be implemented. They also endeavour to establish “greater links between post-primary schools and higher education” (DES, 2017a: 10).

Goal 4 aims to “[e]nhance employer engagement in the development and use of trade languages” (DES, 2017a: 8). This goal relates to several components of the world of work. In terms of second-

level education, it encourages the participation of employers and other relevant bodies and agencies with post-primary schools.

The strategy (DES, 2017a: 11) establishes a number of key target outcomes to be achieved by 2026:

- Increase the uptake in key languages from their present Leaving Certificate examination uptakes: German (13%), Spanish (11%), Italian (0.9%), Russian (0.6%), Japanese (0.6%), Arabic (0.2%), Mandarin Chinese (N/A), Portuguese (0.2% - non-curricular),
- Introduce a curricular specification for new learners of Mandarin Chinese for Leaving Certificate and curricular specifications for heritage speakers for Polish, Lithuanian, and Portuguese,
- Increase in the number of post-primary schools offering two or more foreign languages and increase the number of students sitting two languages for state examinations by 25%,
- Increase the proportion of the higher education cohort studying a foreign language, in any capacity, as part of their course to 20%,
- Increase the number of participants in Erasmus+ by at least 50%,
- Double the number of teachers participating in teacher mobility programmes,
- Double the number of Foreign Language Assistants,
- Improvement in learners' attitude to foreign language learning,
- Improvement in the quality of foreign language teaching at all levels,
- Adoption of the CEFR in education and by employers and increase the proportion of graduates leaving HE [higher education] who reach the "Independent User" standard.

A separate implementation plan, entitled *Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017 - 2026 Implementation Plan 2017 – 2022*, details the actions to be undertaken as well as timescales to achieve set targets. The *Languages Connect* strategy (2017) also established a Foreign Language Advisory Group (FLAG) to provide support for the implementation of the strategy and to evaluate its progress. The advisory group comprises of numerous representatives, including those of the education sector, enterprise, and cultural institutions, with the notable and paradoxical exclusion of representatives from MFL units at third level (Earls, 2019).

The *Languages Connect* document advises that it is the responsibility of all stakeholders to raise awareness and to foster a plurilingual second-level student populace. It states:

A key goal of this Strategy is to raise awareness in society at large of the educational, cognitive, social, intercultural, professional and economic benefits of language learning. Awareness-raising measures need to focus on key stakeholders: school principals and management, teachers, students and their families, graduates and employers. This will require a multi-faceted approach. Organisations such as National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), teacher unions, national parents associations, and student organisations need to be targeted both separately and, where opportunities exist, together... (DES, 2017a: 34).

The *Languages Connect* strategy is a good example of how a policy or a plan can go from being an idea to becoming a reality. Kingdon (2003) believes that in order to get a policy onto the national stage for either acceptance or rejection, it requires the convergence of three activities. Firstly, "problem identification" is key. If one fails to recognise and identify the problem, it is most unlikely that a solution will be found. The second activity is to develop solutions. A significant and inclusive public consultation process is advisable at this stage. The steps that are required to solve the issue

should then be outlined. This is normally done by a group of experts who carefully parse the issues and formulate a solution or solutions. The final part requires a series of political events that provide the opportunity for the issue to be raised. Indeed, the *Languages Connect* strategy has identified the problems, has developed solutions and has received considerable political support. Kingdon (1984) advises that policy change is realised when the three streams connect: problems, policies and politics. He advises that all three streams must work together in order for a policy to emerge.

Moreover, timing is very important. As Mitchell, Shipps and Crowson point out, “[p]olicy entrepreneurs seeking action on a preferred solution who act too soon or too late in reference to the political stream are much less likely to be successful than those who understand the rhythms of the system and time their actions accordingly” (2018: 29). As such, when windows of opportunity arise, it is important to seize the moment wisely and maximise the opportunity.

In conclusion, while Ireland experiences considerable issues developing a bilingual nation of Irish and English, in terms of the post-primary education system, the country has made steady progress over the last three decades through extensive legislation, policies as well as some guidelines on school development planning. In terms of modern foreign languages, *Languages Connect* is an ambitious strategy. While there is a long road ahead, the document marks a significant step forward in developing a plurilingual populace.

Chapter Three

Modern Foreign Language Learning in Irish Post-Primary Schools

The Introduction Chapter discussed the poor plurilingual competences of the Irish populace. It concluded that there is a serious cause for concern, and that a challenging path lies ahead to rectify the situation. As outlined in the Introduction Chapter, Chapter One and Chapter Two, the State education system is the ideal place for plurilingualism to be nurtured. While Ireland's education system is well positioned to develop plurilingual second-level students, it is not achieving its full potential in this regard (DES, 2017a). As with any complex issue, the reasons to explain such a phenomenon are multifaceted. This chapter will analyse some of the main issues surrounding modern foreign language (MFL) teaching, learning and assessment in second-level schools in Ireland. It will then proceed to explore, within the context of a language policy for post-primary schools, the feasibility of implementing three strategies that aim to make the vision of a plurilingual post-primary education system a reality.

3.1 Impediments to students achieving their plurilingual potential

There are several structural, operational and pedagogical issues which currently impede students from reaching their full plurilingual potential in the second-level education system in Ireland.

3.1.1 MFL syllabi and State examinations should be properly aligned with the CEFR

As noted in Chapter One, if the desired outcome is to foster a truly plurilingual populace, both language policy and language planning are essential. In this context, it is important for language learners and educators to have a "set of common reference levels as a calibrating instrument" so that these stakeholders can "work with stable, accepted standards of measurement and format" (COE, 2002: 7). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), devised by the Council of Europe, is the official language proficiency scale in the European Union. It clearly delineates what a learner should know and be able to do in order to progress from complete beginner to proficiency in their MFL studies (COE, 2001: 5). Athanasiou, Constantinou, Neophytou *et al.* note that the advantage of adopting the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is that the CEFR is "oriented towards tasks and learning outcomes and provides descriptors of general language competence which are recognised and used internationally" (2016: 297).

The CEFR came into effect in 2001 and has been adopted by all member states of the European Union. However, some two decades after its inception, the Department of Education and Skills has yet to properly align modern foreign languages with the agreed CEFR. Students who have a Junior Cycle or Leaving Certificate qualification have no measure of what their MFL level is on an international scale. As noted in the Introduction Chapter, the specification for Junior Cycle MFLs claims to “develop communicative language skills broadly aligned with the A band (A1 to A2, basic user) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015: 6). Meanwhile, the “existing Leaving Certificate syllabuses have not been aligned to the CEFR, but Ordinary and Higher level candidates typically perform in the range A2 – B1, with a minority of candidates achieving elements of B2” (DES, 2017a: 21).

The rationale for aligning the MFL syllabi and State examinations with the CEFR is that the framework clearly outlines what each student should know at a particular language level – A1 (Breakthrough) to C2 (Mastery) (see Appendix J). At present, students in the Irish education system are not required to have achieved a minimum MFL level upon completion of the State examinations, aside from passing an ordinary level exam. The CEFR sets forth a clear roadmap for a learner to progress from complete beginner to proficiency. By students knowing their CEFR level upon leaving second-level education, they would be in the position to progress to their next CEFR level in further studies. Additional aspects and benefits of the CEFR will be discussed later in this chapter.

In the coming years, the Senior Cycle is also due to undergo an overhaul. However, for the time being, teachers and students continue to use the same Senior Cycle MFL syllabi which date back to 1995, thus predating the introduction of the CEFR. While the Department of Education and Skills has praised the CEFR and alludes to its implementation in some form in the future (DES, 2017a: 11), the education system in Ireland appears to be content to thread its own path in terms of MFL standards. It is important to note that the European Schools system already has in practice syllabi and attainment descriptors aligned to the CEFR for L2, L3, L4 and L5 (OSG, 2020b). Attainment descriptors are a “set of generic statements, which describe levels of attainment in respect of a given set of competences or learning objectives” (OSG, 2017: 7). The attainment descriptors also delineate the marks awarded for listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing, cultural awareness and language learning (OSG, 2016: 2-3). These syllabi and attainment descriptors map the steps to take and standards to achieve in order for students to attain the various CEFR levels.

In the European Schools system, the L2 can be English, French or German. However, L3 and L4 can be “chosen from among the official languages of the European Union depending on local expediences

[while the] L5 can be any language” (OSG, 2019b: 13). The Irish education system should explore this CEFR-aligned additional language model.

3.1.2 Insufficient number of in-class contact hours to become plurilingual

If the desired plurilingual outcome is that students are independent users of their MFL, they should achieve a B2 CEFR level (COE, 2001: 5). This level requires learners to be able to do the following:

Vantage: Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options (COE, 2001: 5).

However, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) does not allocate a sufficient number of class-contact MFL hours for students to achieve this level. In the new Junior Cycle programme (First Year to Third Year at post-primary level), the total number of class-contact hours for MFL classes over the three years has been reduced from a minimum of 240 hours to 200 hours (DES, 2017a). This works out at approximately 2 hours per school week. In the Senior Cycle (Fifth Year and Sixth Year), the total number of class-contact hours is a minimum of 180 hours over the two years (DES, 1995c) or approximately 2.7 hours per school week. In the Irish education system, some schools offer an interim year, known as Transition Year, between the junior and senior syllabi cycles. This year is optional and there are no fixed-hour guidelines for MFLs during this year.

Thus, from September 2017 (introduction date of the new Junior Cycle MFL programme), the total number of in-class contact hours students study an MFL during their second-level studies is approximately 380 hours (200 hours Junior Cycle and 180 hours Senior Cycle). As noted in the Introduction Chapter, there are currently four curricular MFLs available throughout second-level education in Ireland – French, German, Italian and Spanish. French is the most widely studied MFL at second-level (see Appendix M). The *Alliance Française* promotes and teaches the French language and culture and recommends the following number of in-class contact hours. To achieve A1 level in the CEFR (beginners level), *Alliance Française* (2018) suggests 60 to 100 in-class contact hours. To reach A2 level (pre-intermediate), they recommend 160 to 200 hours. To be awarded a B1 level (Intermediate), they advise 360 to 400 hours. To obtain a B2 level, they encourage 560 to 650 class-contact hours. The number of recommended hours for levels A1, A2, B1 and B2 vary from one curricular MFL to the other but they are largely in line with those for French (see Appendix K).

As such, the minimum number of in-class contact hours for students to successfully complete B2 level is 560 hours. This figure represents 180 hours more than students currently do in second-level education in Ireland. Having a B2 standard (upper intermediate) should mean that students leaving second-level education in Ireland would have a strong foundation in the MFL and would be able to communicate with an acceptable level of fluency on various everyday topics.

In terms of desired standards, it is important to establish reasonable CEFR targets. Kivinen advises stakeholders to avoid high expectations as “[l]anguage learning is a slow process” (2011). If students do not engage in 560 hours of MFL tuition, a B2 level is an unreasonable expectation. Even when hours are provided, it ought to be done in a structured way, as outlined in Chapter One. Archibald *et al.* advise that simply “[l]earning a second language for 95 hours per year for six years will not lead to functional bilingualism and fluency in the second language. Expectations must be realistic” (2007: 3). The current hours allocated to MFL tuition (380 hours) indicates that students should be achieving a B1 level (360 – 400). The reality, as noted in the Introduction Chapter, is that the vast majority of students are not achieving this standard (EC, 2016: 9; SEC, 2016a; SEC, 2016b; SEC, 2016c; SEC, 2016d).

3.1.3 Attrition in MFL students to Leaving Certificate examinations

The percentage of students studying an MFL to completion within their second-level studies is a cause for concern. At Junior Cycle level, almost 90% of students study an MFL. However, this figure drops to almost 70% in the case of Senior Cycle students (DES, 2017a: 16). If passing an MFL Leaving Certificate examination were not a matriculation requirement for many third level institutions, such as for many degree programmes in the National University of Ireland system (National University of Ireland, 2018), the percentage of students taking an MFL at second level could in fact be a lot lower. The Department of Education and Skills advises that “[c]oncerns were expressed in the consultation process [prior to the *Languages Connect* document] that a significant proportion of those taking languages to Leaving Certificate level do so largely due to the matriculation requirements of HEIs (higher education institutions)” (2017a: 17).

The attrition rates of students completing their second-level education with an MFL Leaving Certificate qualification may be due to three key reasons. Firstly, learning an MFL is challenging, very time consuming and often requires the learner to act in a childlike way (Dörnyei, 2012: 40). Dörnyei states:

Language learning is one of the most face-threatening school subjects because of the pressure of having to operate using a rather limited language code. Learners are forced to ‘babble like a child’ (2012: 40).

Indeed, even to produce relatively simple answers, “it is all too easy to make a mistake when you have to pay attention to pronunciation, intonation, grammar and content at the same time” (Dörnyei, 2012: 40). As such, Dörnyei advises that it is “[n]o wonder that language anxiety has been found to be a powerful factor in hindering L2 learning achievement” (2012: 40).

Secondly, many students experience difficulty maintaining motivation in their MFL studies (Dörnyei, 2012: 71). Remaining motivated is a very important component to students overcoming learning hurdles and seeing their MFL studies through to completion. Scheidecker and Freeman state that “[m]otivation is, without question, the most complex and challenging issue facing teachers today” (1999: 116). Maintaining motivation in students up to five school days a week during the academic year can be a challenge even for the best of teachers. While motivation is certainly a central tenet of successful additional language learning, how to inculcate it in students is quite complex. Scheidecker and Freeman advise that:

The real problem with motivation, of course, is that everyone is looking for a single and simple answer. Teachers search for that one pedagogy that, when exercised, will make all students want to do their homework, come in for after-school help, and score well on their tests and report cards. Unfortunately, and realistically, motivating students yesterday, today, and tomorrow will never be a singular or simplistic process (1999: 117).

In language learning, there are four types of motivation involved (Alizadeh, 2016: 12) – intrinsic, extrinsic, integrative, and instrumental. Deci states that intrinsic motivation results in “internally rewarding consequences” (1975: 24) because the activity is enjoyable to do. However, extrinsic motivation usually involves some external reward, such as a qualification, a monetary incentive, etc., or even endeavouring to avoid punishment. In terms of which motivations is better, intrinsic or extrinsic, Brown states that the research “strongly favours intrinsic orientations (motivation), especially for long-term retention” (2007: 173).

Moreover, integrative motivation refers to “language learning for personal growth and cultural enrichment; that is, the learner likes to learn a language to enter successfully into the target language society” (Alizadeh, 2016: 12). Instrumental motivation involves learning an additional language for “functional or external reasons” (Alizadeh, 2016: 12). In truth, language learners can be motivated by a mixture of the four types of motivation.

Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) make a distinction between orientation and motivation. Orientation refers to the reasons for learning an additional language, while motivation concerns the attitudes towards learning the language. Gardner and MacIntyre state that “[i]f an integrative or instrumental

orientation is not linked with heightened motivation to learn the second language, it is difficult to see how either could promote proficiency” (1991: 58).

The reality is that motivation in MFL learning is challenging to maintain. For many students, the MFL they study as well as the curriculum lack relevance to their lives (Bartram, 2010: 177). Coleman *et al.* (2007) advise that motivational levels of MFL students generally deteriorate as they progress through second-level education.

Motivation is very important in additional language learning. True motivation needs to be intrinsic. Wentzel and Brophy advise that students who are “motivated solely by grades or other extrinsic rewards will do what they must to prepare for your tests, but then forget most of what they learned” (2014: 118). As such, “[i]t is better when students find academic activities intrinsically rewarding” (Wentzel & Brophy, 2014: 118). However, Wentzel and Brophy highlight that for optimal learning to take place, the motivation should be cognitive. They state:

they may not learn what you would like them to learn if the basis for their intrinsic motivation is primarily affective (they enjoy the activity) rather than cognitive (they find it interesting, meaningful, or worthwhile to learn what the activity is designed to teach) (2014: 118).

Bandura believes that *expectancy-value theory* plays a considerable role in motivation. This theory postulates that “motivation is regulated by the expectation that a given course of behaviour will produce certain outcomes and the value placed on those outcomes” (1995: 7). The expectancy is the individual’s judgement that they can do the task. The value is the importance the individual places on doing the task. In the *expectancy-value theory*, motivation is dependent on the learner maintaining positive expectancies and values. Self-efficacy is also central to the concept of motivation (Bandura, 1995: 7). Pajares notes that self-efficacy beliefs “touch virtually every aspect of people’s lives... [and they] powerfully influence the level of accomplishment that one ultimately achieves” (2008: 113). The *expectancy-value theory* is a motivation to put in the effort, while self-efficacy is the belief that the learner will achieve their goal.

Students not believing in the relevance and usefulness of the MFL they study is a third reason that may explain the attrition rates of students completing their second-level education with an MFL Leaving Certificate qualification. As English is the language of “business, science, technology and international communication generally[,] [t]his has led many in English-speaking countries to adopt the mistaken belief that proficiency in English is enough” (DES, 2014: 5). Little outlines two key issues with such an assumption. Firstly, he states that this “assumes that language serves a predominantly transactional purpose and ignores or dismisses the importance of language learning as the means by

which we gain access to other societies and cultures” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2003: 20). Secondly, Little believes that it:

overlooks the fact that English is far from being a universal language. However much speakers of other languages may use English for purposes of international communication, they will continue to use their mother tongues at home; and those mother tongues will continue to provide the foundation for significant political, social, economic and cultural institutions (2003: 20).

The education system in Ireland has therefore an important role to play in challenging the false assumption students may have that their competences in the English language negate any need to be able to adequately converse in an MFL. The *Languages Connect* (2017) strategy highlights the central role of school stakeholders in this regard. It states that there is the “need to raise awareness among school principals, students and their parents of the benefits of foreign language learning” (DES, 2017a: 27). By raising such awareness, the DES “intends to see a reduction in the number of candidates who sit no foreign language for state examinations” (DES, 2017a: 27).

3.1.4 Current system rewards rote learning

The current education system rewards short-term memorization of the MFL by assessing an entire course or almost an entire course in just half a day. The entire Junior Certificate examination has traditionally been assessed in half a day after three years’ work with an optional oral exam that could be taken towards the end of Third Year (NCCA, 2015: 9). As noted in the Introduction Chapter, a new Junior Cycle programme was introduced in 2017. In addition to doing a terminal examination (90% of the final grade) at the end of Third Year, students have to do two classroom-based assessments (CBAs). Although the first CBA is an oral task in Second Year, it is largely prepared over a three-week period before it is recorded and assessed. The second CBA is the production of a student language portfolio in Third Year (10% of the final grade). There is no longer the option to do an oral examination as part of the Junior Cycle MFL examinations. As for the MFL Leaving Certificate exam, 80% (ordinary level) or 75% (higher level) of it is assessed in half a day at the end of Sixth Year with an oral exam (20% at ordinary level or 25% at higher level) taking place towards the end of Sixth Year.

The State Examinations Commission’s French, German and Spanish Chief Examiner Reports (2016) raised serious concerns about the levels of student rote learning in the examinations. Moreover, a 2018 study, carried out by Dublin City University’s Institute of Education, and completed at Trinity College Dublin, found that “Leaving Certificate students rely heavily on rote learning and memory recall to get through their exams” (Burns, 2018). Rote learning, such as for exams, is counterproductive to developing proficiency in an additional language. Takač notes that rote learning

“does not aid (long-term) vocabulary acquisition” (2008: 61). More generally, Prinsloo, Vorster and Sibaya note that rote learning information is easily forgotten, it “inhibits the interplay of more advanced cognitive learning components” (2004: 245), it can be limiting in its application, and can curtail the learner’s “initiative, creativity and self-expression” (2004: 245).

In order to develop genuinely plurilingual second-level students, the focus on MFL learning needs to be on long-term acquisition. To achieve such acquisition, Selinker (1972) coined the term ‘interlanguage’ which outlines how long-term acquisition of additional languages takes place. ‘Interlanguage’ may be defined as the language the learner speaks that is on a continuum between one’s mother tongue (L1) and one’s MFL (L2). At the start of the continuum, the learner is almost totally dependent on the structures of their L1. However, the more independent the learner becomes in their MFL, the less they depend on their own mother tongue, and consequently become independent users of their additional language.

VanPatten (1996) advances Selinker’s work and develops the concept of ‘intake’ and ‘uptake’ along this interlanguage continuum. VanPatten argues that, initially, language learning takes the form of ‘intake’ (short-term memory). ‘Uptake’ is when additional language structures and vocabulary form part of the long-term memory. VanPatten notes that language intake is a conscious process and language uptake is subconscious. To help ensure long-term MFL acquisition is achieved, VanPatten argues that learners require as much exposure to the language as possible. Such exposure can be both achieved consciously (e.g. in a language class) as well as subconsciously (e.g. the language is used in passing).

3.1.5 Lack of focus on the oral component of the MFL

Officially, grammar-translation and the communicative methodologies are the primary teaching methodologies of MFLs in second-level schools in Ireland (DES, 1995c; DES, 2017a). The aim of the grammar-translation method is to “learn a language in order to read its literature or in order to benefit from the mental discipline and intellectual development that result from foreign language study” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 5). Essentially, the grammar-translation method involves a detailed analysis of grammar rules, translating sentences and texts into and out of the target language. The grammar-translation method consists of little more than memorizing rules and words. Moreover, instruction is generally through the first language of the student.

Richards states that communicative language teaching (CLT) “sets as its goal the teaching of communicative competence” (2006: 2). He states that communicative competence includes the following aspects of language knowledge:

- Knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions.
- Knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants (e.g., knowing when to use formal and informal speech or when to use language appropriately for written as opposed to spoken communication).
- Knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts (e.g., narratives, reports, interviews, conversations).
- Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge (e.g., through using different kinds of communication strategies) (Richards, 2006: 3).

As briefly noted in the Introduction Chapter, the current second-level education system in Ireland does not place sufficient emphasis on speaking the MFL. The fact that there has traditionally been no requirement for a Junior Certificate oral exam (DES, 2017a) demonstrates that communicative competence has not been a priority for the Junior Cycle programme. It could be reasonably argued then that even less emphasis is being placed on the oral component in the new Junior Cycle (2017) programme, given that there is no longer the option for students to do an oral exam towards the end of Third Year. There is, however, a mandatory second year classroom-based oral assessment that students can take as part of a group. However, they have three weeks to prepare for this.

In terms of the Leaving Certificate examinations, the MFL oral exam only accounts for 20% at Leaving Certificate ordinary level and 25% at higher level (DES, 1995c). This fifteen-minute communicative exam does not take place until a few weeks before students are set to leave second-level education. Having just one oral exam at the end of one's schooldays is unlikely to encourage or entice both students and teachers to prioritise the oral component of the language throughout second level. This potentially explains why Ireland's additional language competences are quite low compared to many of its European counterparts (Eurostat, 2015).

For optimal additional language learning to take place, students ought to speak the MFL they study throughout their MFL studies in second-level education. Little (2014) points out:

If learning the language is not underpinned the whole time by using it, it becomes impossible to develop anything that gets you anywhere at all in the short term never mind the medium and long term.

In addition, Moeller and Roberts state that:

Together with best pedagogical practices, maximizing the TL (target language) in the classroom will ensure a lively and engaging language experience that can approximate authentic language use and make language learning meaningful to learners... When students cross the threshold of your classroom and expect to understand and respond in the TL, language learning becomes real and the ability to communicate in another language becomes a highly-valued skill (2013: 35).

However, Littlewood and Yu (2009) argue that it is very important to achieve a balance between the use of L1 and the target language in the classroom, as the L1 can "support foreign language learning" (2009: 64). Indeed, "[d]epriving students completely of this support [L1] by immersing them in a

strange environment... has been identified as one possible source of demotivation, especially for student with more limited proficiency” (Littlewood & Yu, 2009: 70). Liebscher highlights that “no research has ever shown how much target language use is conducive to learning” (2013: 125). Nonetheless, Satchwell states that “[h]ow much can be done through the target language will of course depend on the ability of the class and ultimately on the competence and enthusiasm of the teacher” (1999: 89).

While developing the MFL oral competences of students is essential, expecting students to be able to speak like a native speaker is unreasonable. As such, setting realistic expectations is key (e.g. B1/B2 CEFR). Although it is important for MFL learners to be motivated by native speakers of their MFLs, as Byram, Nichols and Stevens note, it is “neither appropriate nor desirable for learners to model themselves on native speakers” (2001: 5), as it can essentially set the bar so high that students can give up.

If the desired outcome is for students to become truly plurilingual, it is important to achieve a balance between the grammar-translation method and the communicative method. In research carried out by Catena Fontalba and Stephens at Letterkenny Institute of Technology (2012), they found that “Anglophones tend to have very little formal knowledge of their own language and its grammar. This lack of linguistic competence may be an element that affects their ability to learn a foreign language” (2012: 1). Catena Fontalba and Stephens argue that the grammar-translation method is “not outdated” (2012:9). Indeed, they state that the “introduction of practical skills is unadvisable if Anglophones do not have sufficient knowledge of English” (2012: 9). As such, having a solid linguistic foundation in one’s L1 is an important component, and perhaps even a prerequisite, to L2 learning. Catena Fontalba and Stephens conclude that the grammar-translation method “must be implemented with elements of the communicative method such as role plays and using the target language in class” (2012: 9). In research undertaken by Dickson, he found that “it should not be overlooked that, apart from the teaching of grammar, [...] no aspect of L2 competence... should be developed mostly through the use of English” (1996: 20). However, this does not mean that all other aspects of learning the language should be held uniquely through the target language. He highlighted that what is important is not the quantity of exposure to the target language, but rather the quality of exposure (1996: 26).

3.1.6 The system lacks sufficient focus on the individual student

The current system of MFL teaching, learning and assessment in Ireland largely provides one model to meet the needs of all students. Each school has the same syllabus, each student has the same

official exam dates, each student has the same official exams (at common level, ordinary level or higher level), and so on. Such a model is flawed. For optimal MFL learning to take place, a more individualised approach that takes into account the uniqueness of each student is necessary. Moreover, each individual student should be empowered to take control of their own MFL learning experience. There are four areas that relate to each student's learning that are currently underdeveloped in MFL learning in second-level schools in Ireland:

- a) Adapting teaching and learning to the individual needs of learners.
- b) Developing language awareness in students.
- c) Instilling good language learner characteristics in students.
- d) Encouraging students to become autonomous learners.

A) Adapting teaching and learning to the individual needs of learners

The uniqueness of each learner is a very important concept in MFL learning. Each learner has his/her own personality, IQ, ways of learning and circumstances (Jensen, 2005; Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2011). As such, how one student learns languages can vary greatly from the other. However, the current model of second-level MFL education in Ireland does not adequately support the uniqueness of each learner. In fact, the ongoing dominance of the grammar-translation method with limited focus on the communicative method (DES, 1995c; DES, 2017a) rewards a specific learner type. Such an approach can disenfranchise other students who learn in different ways.

Given the continued dominance of Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences (MI) Theory* in the education system (Coffield, 2013: 2), it is an appropriate place to begin in exploring how best to respond to students' individual learning needs. Gardner proposed seven multiple intelligences (1993: 8-17). These are:

- *Visual-Spatial*: This learner thinks in terms of physical space, is very aware of their environments, likes to draw, do jigsaw puzzles, read maps and daydream.
- *Bodily-kinaesthetic*: This learner uses the body effectively, has a keen sense of body awareness, likes movement, making things and touching.
- *Musical*: This learner shows sensitivity to rhythm and sound. This learner has a passion for music, and is also sensitive to sounds in their environments.
- *Interpersonal*: This learner learns through interaction with others.
- *Intrapersonal*: This learner tends to shy away from others. This learner is in tune with their inner feelings and has wisdom, intuition, their own opinions, and demonstrates a strong will and confidence.

- *Linguistic*: This learner has highly developed auditory skills. They usually think in words. This learner likes reading, playing word games, making up poetry or stories.
- *Logical–Mathematical*: This learner thinks conceptually, abstractly and is able to see and explore patterns and relationships. This learner likes to experiment, solve puzzles, and ask questions.

In 1995, Gardner tentatively added an eighth intelligence, that of the *naturalist* (1995: 206). This intelligence applies to individuals who are readily able to “recognize flora and fauna, to make other consequential distinctions in the natural world, and to use this ability productively” (1995: 206).

The *Multiple Intelligences Theory* has been heavily critiqued, most notably by Gardner himself, who acknowledges that he never tested his theory (Checkley, 1997). More recently, he stated that he “admit[s] that the theory is no longer current” as “[s]everal fields of knowledge have advanced significantly” (2016: 169).

Even the concept of learning styles (how we approach different tasks, e.g. visual learners, auditory learners, etc.), as opposed to multiple intelligences (different intellectual abilities), has been critiqued. Indeed, Coffield poses the question as to whether learning styles are “more of a hindrance than a help” (2013: 1). He argues that the “literature on learning styles is theoretically incoherent and conceptually confused... [given the] endless overlapping and poorly defined dichotomies” (2013: 1). Moreover, he contends that most of the different learning styles tests are not of the same high standard. He further questions the validity of such tests which he believes are bereft of context, and as such can skew the findings. Based on his research, Coffield states that he “found no hard evidence that students’ learning is enhanced by teaching tailored to their learning style” (2013: 2). He concludes that the “research evidence has been clear, consistent and convincing: learning styles are invalid, unreliable and have a negligible impact on practice” (2013: 2).

In a separate study, having researched the 150 factors that affect students’ learning, Hattie found that aligning teaching with students’ learning styles had an inconsequential effect. Indeed, he advises that “[o]ne of the most fruitless pursuits is labelling students with ‘learning styles’” (2012: 79). Instead, Hattie argues in favour of employing multiple learning strategies (e.g. visual, spoken, movement, etc.) in teaching and learning.

Notwithstanding the criticisms, De Bruyckere argues that there is still some merit in the general concept of multiple intelligences because “the basic idea behind this theory is that people are

different, and... have different interests, different abilities, different moods, etc.” (2018). De Bruyckere (2018) advises that these differences ought to be considered for teaching and learning.

The Finnish education system excels at developing the additional language competences of their students. One of the key reasons for its success is that the Finnish schooling system takes the different ways of learning as well as the individual needs of students most seriously in their educational programmes. In fact, in Finland, all schools are required to have “a balanced program, blending academic subjects with art, music, crafts, and physical education” (Sahlberg, 2015: 168). Moreover, all schools are mandated to “provide all students with sufficient time for their self-directive activities” (Sahlberg, 2015: 168).

By adopting such a student-centred approach, the Finnish education system states that it benefits the vast majority of its students. In fact, “Finnish teachers believe that over 90% of students can learn successfully in their own classrooms if given the opportunity to evolve in a holistic manner” (Sahlberg, 2015: 168).

While the validity of Gardner’s *Multiple Intelligences Theory* has been and continues to be challenged, it is nonetheless very important that MFL teachers and course designers create learner programmes that are adaptive to the individual needs of students by incorporating multiple learning strategies.

B) Developing language awareness in students

Developing language awareness in students is also an important component. Language awareness, or knowledge about language, “is a mental attribute which develops through paying motivated attention to language in use, and which enables language learners to gradually gain insights into how languages work” (NCCA, 2008: 83). By gaining these insights, the learner is better equipped to learn the language (Candelier, 2004: 19).

The Junior and Senior Cycle MFL syllabi place an emphasis on language awareness by enhancing students’ “ability to analyse how language works, to compare languages, and to reflect on how they learn languages” (NCCA, 2015: 4). As a result, “[s]uch awareness can be expected to improve the learner’s ability to use the language for a wide range of purposes” (DES, 1995c: 3). While the syllabi acknowledge its importance, language awareness is only assessed in small measure in both the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate MFL exams. The lack of adequate focus on language awareness places the student in a weaker position in terms of MFL learning. Eric Hawkins, the ‘father’ of

language awareness, believes that reflection on language should form part of the language curricula and that “its potential as one force for good in FL [foreign language] study should be fully exploited” (James, 2005: 80). In essence, by students developing a greater awareness of the foreign language, they are better equipped to make progress in their MFL.

C) Instilling good language learner characteristics in students

The current syllabi for the Junior and Senior Cycles (DES, 2017a; DES, 1995c) place little emphasis on students’ developing good language learner characteristics. There are certain characteristics in a learner that make the process of acquiring an additional language easier. Inculcating as many of these desirable behavioural characteristics as possible in students is a central ingredient to MFL learning success. Lightbown and Spada highlight some of the key characteristics of a good language learner. They advise that it is someone who:

- is a willing and accurate guesser,
- tries to get a message across even if specific language knowledge is lacking,
- is willing to make mistakes,
- constantly looks for patterns in the language,
- practices as often as possible,
- analyses his or her own speech and the speech of others,
- attends to whether his or her performance meets the standards he or she has learned,
- enjoys grammar exercises...
- has good academic skills,
- has a good self-image and lots of confidence.

(Lightbown & Spada, 2006: 55)

D) Encouraging students to become autonomous learners

Finally, the current Junior and Senior Cycle syllabi place a limited requirement on students to become autonomous learners. Learner autonomy is a key component to positive additional language acquisition. It places the student at the centre of the learning process. The student takes responsibility for their learning and their progress. Little (2014) points out that the aim of education should be to:

Find ways of harnessing that autonomy, that sense of being in control of what one is doing, that sense of developing competence on the basis of that control, because that is what leads to effective long-term learning.

Little (2014) believes that it is essential to give students responsibility for their choices and to allow them to live with the consequences. He advises that “the role of the teacher is to help the student to reflect on their choices and how those choices worked out”. Thus, central to learner autonomy is that students reflect and evaluate. Little (2014) states that learners need to:

Develop communication skills, not just speaking but listening, reading and writing, to develop communication skills through communication but not through unreflected communication, through communication that is constantly questioned by analytical learning activity on the one side and by evaluation on the other.

Students therefore ought to be encouraged to develop holistically and to become reflective practitioners. Teachers, acting as facilitators, have a key role to play in this, where the facilitator's role is to:

Lead the group in drawing out answers, building a vision and developing plans that motivate everybody to achieve agreed upon goals – in short to win... The facilitator functions much like the conductor of a symphony, orchestrating and bringing forth the talents and contributions of others (Spencer, 1989: 11).

3.1.7 Develop MFLs in early childhood

The teaching and learning of MFLs in Ireland should be taking place in primary school and then developed and nurtured at second level. Currently, in Ireland, the curricular teaching of modern foreign languages does not officially begin until post-primary level (at approximately 12 to 13 years of age) (DES, 2017a). One of the main reasons that MFLs should be taught and learned at primary school level is that significant research indicates that learning an additional language during childhood proves beneficial to one's chances of success in terms of MFL mastery. The *Critical Period Hypothesis* (CPH) contends that the ability to acquire an additional language is biologically linked to age, that in a sense there is an ideal 'window of opportunity', and after this period it becomes ever more difficult to develop considerable fluency in the additional language (Bhatia, 2006: 104).

Penfield and Roberts (1959) introduced the concept of a critical period in language acquisition. This was further developed by Lenneberg (1967) who believes that the critical age is between 10 to 12 years old due to the development of the human brain. Moyer explains the basis for this assertion:

The neurological basis for a critical period for language learning may lie in electro-chemical changes in the brain, many of which reach a steady state around the age of 10-12 years (Lenneberg, 1967). It could further be due to lateralization, or the assignment of specific (language) functions to either the right or left hemisphere. After lateralization is complete (by early puberty, according to Lenneberg), language acquisition is predictably much less complete or successful because the brain is less flexible or 'plastic' (2004: 17).

Although Lenneberg's hypothesis was based on his findings on first language development, "SLA [second-language acquisition] research adopted the critical period hypothesis (CPH) and applied it to second and foreign language learning, resulting in a host of studies" (Vanhove, 2013: 1). Ultimately, there is no consensus amongst linguists about whether a critical period exists. Indeed, Scovel contends that the critical period hypothesis is "conceivably the most contentious issue in SLA because there is disagreement over its exact age span; people disagree strenuously over which facets of language are affected; there are competing explanations for its existence; and, to top it off, many people don't believe it exists at all" (2001: 113).

Several important research studies on the CPH have been conducted. In one such study, French was introduced as part of a pilot project in several primary schools in England and Wales from 1964 to 1974. In this longitudinal piece of research, three cohorts of primary school pupils – all commencing

their students between the ages of 8 and 9 – participated in the French-language programme. The findings of the project were not congruent with the critical period hypothesis. In fact, “[p]upils taught French from the age of eight did not show any substantial gains in achievement, compared with those who had been taught French from the age of eleven” (Burstall, 1977: 248). In fact, the older students generally learned French more efficiently compared to the younger ones. Indeed, by the age of sixteen, listening comprehension skills remained the only area that those who started learning their MFL at the age of eight consistently scored better; although, this difference was not substantial (Burstall, 1977: 248). Nonetheless, it should be noted that while there were no significant differences between those who commenced learning the MFL in primary school and those in post-primary school in terms of achievement, the research found that those who started at the younger age developed a better attitude towards speaking their MFL. Burstall concludes that the “achievement of skill in a foreign language is primarily a function of the amount of time spent studying that language, but is also affected by the age of the learner, older learners tending to be more efficient than younger ones” (1977: 248).

In a separate study, Johnson and Newport (1989) carried out research with 46 native speakers of Chinese and Korean who learned English as a second language. These languages were chosen as they have a different typology to English. All the participants had at least five years of exposure to the English language and had been living in the USA for an unbroken period of at least three years prior to the test. 23 participants were early arrivals (before the age of 15) to the USA, while the other 23 were late arrivals (after the age of 17). The late arrivals all had between 2 and 12 years of English-language instruction in their native country. All the subjects were tested on their knowledge of English-language syntax and morphology. Johnson and Newport advise that the main aim of the study was to discover if there is a critical period in second language acquisition or if a critical period only applies to the first language. Having undertaken their research, they state that human beings “appear to have a special capacity for acquiring language in childhood, regardless of whether the language is their first or second” (1989: 95). In addition, they advise that they did “not find a flat relationship between performance and age of learning throughout childhood, with a sudden drop in performance marking the end of a critical period; instead, performance gradually declined from about the age of seven on, until adulthood” (1989: 95). Johnson and Newport further note that “while early learners are uniformly successful in acquiring their language to a high degree of proficiency, later learners show much greater individual variation” (1989: 96). They conclude their research by stating that a critical period in language acquisition applies to both L1 and L2.

A key finding of Johnson and Newport's research was that regardless of one's L1, it is not possible to achieve nativelikeness in one's L2. Birdsong and Molis (2001) questioned such an assertion and carried out a separate study with 61 native speakers of the Spanish language. This study employed almost the exact same procedures and materials as Johnson and Newport's (1989) research. However, Birdsong and Molis found different results. The participants (native speakers of Spanish) in their research performed considerably better compared to their Chinese and Korean counterparts in Johnson and Newport's study. As Spanish shares many similarities with the English language, Birdsong and Molis suggest that the L1-L2 pairings play a significant role in additional language performance, including the possibility of achieving L2 nativelikeness. In terms of a critical period, while Johnson and Newport's study (1989) found a critical period of between 8 and 10 years old, Birdsong and Molis' research only discovered that those aged 17 and older demonstrated a substantial decline in performance (2001: 240). Nonetheless, they found "[m]odest evidence of nativelike performance" (2001: 247) amongst late arrivals (17 years and older) to the USA. In addition, Birdsong and Molis state that whether it be "mastery or something short of mastery – it may be that fewer years of exposure to English are required of Spanish speakers than of Korean or Chinese speakers" (2001: 243). As such, they advise that both exposure to the L2 and the amount of L2 one uses are key to developing such L2 mastery.

In Vanhove's appraisal of CPH studies, she advises that the "statistical analysis of data patterns as well as their interpretation in CPH research – and this includes both critical and supportive studies and overviews – leave a lot to be desired" (2013: 1). She is critical of the analytical tools used in CPH research generally and suggests that studies concerning CPH are influenced by "a form of 'confirmation bias'.... a cognitive bias at play" (2013: 13) by the researchers. She concludes that what is needed is for CPH supporters and sceptics to "join forces on a protocol for a high-powered study in order to provide a truly convincing answer to a core issue in SLA" (2013: 14).

A more recent study (2018), carried out by researchers at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), found that in terms of learning the grammar of a new language, a critical period in additional language learning exists and that it actually extends until the age of 17 or 18 (Hartshorne *et al.*, 2018: 270). However, in this substantial research project, involving some 669,498 participants, they discovered that in order to develop the proficiency standard to that of a native speaker, learners have to start by the age of 10 (Hartshorne *et al.*, 2018: 270). The findings of Hartshorne *et al.* are significant as their "larger sample size allows for fairly precise estimates [and that] [t]hese simulations support Vanhove's (2013) contention that thousands of subjects are required to provide reliable conclusions about ultimate attainment" (2018: 272).

Hartshorne *et al.* advise that there are implications of their research finding that the critical period lasts until late adolescence. Essentially, this means that the critical period “cannot be attributed to neuronal death or syntactic pruning in the first few years of life, nor to hormonal changes surrounding adrenarche or puberty” (2018: 274). The authors suggest that the critical period may in fact be an epiphenomenon of culture. They state that “the age we identified (17-18 years old) coincides with a number of social changes, any of which could diminish one’s ability, opportunity, or willingness to learn a new language” (2018: 275). They further explain that “[i]n many cultures, this age marks the transition to the workforce or to professional education, which may diminish opportunities to learn” (2018: 275). The authors believe that further investigations into the critical period hypothesis are necessary.

Muñoz highlights that there has been a significant dearth of research in terms of CPH and the education system. She notes that the “findings from second language learning in naturalistic contexts have been generalised to foreign language learning in instructed contexts” (2006: 6). Unlike the research carried out by Hartshorne *et al.*, which largely focused on grammar, Muñoz’s research tested students’ English language competences in reading, writing, speaking, listening as well as in many other areas including grammar, phonetic imitation, phonetic discrimination, etc. in the education system. Muñoz’s study indicates that age is an important factor in language learning. Five groups of L2 learners were researched: two main groups, those who began at 8 years old, and those who commenced at 11 years old; and three smaller groups: those who began learning between the ages of 2 and 6, those who started at the age of 14, as well as a group of adults who commenced their instruction in English at 18 or older. In total, 1,928 people were involved in the project. The participants were tested after three periods of instruction – 200 hours, 416 hours and 726 hours.

Both adolescents and adults were the strongest L2 learners making significant progress in the first period (after 200 hours). In terms of the second period (between 200 and 416 hours), those who began learning their MFL at 11 years old made the best progress. However, by the third period of learning in L2 (between 416 and 726 hours), those who started learning their L2 at the age of 8 made the greatest advances in learning. Muñoz’s research suggests that “second language learning success in a foreign language context may be as much a function of exposure as of age” (2006: 34). Indeed, in terms of neurolinguistics, Perani *et al.* (2003) advise that exposure to the additional language is very important. They believe that by using the L2 intensely, it leads to higher levels of automaticity. Muñoz’s research findings also demonstrate that, in terms of the morphosyntactic components, older learners are generally quicker and more efficient. She advises that such older school learners’ cognitive development also “allows them to take greater advantage of explicit teaching processes in

the classroom” (2006: 33). By contrast, younger learners tend to do best by implicit learning. As Muñoz notes, normally in the education system, students receive around three hours of L2 tuition weekly. Given this, “younger learners may not have enough time and exposure to benefit from the alleged advantages of implicit learning” (2006: 33). The implication of this finding is that if optimal MFL learning is to take place in primary schools, it would ideally require significant MFL time to be allocated weekly to facilitate greater implicit learning.

It is advisable to have a reasonable expectation of what L2 learners can achieve based on limited MFL exposure as part of the education system. It is very unrealistic to expect nativelikeness in L2 when a student is only exposed to their MFL for a few hours a week. As Birdsong and Molis point out, “[b]y definition, an L2 learner cannot be or become a native speaker, and thus it is pointless to hold out the monolingual native as a yardstick for success” (2001: 245). In the European Schools system, its primary school pupils do two languages (L1 and L2). When they commence second level, the students are required to start their L3. They have the option to do an L4 in S4 (4th year of second level) and an L5 in S6. Students are required to achieve various levels of fluency in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) ranging from A1 in L5 to C1 in L2 (OSG, 2019: 18). The European Schools system demonstrates that students of school-going age are well able to study and develop considerable fluency in additional languages. However, such fluency is not measured against that of a native speaker, rather, it is benchmarked against an additional language proficiency scale (CEFR).

In Ireland, for the time being, MFLs will not become part of the curriculum of the primary school education system. Nonetheless, the Department of Education and Skills has advised that it is considering the possibility of introducing MFLs at preschool level and commencing the studying of MFLs as part of the primary-school curriculum (O’Brien, 2020).

As discussed hitherto, there is no consensus amongst experts in linguistics that a critical period exists. However, Jaspal notes that the “common belief is that as we age our ability to attain language successfully gradually declines” (2009: 235). Vanhove advises that “[i]n the long term and in immersion contexts, second-language (L2) learners starting acquisition early in life – and staying exposed to input and thus learning over several years or decades – undisputedly tend to outperform later learners” (2013: 1). As such, to maximize the potentiality of developing plurilingual second-level students, the process of teaching and learning MFLs ought to begin during the learners’ primary-school studies. By commencing at primary level, it provides pupils with greater exposure to the FL and is beneficial in terms of learner attitudes towards languages. Moreover, the research findings

indicate that children learn best through implicit learning while adolescents do best through explicit means. Finally, students' FL competences should be measured against that of an additional language scale (e.g. CEFR) and not against the unreasonable comparison of that of a native speaker.

3.1.8 MFL initial teacher education and continuous professional development

Teacher quality is “the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement” (King Rice, 2003: v). As such, to develop a truly plurilingual student populace, it is essential that initial teacher training fully prepares would-be MFL teachers to enter the profession. While many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are currently developing integrated undergraduate to Master degree teacher training programmes in MFLs, currently, to become a second-level teacher in Ireland, most candidates complete a two-year full-time Professional Master of Education (PME)¹ (Teaching Council, 2017: 11). The Teaching Council advises that the aim of initial teacher training is to:

ensure that tomorrow's teachers are competent to meet the challenges they will face and are prepared to be life-long learners, continually adapting over the course of their careers to enable them to support their students in achieving their full potential (2017: 10).

While learning teaching methodologies and doing in-school practice are very important components of initial teacher training, the linguistic competences of MFL teachers across all language skills are essential. As part of the *Languages Connect* strategy (2017), the DES advises that it will “[r]equire all applicants for registration as teachers of foreign languages to submit evidence of having completed an independent language competency test and having achieved a minimum Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level of B2.2 across all language skills” (2017a: 2).

In reality, initial teacher education simply “cannot furnish ‘finished products’” (Teaching Council, 2011: 16). The European Commission states that:

even initial teacher education of the highest quality cannot provide teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary for a lifetime of teaching. Teachers are called upon not only to acquire new knowledge and skills but also to develop them continuously. The education and professional development of every teacher needs to be seen as a lifelong task, and be structured and resourced accordingly (2010: 12).

¹ To become a post-primary teacher in the Republic of Ireland, the Teaching Council (2020) requires candidates to hold either:

- a) an Honours Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 8) in at least one curricular subject and a Teaching Council approved post-primary initial teacher education qualification.
- or
- b) a Teaching Council “approved concurrent degree qualification in post-primary initial teacher education which combines the study of one or more curricular subjects which satisfy the requirements for at least one curricular subject... with teacher education studies directed towards first to sixth years” (Teaching Council, 2020).

As such, continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers is an essential component to the professional lives of MFL teachers. The Teaching Council states that:

Continuous professional development (CPD) refers to life-long teacher learning and comprises the full range of educational experiences designed to enrich teachers' professional knowledge, understanding and capabilities throughout their careers (2011: 19).

The importance of teachers participating in CPD has been enshrined in law in Ireland since the mid 1990's. In the White Paper, *Charting Our Education Future* (1995), the then-Department of Education and Science noted that "as with other professions, and because of changing social and economic circumstances, initial teacher education cannot be regarded as the final preparation for a life-time of teaching" (DES, 1995a). The White Paper on Education recognises teacher education as a continuum and emphasises:

the long-term importance of quality pre-service education, well-managed induction procedures, in-career development programmes throughout the teaching career, as well as conditions of service which facilitate flexibility and adaptability, in response to curricular and societal change (DES, 1995a: 126).

Moreover, the Teaching Council highlights the importance of a continuum of teacher education. This continuum is defined as:

the formal and informal educational and developmental activities in which teachers engage, as life-long learners, during their teaching career. It encompasses initial teacher education, induction, early and continuing professional development and, indeed, late career support, with each stage merging seamlessly into the next and interconnecting in a dynamic way with each of the others (Teaching Council, 2011: 8).

Williams advises why CPD is so important and why teachers should fully engage. He states:

Teaching is such a complex craft that one lifetime is not enough to master it..., but by rigorously focusing on their classroom practice, teachers can continue to improve throughout their career. Therefore, we need a commitment from teachers — not one to attend a certain number of hours of professional development per year but a career-long commitment to the continuous improvement of classroom practice, as well as an agreement to develop their practice in ways that are likely to improve outcomes for students (2011: 12).

Continuous professional development is vital, not simply to improve the linguistic competences of MFL teachers, but also because of the "emergence of new knowledge, understandings and insights into curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and teacher learning, together with the accelerating pace of societal, legislative and educational reform and the increasingly complex role of teachers" (Teaching Council, 2011: 7). Moreover, CPD sessions can provide a forum to discuss issues and challenges relating to teaching and learning MFLs. It also offers a setting where examples of good practice can be discussed, and it can help build support networks amongst MFL teachers outside their own schools. Furthermore, it can encourage MFL teachers to engage in new teaching methodologies that could develop the linguistic competences of their students.

The DES recognises that more CPD training should be made available to MFL teachers (2017a: 9). However, the rhetoric about the importance of CPD in MFL teaching and learning does not tally with the reality. While there are MFL teacher programmes abroad such as Erasmus+ to develop participants' language competences, CPD for MFL teachers is largely inadequate. The Second Level Support Service (SLSS) has found that:

while the rhetoric of policy has adopted CPD as a core concept in the understanding of the teacher as professional, neither the term, or more importantly its meaning have yet achieved purchase in the working lives of teachers (Granville, 2005: 52).

The insufficient provision of CPD training for MFL teachers is very short-sighted because to "secure its future economic prosperity every country needs to improve educational achievement, and this can only be done by improving the quality of teachers" (Williams, 2011: 10). Teachers are key to students' plurilingual success. They need to be properly trained in all aspects of ongoing additional language teaching, learning and assessment, so that they may best optimize the MFL potential of their students.

3.1.9 Role of parents/guardians

Parents/guardians should play a much greater role in developing the MFL competences of their children. It is too simplistic to solely assign schools the task of developing plurilingual second-level students. Parents/guardians are key to their children's educational success. In fact, the Irish Constitution (1937) strongly defends the rights of parents in relation to the education of their children:

The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children (Government of Ireland, 1937: Article 42:1).

Moreover, the White Paper on Education, *Charting our Education Future* (1995), insists on greater parental involvement in the education of their children. It states that:

As part of national education policy, it is essential, therefore, to adopt a range of measures aimed at fostering active parental partnership with schools (Department of Education and Science, 1995a: 138).

There is considerable room for improvement in terms of parental involvement in second-level schools. In reality, barriers impeding such participation truly exist. Lightfoot and Spada note:

there are very few opportunities for parents and teachers to come together for meaningful, substantive discussion. In fact, schools organise public, ritualistic occasions that do not allow for real contact, negotiation, or criticism between parents and teachers. Rather, they are institutionalised ways of establishing boundaries between insiders (teachers) and interlopers (parents) under the guise of polite conversation and mature cooperation. Parent-Teacher Association meetings and open house rituals at the beginning of the school year are contrived occasions that symbolically affirm the idealized parent-school relationship but rarely provide the chance for authentic interaction (2006: 10).

The *Languages Connect* strategy (2017) places a strong emphasis on parental involvement in children's additional language learning. In the document, the then-Minister for Education and Skills, Mr Richard Bruton, stated that "[p]arents must act as advocates and motivate their children to learn foreign languages" (DES, 2017a: 5).

In the European Schools system, the former Secretary General, Dr Kari Kivinen, highlights two key roles parents/guardians can play in developing language learning in their children while they undertake MFL studies at school: a) language choices in school, and b) language support. In relation to language choices in school, these choices refer to helping their children choose the languages they will study at school (e.g. L2, L3 and L4) (Kivinen, 2011). As for language support, this pertains to obtaining the necessary support for their children when needed both inside and outside of school (Kivinen, 2011).

While the school can play a significant role in developing plurilingual second-level students, the full responsibility should not lie with the school. Parents/guardians should endeavour to work with the school in the development of their children's MFL competences.

3.1.10 Effectuating change

Effectuating any change to MFL curricula or State examinations (Junior or Senior Cycles) in the current education system in Ireland is a long and arduous process. When a curriculum is set, it can stay in place for decades, as evidenced with the Junior Cycle MFL curricula from 1989 to 2017 and the Senior Cycle MFL curricula from 1995 to present.

Other education systems facilitate the process of realizing changes a lot more efficiently and effectively. The Finnish education system has a very minimalist state role. In fact, in Finland, "[c]urriculum planning is the responsibility of teachers, schools, and municipalities, not the state" (Sahlberg, 2015: 122). The school curriculum is reviewed and amended on an ongoing basis at school level. By contrast, the European Schools system has detailed syllabi. However, its syllabi can be changed by the agreement of stakeholders at the Joint Teaching Committee (JTC) of the European Schools every six months. The JTC is a stakeholder body with representatives of students, representatives of teachers, school directors, inspectors, members of the Office of the Secretary General of the European Schools, etc., and will be discussed further in Chapter Five. The European Schools state that "[i]n general, syllabuses are reviewed and revised every ten years. Minor changes may, however, be made at any time" (OSG, 2018).

The European School's Joint Teaching Committee model is worth considering for the Irish education system. Ireland has many strong stakeholder bodies in place – student councils (at school level), subject teacher associations, teacher unions, the Teaching Council, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), the National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCPP), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Foreign Languages Advisory Group (FLAG), amongst others. By having a forum for stakeholders (from the above-mentioned groups and others) to debate and effectuate real changes, the process of teaching, learning and assessing MFL students could better evolve to meet the needs of students and teachers.

In summary, to develop truly plurilingual second-level students, the current education system in Ireland is in need of considerable reform. The goal of any education system ought to be to one that maximises students' potential. However, as discussed, there are numerous significant deficiencies that continue to impede progress towards developing genuinely plurilingual students. The confines of this thesis do not permit the researcher to adequately address all ten points. Indeed, each one could merit its own doctoral thesis. Equally, other valid shortcomings in the system could be added to the list (improving teachers' MFL oral competences, teaching methodologies, peer learning amongst teachers and students, greater collaboration amongst MFL teachers in different schools, student mentors, foreign exchange programmes, technology in MFL teaching and learning, etc.). Nonetheless, the aim of the ten highlighted areas is to set an important backdrop and to draw attention to significant impediments to progress that ought to be overcome.

Having detailed the context and various confines, this thesis wishes to next explore the feasibility of introducing three strategies that could potentially, by way of an MFL policy and planning document for schools, develop greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students in Ireland. These are:

1. Harmonising post-primary MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR),
2. Replacing the current State MFL exams (Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate) with CEFR international exams,
3. Implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

3.2 Strategy 1: Harmonising post-primary MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The current second-level education system in Ireland groups students into school years. Students generally only attend classes with other students of their same year. When they complete the school year, they progress to the next year. Indeed, as Little notes, “[m]ost systems of education worldwide are predicated on the notion that learners enter, progress through and exit from ‘grades’ alongside a group of peers” (Little, D., 2004: 2).

However, this practice of grouping students has not always been the case. In fact, teaching students from different year groups in the same class was commonplace in the past. The roots of organised mass education can be found in early nineteenth century England (Little, A. W., 2006: 304). These classes consisted of students of different ages. Within each class, the learners were divided into groups. The students worked on material in line with their ability and not their age. In this way, students progressed based on their “achievement” (Little, A. W., 2006: 305). It was only in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries where students began “sitting in groups or classes of learners of a similar age in separate classrooms with separate teachers” (Little, A. W., 2006: 305).

Nowadays, in second-level schools internationally, it is relatively rare to come across such examples of multigrade classes (grouping students of different school years in the same classes) (Ireson & Hallam, 2001: 182). However, multigrade classes in primary schools are still widespread in the world today. This is largely due to insufficient student numbers for individual classes. A. W. Little advises that “learning and teaching in multigrade schools and classes is extensive in a wide range of countries” (2007: 6). In terms of a worldwide total, she estimates that, based on UNESCO data (2003), a “conservative estimate of 30% of children [are] currently in multigrade classes” (2007: 7).

The first strategy this thesis aims to explore is the feasibility of harmonising post-primary MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In this scenario, students of different school years would be grouped together for MFL classes based on their MFL level according to the CEFR, and would therefore no longer be divided by their school year or by ordinary and higher levels.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was developed by the Council of Europe as part of the *Language Learning for European Citizenship* between 1989 and 1996 to provide a common basis for the explicit description of objectives, content and methods in additional language education in Europe. The CEFR delineates six common reference levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1

and C2). Each level defines what a learner/user should be able to achieve at that proficiency stage (known as 'can do' statements). Levels A1 and A2 are the levels for basic users. Levels B1 and B2 are the levels for independent users, while levels C1 and C2 are for proficient users (see Appendix J). The CEFR divides language activities into four types: reception (listening and reading), production (oral and written), interaction (oral and written) and mediation (translating and interpreting) (COE, 2001: 14).

In 2018, the Council of Europe published the companion volume (further updated in 2020) with new descriptors for the CEFR. It advises that, while the six main levels remain (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2), each level may be subdivided as required (2018: 34). The subdivision presented by the Council of Europe consisted of pre-A1, A1, A2, A2+, B1, B1+, B2, B2+, with C1 and C2 not subdivided (COE, 2018: 40). It is also common to see the subdivisions of CEFR levels in the following way: A1.1, A1.2, A2.1, A2.2, B1.1, B1.2, and so on (Lingualevel, 2009). For the purposes of this thesis, the latter subdivision format will be used. The CEFR companion volume presents separate descriptors for adults and younger learners.

In terms of schooling, in particular, the CEFR aims to provide a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabi, curriculum guidelines, assessments, textbooks, etc. across the European Union. The CEFR also endeavours to “enhance the transparency of courses, syllabuses, qualifications, thus promoting international co-operation in the field of modern languages” (COE, 2002: 1). In addition, the purpose of the CEFR is to facilitate the mutual recognition of MFL qualifications and competences across Europe as well as fostering greater mobility of citizens throughout the continent.

The Council of Europe highlights that the aim of the CEFR is for learners to develop plurilingual and pluricultural competences. It states that:

Plurilingual and pluricultural competence refers to the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures (2001: 168).

As briefly noted above, the first strategy this thesis aims to explore is the feasibility of harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR. In such a scenario, the learning of an additional language would be broken down into six distinct levels (beginners to proficiency: A1 – C2). In reality, these would be further subdivided into A1.1, A1.2, A2.1, A2.2, etc. in line with the CEFR companion volume (2018). In practice, at least initially, the highest level a school would likely offer is B1.2 or B2.1 given that schools are only obliged to provide 380 hours of MFL tuition. As noted earlier in this chapter, 380

hours is considered a sufficient number of hours to achieve a B1.2 standard (number of hours varies somewhat depending on the MFL).

Subdividing levels (A1.1, A1.2, etc.) would likely complement the academic school year as it is divided into three terms. Term 1 is the longest term from late August to the Christmas holidays. Terms 2 and 3 combined (January to May) are generally just a few weeks longer than term 1. As such, one part of a level (e.g. A1.1) could be completed in term 1 and the second part of the level (e.g. A1.2) could be done in terms 2 and 3. In relation to the higher CEFR levels, such as B1, these may need to run over one and a half academic years. In this case, they could be divided into three parts – B1.1, B1.2 and B1.3.

In terms of recognising achievement as well as encouraging continued motivation, students could receive certificates at each stage of exam progress. As such, certificates could be awarded for each successful completion of part of a level. By way of an example, if a student passes his/her B1.1 exams, he/she could receive a school-based certificate for B1.1. He/she would then progress to the B1.2 level.

As noted in the Introduction Chapter, the European Schools system does not harmonise its second-level MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Nevertheless, all its languages (except L1) are taught in alignment with the CEFR. While students remain in mixed ability classes according to their school year, they are nonetheless expected to achieve the required CEFR standard of that school year. All syllabi and course descriptors are aligned to prepare students to meet their CEFR level commitments. How well this model operates in practice will be discussed in Chapter Five.

In terms of exploring the feasibility of harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR, this strategy proposes *cross-age grouping* for MFL classes. This is also known as *cross-grade grouping*. In this scenario, students from different year groups would be placed in the same MFL classes based on their current CEFR level. By way of an example, second year, third year and fifth year students, with the same CEFR level (e.g. A2.2), could be assigned to the same class to study their MFL. When the students successfully complete the level, they would then proceed to the next level (B1.1 CEFR).

Such a model of schooling would mean that students would be correctly placed in an MFL class according to their language level. They would have clear set objectives to achieve in order to progress to the next level. As for first year students, given that they generally only commence

learning an MFL at post-primary level, a realistic scenario is that most of them would be in mixed ability classes with other first year students for First Year and would then be divided into the relevant CEFR levels from Second Year (based on their first year grades). In the case of first year students who already have prior knowledge of their MFL, they would take a proficiency placement test at the start of First Year and would then be placed in an appropriate cross-age grouping class.

Ability grouping in education has historically been a contentious issue. Ireson and Hallam point out that the topic of ability grouping “arouse[s] strong feelings” (2001: 1). In fact, ability grouping in education has been “hotly debated for over a century” (2001: 1). Those in favour of ability grouping argue that courses can be tailor-made to meet the needs of that particular grouping and raise their attainment levels. The argument from those who are against the practice is that it disenfranchises the weaker groups.

Below, Ireson and Hallam outline the main types of ability grouping used in schools. The italicised terms are the American equivalents.

Streaming (<i>tracking</i>)	Pupils are placed in classes on the basis of a test of their general ability. They remain in their streamed class for most subjects.
Banding	Pupils are placed in two, three or four bands on the basis of a test of their general ability. Each band contains a number of classes and pupils may be regrouped within the band for some subjects.
Setting (<i>regrouping</i>)	Pupils are grouped according to their attainment in a particular subject. Setting may be imposed across a whole year group, across timetable halves, within a band or across mixed age classes. Sets may be serially ordered or there may be parallel sets.
Mixed Ability (<i>heterogeneous grouping</i>)	There is no attempt to group together pupils of similar ability. Pupils may be regrouped in such a way as to achieve a range of abilities within the class. Other factors, such as social relationships, gender or ethnic composition, may form the basis for grouping.
Within class ability grouping	Pupils are grouped within the class on the basis of ability. They may be regrouped within the class for different subjects.
Cross-age grouping (<i>Cross-grade grouping</i>)	Pupils in two or more year groups are placed in the same class. They may be regrouped by setting or within class grouping or taught as a mixed ability class.

Table 3.1: Types of ability grouping

Source: Ireson and Hallam (2001: 10)

It should be noted that terms relating to ability grouping such as 'streaming' and 'setting' are often used inconsistently (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998: 1). This thesis clearly distinguishes the term 'setting' from 'streaming'. With setting, students "are divided by ability... on a subject-by-subject basis" (Gamoran, 2002: 2).

Combining setting with cross-age grouping offers students the opportunity to progress at a far speedier pace. Ireson and Hallam argue that setting is a "more flexible way of grouping pupils on the basis of their attainment in particular curricular subjects" (2001: 11). It is also "consistent with a differentiated view of abilities, and allows for higher attainment of pupils in some subjects than in others" (2001: 11). Setting also reduces heterogeneity within classes, and as such, teachers are better placed to meet the needs of their students at their linguistic level. Moreover, as students can be set by their level for different subjects, setting diminishes the negative effects often associated with streaming, where students can be placed in the same stream for several subjects (Slavin, 1987).

Ireson and Hallam (2001) outline how setting would work in practice: students should remain in mixed ability classes for the majority of their time. Where ability grouping does occur, this should take place in subjects where students are required to have a shared prior knowledge and levels of attainment. In this regard, MFLs would be ideal. As noted above, if students entering First Year are beginners, they would stay in a mixed ability class for First Year. From Second Year, they would be divided by their CEFR level (based on their first year grades). If students entering First Year already have enough knowledge that they could enter a higher CEFR level class (e.g. A1.2, A2.1, etc.), they could join the relevant group. In the case of bilingual students who already have a very high standard, they could enter the class with the highest CEFR level in the school, as financially it would not be possible – as is also currently the case – to create a class for just a couple of students. An alternative for such bilingual students is that they could start to learn a new MFL in the school, if such an option is possible.

It is important to note that assigning students to sets should be done on the basis of their academic record – not other factors such as good behaviour. Students should also be assessed by in-school CEFR exams (e.g. A1.1, A1.2, A2.1, etc.) during the standard examination periods in each school year (generally December and May). Students should be tested in four language competences – reading,

writing (including grammar), listening, and speaking². If students successfully pass their exam, they can progress to the next CEFR level. Consequently, students would not need to remain in the same group for up to three years at Junior Cycle or a further two to three years at Senior Cycle.

Furthermore, 'bridging' groups could be established with the aim of providing extra support to students who may be falling a little short of the requirements to move to a higher CEFR level.

The most time-consuming component for MFL teachers in this examination process would likely be to assess the oral competences of students. As such, the Cambridge English examinations may be a viable model to emulate. During their oral examinations, up to three students can be present and assessed at the same time (Cambridge English Assessment, 2020).

Adapting one's teaching to the needs and pace of students as well as establishing high expectations of all students at all CEFR levels is very important. Regardless of each student's group placement, all students should have access to the curriculum and be afforded the opportunity to take examinations to progress. In the case where students really struggle with their MFL, schools should be encouraged to provide opportunities to these students to excel in other areas. As such, at all times, schools should demonstrate that they value each of their students equally (Ireson & Hallam, 2001: 177).

This thesis will examine some studies on *cross-age grouping* (also known as *vertical grouping* and *mixed-age grouping*) at primary school level because "[a]t secondary level vertical grouping has been relatively rare" (Ireson & Hallam, 2001: 182). The only example of *cross-age grouping* at secondary level that this researcher has discovered is that involving students who are considered advanced in a particular subject area and are permitted to study this course with students in a higher school year (Ireson & Hallam, 2001: 182). As this does not constitute true *cross-age grouping*, *cross-age grouping* studies at second level cannot be explored.

The first example of cross-age grouping that this thesis will make reference to is that of the Joplin Plan, first employed in 1953, which mandated that cross-age grouping take place in the Joplin schools in Missouri in the USA (Kulik & Kulik, 1992: 75). This new teaching approach was devised by the assistant superintendent of schools in Joplin, Cecil Floyd. The Joplin Plan is a "system of teaching reading in which children in several year groups (fourth, fifth and sixth graders) are regrouped for

² The Department of Education and Skills has broadened its list of language competences to act in line with the *CEFR Companion Volume* (Council for Europe, 2020). Adapted by Junior Cycle for Teachers (2021), appendix O lists all the MFL competences in terms of the CEFR 'can-do' statements at A1 and A2 levels. As all the competences involve reading, writing, speaking and listening, these four will be referenced throughout this thesis.

reading instruction according to their attainment in reading” (Ireson & Hallam, 2001: 27). The principles underlying the programme are “identical to setting but the children are drawn from different year groups” (Ireson & Hallam, 2001: 27). Fourteen studies investigated the effects of cross-age grouping. Eleven of these studies discovered that “students achieved more when taught in these cross-grade programs; two studies found that performance was better when students were taught in conventional mixed ability classes; and one study found no difference in results of the two approaches” (Kulik & Kulik, 1992: 75). Kulik and Kulik note that “[n]one of the studies reported on effects of cross-grade grouping on self-esteem” (1992: 75).

In separate work, Veenman (1995) examined 11 studies by various researchers (between 1964 and 1981) concerning the cognitive and non-cognitive effects of cross-age classes at primary/elementary school level; 9 took place in the USA, 1 in Canada and 1 in the UK. It should be noted that the 11 studies involving cross-age grouping “produced no consistent positive achievement effects” (1995: 373). Veenman proposes some reasons to explain why student learning in cross-age classes did not differ from single-age classes. Firstly, he states that it is “unlikely that the grouping alone will affect student learning” (1995: 370). He advises that the success in the classroom is “less dependent on organizational strategies than on the quality of the instructional practices” (1995: 370). Veenman highlights that teachers in the study commented that they had not received training on cross-age teaching (1995: 371). Veenman also suggests that there may have been bias in terms of the group of students in the studies. Students may have been selected for the groups based on their “independent work habits, cooperation, and no behavioural or emotional difficulties” (1995: 371). He advises that the “effect of student selection criteria is speculative but may account for the absence of differences in student outcomes in some of the reviewed studies” (1995: 371). Finally, he states that in his studies, “we do not know which combinations of grades are most successful” (1995: 372).

The lessons to be learned from the above conclusions are:

- 1) teachers need to be properly trained for cross-age teaching;
- 2) students should be divided by their ability levels and preferably not by other factors;
- 3) while Veenman’s research involved primary schools, research should also take place at second level in order to discover which combination of student school years would work best together – e.g. should students be grouped from First Year to Sixth Year based on their level, or would it be best to group them based on the Junior (First Year to Third Year) and Senior (Transition Year to Sixth Year) cycles?

Notwithstanding the above, in Veenman's research on cross-age grouping, he found a number of cognitive and non-cognitive benefits (1995: 322). These include:

1. Students have a chance to form relationships with a wider variety of children than is possible in one traditional same-age classroom. This leads to a greater sense of belonging, support, security, and confidence.
2. Teaching a diverse group of students demands individualized instruction.
3. The development of a balanced personality is promoted by fostering the attitudes and qualities that enable students to live in a complex and changing social environment.
4. The self-concepts of slower, older students are enhanced when they are asked to tutor younger students in their class.
5. Fewer anxieties may develop because the educational atmosphere is conducive not only to academic progress but also to social growth.
6. Multi-age grouping provides younger students with the opportunity to observe, emulate, and imitate a wide range of behaviours; older students have the opportunity to assume responsibility for less mature and less knowledgeable students.
7. Multi-age grouping invites cooperation and other forms of prosocial behaviour and thus appears to minimize competitive pressures and the need for discipline.
8. Students in the lower grade(s) can enrich their learning by attending to the material designed for the higher grade(s), while students in the higher grade(s) profit from opportunities to review the material designed for the lower grade(s).
9. Current concepts of cognitive development (e.g., the zone of proximal development and cognitive conflict) imply that children whose knowledge or abilities are similar but not identical can stimulate each other's thinking and cognitive growth.
10. Finally, multi-age grouping relaxes the rigid curriculum with its age-graded expectations, which are inappropriate for a large number of students.

In analysing the feasibility of introducing ability grouping for MFLs, it is important to examine if setting has an impact on the self-image of students. Gamoran and Berends (1987) highlight that one of the main arguments against ability grouping is that it negatively affects those students' self-esteem, self-concept, as well as their attitudes towards their school and their schoolwork. However, Ireson and Hallam's work indicates that while "the extent of setting in a school has an impact on pupils' self-esteem [and] affects pupils' academic self-perceptions in relation to specific curriculum subjects", nonetheless, the "effects are not uniform" (2001: 40).

Ireson and Hallam note that "there are strong relationships between academic attainment and subject-specific self-concept" (2001: 44). An important question therefore arises as to whether or not academic achievement affects self-concept or if self-concept affects academic achievement. Ireson and Hallam advise that the research provides mixed results and suggest that the relationship between academic self-concept and achievement may be reciprocal where each influences the other.

Ireson and Hallam advise that there is a correlation between students' self-perceptions and gender and social disadvantage. They state that girls and disadvantaged pupils tend to "have more negative self-perceptions than boys and socially advantaged pupils" (2001: 52). In terms of these gender differences, boys tend to have higher self-perceptions in some school subjects such as maths, while girls tend to have higher verbal self-concepts (2001: 45).

Ireson and Hallam also argue that students evaluate the self-perception of their achievements with how they perceive their peers' abilities across their year group. Chapman (1988) notes that lower attaining students tend to have lower self-concepts, compared to their higher attaining peers. This occurs where lower-attaining students compare themselves with those in higher attaining ability groups. Marsh's (1987) big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE) applies here, where Marsh argues that, when students compare themselves to higher attaining students (small fish in a big pond), they will experience a lower self-concept. The opposite is also true; when students compare themselves to lower attaining students (big fish in a small pond), they will experience a higher self-concept. In fact, Ireson and Hallam contend that the effect of ability grouping on academic self-concept is not the same for all subjects, in that, in terms of academic self-concept, there is no evidence that ability grouping has an effect on subjects such as maths and science. However, setting does have an impact on English as a school subject. Ireson and Hallam also note that setting can increase the self-concept of lower attaining students while decreasing the self-concept of higher attaining students. They suggest the reason for this is that subjects such as maths and science are easier to compare, given that assessment generally takes the form of right or wrong answers. By contrast, assessment in English tends to be more in terms of quality of response as opposed to right or wrong answers. Thus, subjects such as English can increase the self-concept of lower-attaining students. This leads Ireson and Hallam to state that a "move from mixed ability to setting would therefore have less impact on academic self-concept in these subjects" (2001: 52). Consequently, it is likely that MFLs being set would boast similar results, in that it may actually improve the academic self-concept of lower attaining students.

Ireson and Hallam note that bad behaviour can take place at the lower ability groupings, as students can feel they are weaker. Moreover, they caution that teachers can over-stereotype their students, leading teachers to having low expectations of the lower ability groupings. It is therefore most important that teachers set high expectations of their students. As Dörnyei notes:

It has been shown by a convincing amount of research that it is not enough to be merely committed to the students' academic progress, you also need to have sufficiently high expectations for what the students can achieve (2012: 35).

Labelling, stigmatisation and teasing as part of ability grouping are important components to consider. Ireson and Hallam state that these have "the potential to influence pupils' developing self-esteem [and that] [h]urtful teasing can undermine confidence and sense of self-worth" (2001: 57).

In Ireson and Hallam's research on students' feelings about their schools, they compared the feedback from three types of schools – mixed ability schools (classes were predominantly mixed

ability), partially set schools (setting took place in between two and four subjects depending on the school year), and set schools (streaming, banding or setting took place in four or more subjects) (Ireson & Hallam, 2001: 31). As the research of this thesis only proposes partially set schools for MFLs, the comparisons between mixed ability schools and partially set schools is considered.

In response to the statement, 'I am very happy when I am in school', 70.2% of students either strongly agreed or agreed in mixed ability schools, compared with 71.1% of students in partially set schools. As for the statement, 'This is a good school', 83.2% either strongly agreed or agreed in the mixed ability schools, compared with 78.1% in the partially set schools. In response to the statement, 'School work is worth doing', 87.3% either strongly agreed or agreed in mixed ability schools, compared with 88.5% in partially set schools. Finally, in relation to the statement, 'To me, the work I do in school is', 96.9% answered either "Very important" or "Quite important" in mixed ability schools, compared with 96% in partially set schools (Ireson & Hallam, 2001: 53-56).

The above responses indicate that there were few statistical differences between the mixed ability and the partially set schools. Nonetheless, it should be noted that students generally answered more positively ('strongly agreed', etc.) in mixed ability schools. Indeed, Veenman's research involving 11 studies investigating cross-age grouping at primary school level found that students in the cross-age classes "tended to score higher on attitudes towards school, personal adjustments, and self-concept" (1995: 367). He concludes that "parents, teachers, and administrators need not worry about the... social-emotional adjustment of students in... multi-age classes" (1995: 367). Given these findings, the rationale for the introduction of cross-age grouping MFL classes at second level should be made on its cognitive, and perhaps even its noncognitive, advantages to students.

The culture and ethos of a school are very important in effectuating positive changes. Shafer (2018) advises that defining school culture is "tricky", arguing that school culture is "shaped by five interwoven elements:" 1) fundamental beliefs and assumptions, 2) shared values, 3) norms, 4) patterns and behaviours, and 5) tangible evidence (Shafer, 2018). Fisher defines school ethos as the "climate of the school, and is expressed in the organisational conditions and web of personal relationships within the school" (2005:143). Fisher advises that school culture and school ethos are "difficult to define" (2005: 143) but they may be considered:

the outward expression of the 'secret harmonies' of the school, those norms, beliefs and values that become modes, standards and rules of operation. As one inspector put it, 'It's what you feel in your bones about a school when you have been in it for some time' (2005: 143).

Both culture and ethos would play a defining role in moulding a positive model of setting and cross-age grouping that could benefit all students. Ireson and Hallam state that “much depends on the ethos of the school and how grouping arrangements are explained to pupils” (2001: 11). Moreover, while grouping students according to their ability can impact on students’ self-perception, Ireson and Hallam argue that “school values and ethos have an important influence on pupils’ views of themselves” (2001: 52).

Ultimately, cross-age grouping could have a very beneficial outcome for developing students’ plurilingual competences, if the school management, teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders establish a culture and ethos in which the following take place: 1) clearly explaining to students and stakeholders the rationale for adopting setting and cross-age ability grouping; 2) employing cross-age grouping in a just way with equal opportunities for students to progress; and 3) encouraging students to achieve their maximum potential.

Given the controversy surrounding ability grouping, one may argue that the terminology being used to group students is inaccurate. The term ‘ability grouping’ could be more appropriately referred to as ‘attainment grouping’ given that “schools generally use measures of current performance, rather than measures of ability, to group pupils” (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020). The model of grouping students proposed in this thesis is indeed that of ‘attainment grouping’; students would be grouped based on their MFL competences at a moment in time. Under the proposed strategy, students would then be offered at least two opportunities annually to advance to a higher CEFR level. As such, students would not be set for years as may be the case in traditional grouping arrangements in schools.

The literature concerning the proposed strategy of harmonising post-primary MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) appears encouraging in terms of developing plurilingual second-level students. With regard to attainment grouping, as opposed to ability grouping, setting, combined with cross-age grouping, offers a promising model for implementing this strategy. Ultimately, this framework empowers students to progress at their own pace, and can motivate students to work towards their next language level. While this form of setting may lead to issues negatively affecting the self-image of some students, the literature shows that these concerns should be addressed positively and pre-emptively at school level through its culture and ethos. Given that students receive a minimum of 380 class-contact hours over the course of their MFL studies, if implemented correctly, this strategy makes it reasonable to expect students to leave second-level education with a minimum of a B1 CEFR level.

3.3 Strategy 2: Replacing the current State MFL exams with CEFR international exams

The second interrelated strategy this thesis aims to explore is the feasibility of replacing the current State MFL exams (Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate) with Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) international exams. As students would already be set according to their CEFR level (strategy 1), this would act as a complementary strategy that would provide students with a certified ladder of progression from CEFR A1 to B2.2, and beyond. Moreover, by doing official CEFR exams, students would have an international qualification that is recognised worldwide.

An essential starting point to investigating the feasibility of assessing students in line with CEFR international exams is to obtain a clear understanding of key components in successful language assessment. Hughes highlights the importance of the quality of language testing in additional language acquisition. He states, “[i]t cannot be denied that a great deal of language testing is of very poor quality. Too often language tests have a harmful effect on teaching and learning” (2003: 1). Hughes draws attention to the term *backwash* in additional language acquisition, which he defines as the “effect of testing on teaching and learning” (2003: 1). This effect can be either beneficial or harmful, and thus getting testing right is crucial to the positive acquisition of an additional language. Hughes believes that too often preparation for the test “can come to dominate all the teaching and learning activities” (2003: 1). A clear example of harmful backwash in the Irish post-primary education system is evidenced by the lack of focus on developing oral competences in both the MFL Junior Cycle specification and Senior Cycle syllabi. As highlighted in the Introduction Chapter, while an oral communication classroom-based assessment (CBA) takes place in Second Year, this is not the same as an oral exam. Indeed, under the new Junior Cycle programme, there is no longer the option to take an oral examination. The Leaving Certificate oral exam, which takes place a few weeks before the end of one’s second-level MFL studies, is the only mandatory oral exam. As an oral component does not feature strongly in assessments, it can have a harmful effect on teaching and learning.

Moreover, Hughes advises that “if the test content and testing techniques are at variance with the objectives of the course, there is likely to be harmful backwash” (2003: 1). He is critical of many language tests because “they fail to measure accurately whatever it is that they are intended to measure. Teachers know this. Students’ true abilities are not always reflected in the test scores that they obtain” (2003: 1). Hughes notes that, to a certain extent, this is inevitable as language abilities are not easy to measure compared with subjects such as Maths or Science. Nonetheless, Hughes believes that a proper relationship between teaching and testing is required for positive backwash. Indeed, Hughes (2003: 8) believes that whatever test or testing system is created for positive additional language learning, it should be one that:

- 1) consistently provides an accurate measure of precisely the abilities in which we are interested;
- 2) has a beneficial effect on teaching (in those cases where the test is likely to influence teaching);
- 3) is economical in terms of time and money.

The Council of Europe states that there are three concepts that have been traditionally considered central to the area of assessment: validity, reliability and feasibility. In the context of the CEFR, the Council of Europe defines these concepts as follows:

- *Validity*: A “test or assessment procedure can be said to have validity to the degree that it can be demonstrated that what is actually assessed (the construct) is what, in the context concerned, should be assessed, and that the information gained is an accurate representation of the proficiency of the candidates(s) concerned” (Council of Europe, 2001: 177).
- *Reliability*: It is “essentially the extent to which the same rank order of candidates is replicated in two separate (real or simulated) administrations of the same assessment” (COE, 2001: 177).
- *Feasibility*: This is essentially practical considerations. Indeed, “[a]ssessors... are only seeing a limited sample of performance” (COE, 2001: 178). Practical issues therefore arise, including: What category of assessment should be used? How long will the process take? Will it effectively measure what it sets out to measure? What are the costs involved in assessing?

In relation to carrying out effective MFL assessments, the Council of Europe puts forward 26 options and notes that a) these are not in order of most effective, and b) the list is non-exhaustive.

Achievement assessment	Proficiency assessment
Norm-referencing (NR)	Criterion-referencing (CR)
Mastery learning CR	Continuum CR
Continuous assessment	Fixed assessment points
Formative assessment	Summative assessment
Direct assessment	Indirect assessment
Performance assessment	Knowledge assessment
Subjective assessment	Objective assessment
Checklist rating	Performance rating
Impression	Guided judgement
Holistic assessment	Analytic assessment
Series assessment	Category assessment
Assessment by others	Self-assessment

Table 3.2: Effective MFL assessment types

Source: Council of Europe (2001: 183)

Appendix L provides a brief explanation of each assessment type noted above. The Council of Europe advises that the list of assessment options is long and therefore “[w]hatever approach is being adopted, any practical assessment system needs to reduce the number of possible categories to a feasible number” (COE, 2001: 193).

In terms of assessment and the CEFR, the Council of Europe states that the CEFR can be used to determine: what is assessed, how performance is interpreted, and how comparisons can be made. Table 3.3 below details the three main ways the CEFR Framework can be used in assessing:

What is assessed?	Content of tests and exams.
How performance is interpreted?	The criteria used to determine a learning objective has been achieved.
How comparisons can be made?	Describes levels of proficiency in tests and exams. This in turn facilitates comparisons being made with different qualification systems.

*Table 3.3: Main ways the CEFR framework can be used
Adapted from CEFR, 2001: 178*

Replacing the current State MFL exams (Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate) with Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) international exams would be a significant departure from how MFLs have traditionally been assessed in the second-level education system in Ireland. How this strategy would operate in practice is relatively straightforward. Under the first strategy, MFL classes would be harmonised in line with the CEFR. As previously noted, each CEFR level can be subdivided in line with the CEFR Companion Volume (2018), e.g. band A2 could be split into A2.1 and A2.2. The examination calendar would be aligned in large part to the existing division of the academic school year. In general, summative examinations take place in December and May. As such, twice a year, students would have the opportunity to sit in-house CEFR exams and progress from one level to the next (e.g. A2.1 to A2.2). Such in-school exams would likely be CEFR-like exams. In other words, instead of students doing the full CEFR exams, the exams could be reduced in size to accommodate school examination timetabling arrangements. Moreover, as international CEFR exams are generally not subdivided (e.g. A2.1), these exams would need to be adapted based on the corresponding full CEFR level (e.g. A2.2). Either an external company could make such exams, or alternatively, MFL teachers could make their own CEFR-like exams based on real CEFR papers or content of a similar standard. This model of assessing MFLs in line with the CEFR would mean that

students would likely be in one MFL class from September to December and another MFL class from January to May. While students would have clearly defined goals to achieve, they would also be empowered to progress at their own pace.

It is important to note that it is very unlikely that a student would have the same CEFR level across all four language skills. By way of an example, as illustrated in figure 3.1 below, a student may do a B1 exam; however, their reading could be B2.1 level, their listening and writing could be B1.2 level and their speaking may be A2.2 standard. As such, results in all four language skills should be clearly explained, including visually, for students, teachers and their parents, so that they can identify areas that need to be addressed.

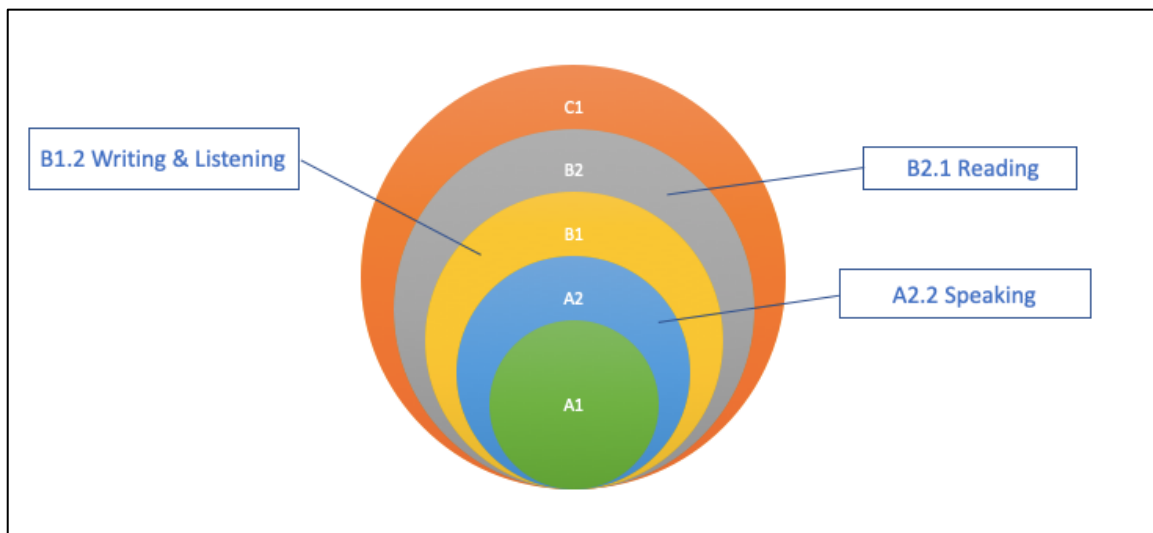


Figure 3.1: Sample breakdown of student CEFR results

In order to progress to the next level (e.g. A2.1 to A2.2), a student would need to obtain an overall grade of at least 60%, which is in keeping with CEFR examination standards in Europe. In the case where there is only a small shortfall, if possible, additional support could be provided in order to allow the student to progress to the next level. While an overall pass grade of 60% across all four skills is reasonable in any initial implementation of this strategy, given the importance of speaking the MFL, serious consideration ought to be given to not allowing students to progress to the next CEFR level if they have failed the oral component of the exam. In this circumstance, instead of repeating the entire course, students could be afforded the opportunity to repeat the oral part of the examination within a few weeks of taking the original oral exam.

In a similar way to which MFL teachers have been trained to teach the new MFL Junior Cycle programme and assess the classroom-based assessments (CBAs), MFL teachers would also need to

receive ongoing training and support over a period of at least two to three years in order to learn how to assess the CEFR in-house exams and uphold national standards. To maintain exam integrity, in-house exams could be corrected by another qualified MFL teacher in the school. As is current practice with the new Junior Cycle MFL *Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR)* meetings³, if the teacher is the only MFL teacher of that subject, they should consult with an MFL teacher of that same language in another school.

In terms of determining the student in-house CEFR grades, teachers would attend a form of SLAR meeting at school level to discuss the provisional CEFR assessment grades they have awarded the group of students whose exams they have corrected. At such a meeting, teachers would take samples of the pieces of work of several students they have just graded, e.g. 6 students get approximately 60% to 70% in their exam. In this case, the teacher would take one to two sample exams. At the meeting, teachers would compare their grades and standards with those of other teachers. At the end of this meeting, in consultation with their MFL colleagues, an agreed grade for their students' work would be determined. In addition, certain samples of scripts could be submitted to the State Examinations Commission⁴ to ensure consistency in standards across the country.

While students would not need to take the official CEFR exams in their MFLs to progress from each level, in the case of the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations, students would be required to take an official CEFR exam to certify their level. These exams could be taken at any time throughout the students' respective Junior and Senior Cycles. By following such a process, students would no longer face the pressure of a terminal MFL exam, along with all the other Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate exams. As a result, students could know their Leaving Certificate points for their MFL before they finish Sixth Year in school.

The official CEFR exams and authorising bodies that the Irish education system could use for assessing its curricular MFLs (French, German, Italian and Spanish) throughout the second-level

³ SLAR (Subject Learning and Assessment Review) Meetings: Review meetings that "enable teachers to collaboratively reach consistency in their judgements of student work against common, externally set Features of Quality" (NCCA, 2020). In the case of MFLs, these meetings take place after the various MFL teachers have awarded a provisional assessment for each student's classroom-based assessments (CBAs). These "provisional assessments may be modified in light of the discussions that take place at the Subject Learning and Assessment Review meeting" (NCCA, 2020).

⁴ The State Examinations Commission (SEC) is "responsible for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the second-level examinations of the Irish state: the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate. The State Examinations Commission is a non-departmental public body under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills" (SEC, 2020).

education are outlined below. These exams could take place in schools as opposed to in examination centres in Dublin city.

French

The *Alliance Française* offers examinations for non-native speakers of French in line with the CEFR. The *Diplôme d'études en langue française* (DELFL) assesses four exam levels – A1, A2, B1 and B2. For learners wishing to sit exams at C1 and C2 levels, they can take the *Diplôme approfondi de langue française* (DALF). The exams test all four language skills – reading, writing, speaking and listening. The exams can be taken in Ireland. The recommended hours to achieve each CEFR level is outlined in table 3.4.

German

The Goethe-Institut provides different types of examinations for non-native speakers of the German language, which assess all levels from A1 to C2. The exams test all four language skills – reading, writing, speaking and listening. The exams can be taken in Ireland. The recommended hours to achieve each CEFR level is outlined in table 3.4.

Italian

Università per Stranieri di Perugia provides assessment for non-native speakers of Italian in line with the CEFR. The *Certificato di Conoscenza della Lingua Italiana* (CELI) is an internationally recognised qualification for all six CEFR language levels in Italian from A1 to C2. *Accademia Italiana di Lingua*, *Università per Stranieri di Siena* as well as *Dante Alighieri Society* also offer alternative CEFR exams. The exams test all four language skills – reading, writing, speaking and listening. The exams can be taken in Ireland. The recommended hours to achieve each CEFR level is outlined in table 3.4.

Spanish

The *Instituto Cervantes* provides assessment for non-native speakers of Spanish in line with the CEFR. The *Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera* (DELE) assesses all levels from A1 to C2. The exams test all four language skills – reading, writing, speaking and listening. The exams can be taken in Ireland. The recommended hours to achieve each CEFR level is outlined in table 3.4.

CEFR Level	French	German	Italian	Spanish
A1	60 – 100	80 – 200	50 - 60	60
A2	160 – 200	200 – 350	100 – 120	180
B1	360 – 400	350 – 650	240 - 300	300
B2	560 – 650	600 – 800	320 – 400	480
C1	810 – 950	800 – 1000	450 – 500	660
C2	1060 - 1200	1000+	600 – 650	840

Table 3.4: Recommended language tuition hours to achieve CEFR levels

Source: Alliance Française (2021); Goethe Institut (2018); Accademia Italiana di Lingua (2021); Instituto Cervantes (2017)

In terms of calculating the points for matriculation purposes for higher education institutions (HEIs), the higher the official CEFR exam the students take, the more points they could achieve in their Leaving Certificate. Points could be awarded on the basis of each student’s percentage in their highest official CEFR exam. As noted earlier, the pass mark for official CEFR exams is generally 60%.

By way of an example, if the desired outcome is for second-level students to leave the education system with a B2 level, it is reasonable to allocate 100 points if a student passes the B2 exam (60%). This is the equivalent number of points for a H1 in the Leaving Certificate higher level examinations. For those students who go beyond the B2 level and achieve a C1.1 standard, it is reasonable to reward extra points. Such provision for extra points already occurs in the case of Mathematics in the Irish education system. This initiative is also proposed in the national foreign languages strategy *Languages Connect* (2017). However, the strategy only proposes that bonus points be provided “in cases where students apply for higher education courses in language-related areas” (2017a: 10).

The above model of allocating points would need to have flexibility. If a student were to sit the exam and achieve 55% at B2 level, this should not mean that the student has failed because the official pass mark is 60%. Similarly, if a student were to sit the same exam and achieve a grade of 85%, that student should not be considered as simply having B2 level. In terms of developing a more equitable system, a noteworthy example of grading to consider is the *Cambridge First for Schools* exams (University of Cambridge, 2018), which assesses English language competences of non-native English speakers attending second-level education throughout the world. By way of an example, students take the Cambridge First Certificate in English exam (B2). However, their grade is determined by how well they do in the exam at B2 level. The University of Cambridge notes that although students may take the exam at B2 level, “[e]xceptional candidates sometimes show ability beyond B2 level” (University of Cambridge, 2018). As such, they state that “[i]f you have achieved a grade A in your

exam, you will receive the *First Certificate in English* stating that you demonstrated ability at level C1” (University of Cambridge, 2018). Likewise, “[i]f your performance is below Level B2, but falls within Level B1, you will receive a *Cambridge English* certificate stating that you demonstrated ability at B1 level” (University of Cambridge, 2018). A similar system for grading CEFR exams could be put into operation for French, German, Italian and Spanish in the Irish education system.

In terms of allocating points for matriculation purposes for the Leaving Certificate based on official CEFR exam results, this thesis proposes a flexible model in line with the Council of Europe’s CEFR Companion Volume (2018). In the current grading system in the Leaving Certificate, percentages are placed within a certain grade bracket, e.g. at higher level, if a student obtains a result between 90% and 100%, their official grade is H1 and 100 points in the Leaving Certificate are awarded; similarly, if a student gets a result between 80% and 89%, their official grade is H2 and 88 points in the Leaving Certificate are awarded, and so on (see Appendix N). In the proposed model, students could take an exam at any CEFR level between A1 and C1. While the minimum level would be A1, all other levels should allow for an increase or decrease in points depending on the extent to which the student excels or fails the respective CEFR level. Table 3.5 below lists the proposed matriculation points at Leaving Certificate level.

CEFR	Points
A1	20
A2.1	30
A2.2	40
B1.1	55
B1.2	70
B2.1	85
B2.2	100
C1.1	110
C1.2	120
C2.1	130

Table 3.5: Sample points system based on CEFR exam grades

For levels A2 to C1, if the students pass the exam (i.e. obtain at least 60%), they would be awarded the full CEFR level and the points. However, if they get between 40% and 59%, they would be awarded the lower CEFR grade for that level with the corresponding points. If they get 80% or higher in that level, they would move up to the next sublevel on the CEFR as outlined in the table above. By

way of some examples, Student A sits the B2 and gets 65%. This student has passed the level and is awarded a B2.2 certificate and gets 100 points in the Leaving Certificate. Student B also sits the B2 exam but gets 47%. As this grade is between 40% and 59% this student is awarded a B2.1 certificate and gets 85 points in the Leaving Certificate. Student C does the same B2 exam and obtains 82% in the exam. This student has not sat the C1 level exam but shows strong potential for the next CEFR level. As such, a C1.1 grade is awarded and the student gets 110 points in the Leaving Certificate. Please see table 3.6 below as an illustrative example.

	Student A	Student B	Student C
<i>CEFR exam level taken</i>	B2	B2	B2
<i>Exam Grade</i>	65%	47%	82%
<i>Grading Bracket</i>	(60% - 79%)	(41% - 59%)	(81% - 100%)
<i>CERF level awarded</i>	B2.2	B2.1	C1.1
<i>Leaving Certificate Points</i>	100	85	110

Table 3.6: Sample CEFR results of 3 students

By following the above model, learning languages has the potential to be more practical. Indeed, students may be able to exert greater control over their studies. They could be rewarded even if they fail. They could also have the option to progress to their next CEFR level after they leave post-primary education – e.g. in a part-time course, abroad, at a third-level institution, etc. As an example, a student who finishes second-level education having officially been awarded the B1.2 level could then continue their studies at B2.1 level via numerous avenues. Through such a revised system, in terms of lifelong learning, additional language advancement could be a lot easier and seamless.

As noted in the Introduction Chapter, the European Schools system sets specific CEFR level goals for its students to achieve throughout their schooling. Indeed, by the end of second-level education (European Baccalaureate examinations), students are expected to have achieved a C1 standard in L2 and a B1 level or higher in L3 (OSG, 2019b). All its language syllabi and attainment descriptors (except L1) are aligned to the CEFR. This means that students in any given school year work towards achieving a specific CEFR standard and are tested against that standard. While the European Schools students are not assessed by an external institution (e.g. Goethe Institut), their in-school assessments as well as the European Baccalaureate (equivalent of the Leaving Certificate examinations) are aligned to the CEFR standards. Although the European Schools system does not provide an exact model of how the second proposed strategy would fully operate in practice, it

nonetheless demonstrates the importance of breaking MFL learning into a step-by-step process benchmarked against an international scale. The European Schools model also highlights the importance of assessing students to ensure the respective CEFR standards have been met. The European Schools model of teaching, learning and assessing in line with the CEFR will be discussed again in Chapter Five.

The literature concerning the second proposed strategy, that of replacing the current State MFL exams with CEFR international exams, indicates that the proposed initiative could prove promising in terms of developing plurilingual second-level students. The current MFL examination system in Ireland leads to a harmful backwash effect, especially in terms of developing oral competences. Assessing students MFL competences in line with their CEFR level addresses key issues in terms of examination validity, reliability, and feasibility. The strategy proposes that students could be assessed by way of in-house CEFR-like exams throughout their schooling, except in the case of key exams (Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations), where internationally accredited organisations (e.g. Alliance Française, in the case of the French language) should assess the students' levels. This CEFR examination system, from the start, focuses on all four language skills, including oral communication, which is clearly advantageous to developing genuine plurilingualism. This proposed strategy empowers students who can progress at their own pace. It also rewards students who achieve higher CEFR levels, as well as those who excel in their exams. Students who fail an exam may also be rewarded with a lower CEFR grade certificate. As such, a positive examination experience can be realised.

3.4 Strategy 3: Implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning

The third correlated strategy this thesis aims to explore is the introduction of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in second-level schools in Ireland. CLIL is a term created in 1994 by David Marsh and Anne Maljers as an approach similar to but distinct from language immersion. Language immersion is a method of teaching an additional language in which the learner's additional language is the medium of classroom instruction. By contrast, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is "a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language" (Coyle *et al.*, 2010: 1). The principal motivation with CLIL is the "desire to improve language skills by broadening the scope of traditional foreign language teaching, while at the same time achieving the same level of specialist knowledge as would be attained if the lesson were taught in the students' first language" (Dalton-Puffer, 2017). Using the CLIL approach, both the content and language are interwoven, even if the emphasis is greater on one

or the other at a given time. This twofold aim is where CLIL extends the experience of learning a language, and where it differs from traditional language-teaching approaches.

Various language-supportive methodologies are employed in order to achieve this dual-focused form of instruction. Indeed, “[a]chieving this twofold aim calls for the development of a special approach to teaching in that the non-language subject is not taught in a foreign language but with and through a foreign language” (Eurydices, 2006: 8). Coyle *et al.* state that “CLIL is an approach which is neither language learning nor subject learning, but an amalgam of both and is linked to the processes of convergence” (2010: 4). Convergence involves the “fusion of elements which may have been previously fragmented, such as subjects in the curriculum” (2010: 4). Such fusion is where CLIL becomes a powerful learning strategy.

CLIL as a teaching and learning approach emerged for a myriad of reasons. Historically, educating through an additional language is as old as education itself. However, the development of CLIL can be traced back to the end of the twentieth century when the need for citizens to become plurilingual increasingly became a necessity. Mehisto *et al.* state that “[b]y the mid-1990’s globalization was placing greater linguistic demands on mainstream education from the primary level through to institutions of higher education” (2008: 10). In Europe, the development of greater linguistic competences amongst Europeans became an increasing priority for the European Union. Enhancing such competences was also part of the strategy to improve competitiveness across Europe. On a greater international level, factors such as the interconnectedness of our world, the vast increase in mobility of international citizens, and the development of new technologies bringing humanity ever closer to one another, also factored into the reasons for the increase in demand for learning additional languages.

Coyle, Hood and Marsh argue that, while the “driving forces for language learning differ according to country... they share the objective of wanting to achieve the best possible results in the shortest time” (2010: 2). Indeed, global comparative measures which rank individual countries, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), have also placed an emphasis on countries meeting or exceeding best international standards in additional language acquisition. CLIL, as an approach, has emerged to help meet these requirements. The European Commission also endorses the CLIL approach for several reasons. It advises that CLIL can:

provide effective opportunities for pupils to use their new language skills now, rather than learn them now for use later. It opens doors on languages for a broader range of learners, nurturing self-confidence in young learners and those who have not responded well to formal language instruction in general

education. It provides exposure to the language without requiring extra time in the curriculum, which can be of particular interest in vocational settings (2004: 19).

On a generational level, Mehisto *et al.* state that “the mindset of Generation Y (generally recognized as born anywhere between 1982 and 2001) is particularly focused on immediacy as in ‘learn as you use, use as you learn’ – not ‘learn now, use later’” (2008: 11). In addition, Mehisto *et al.* state that “[t]hose born into the Cyber Generation (born after 2001) will be even more influenced by their own early, personal, hands-on experience with integrated technologies” (2008: 11). As such, they note that “[t]hese are the generations now in classrooms across the world, and CLIL is one innovative methodology that has emerged to cater to this new age” (2008: 11).

CLIL has been promoted and adopted as stakeholders believe it has significant potential to improve foreign language (FL) competences. Bruton notes that at a “political level, the authorities are attracted to the 2-for-1 idea, the increased exposure and the assurance of positive FL results. In adopting CLIL, they are also seen to be doing something to remedy the existing FL standards and to integrate language and content objectives” (2013: 595). Bruton also advises that oftentimes parents wish for their children to participate in a CLIL programme as they believe their children will have greater opportunities in the future (2013: 594).

In practice, CLIL cannot truly be considered ‘a method’ “as there is no such thing as a specific inventory of teaching rules, restricted to CLIL, nor a defining list of steps to follow when implementing CLIL in the classroom” (Escobar Urmeneta, 2019: 9). As such, CLIL is referred to as an *educational approach* (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010: 1; Dalton-Puffer, 2011: 183). Bruton (2011: 524) advises that there are essentially three variations of CLIL:

- 1) Learn the FL separately, in order to learn the content through the FL;
- 2) Learn the FL through the content, which has already been learned in the L1;
- 3) Learn the FL and the content together.

The CLIL approach has two instruction options through the MFL – extensive instruction or partial instruction. With extensive instruction, the MFL is used almost exclusively to introduce, summarize, and revise topics, with very limited switches into the first language. There is a triple focus on content, language, and cognition. Using this method, 50% or more of the curriculum may be taught in this way.

Partial instruction through the MFL may be considered more apt to the Irish educational context, at least at the initial stages. With this approach, a small percentage of the whole curriculum may be

taught through CLIL. This form of CLIL may involve a project-based modular approach. There is also a triple emphasis on content, language, and cognition.

In some countries, such as Sweden (Abello-Contesse *et al*, 2013: 7), schools have the option of two different forms of CLIL: the first introduces the foreign language gradually in a subject (partial instruction), this can begin with one subject and then extend to others; while the second approach begins immediately with full instruction in the foreign language (extensive instruction).

Within the wider context of a school, the CLIL approach is congruent with the concept of Languages Across the Curriculum (LAC). LAC recognizes that L1 and additional language learning do not solely occur during specific language classes. Indeed, “language learning and education also take place in each and every subject in school... across the whole curriculum – whether we are conscious of it or not” (Vollmer, 2006: 5). LAC therefore regards all teachers as language teachers, who are “encouraged to participate in developing language skills and competences within their fields of responsibility and thus contribute to a school learning policy as a whole” (Vollmer, 2006: 7).

Central to LAC is the development of plurilingual students. Vollmer argues that acquiring conceptual literacy (one’s ability to think lucidly with the support of language) and discourse competence (applying one’s learned linguistic abilities in order to communicate lucidly on relevant topics) for subject-specific use is a “preliminary and fundamental form of plurilingualism” (2006: 5). A second form of plurilingualism occurs when the student learns an additional language. Vollmer advises that, if implemented correctly, CLIL can support both forms of plurilingualism.

CLIL is a flexible approach underpinned by Coyle’s theoretical 4Cs model. The 4Cs Framework integrates the four contextualized building blocks of CLIL: content (subject matter), communication (language being used and learned), cognition (learning and thinking processes) and culture. Coyle, Hood and Marsh believe that the culture component involves the development of intercultural understanding as well as global citizenship (2010: 41). As such, the 4Cs Framework not only comprises the integration of both content learning and language learning within specific contexts, but also recognises the symbiotic relationship that exists between all the components.

The 4Cs Framework should remain at the heart of any CLIL programme. The CLIL-Pyramid offers lesson planners an interesting model to achieve this. The Pyramid operates on the basis that “quality CLIL based on the tenets of the 4Cs-Framework can only be achieved when all of the four Cs are considered in lesson planning and materials construction” (Meyer, 2013: 307). While the Pyramid

does not require that the 4Cs be included in each lesson, they need to be integrated in each unit.

Figure 3.2 below is a visual depiction of the CLIL-Pyramid.

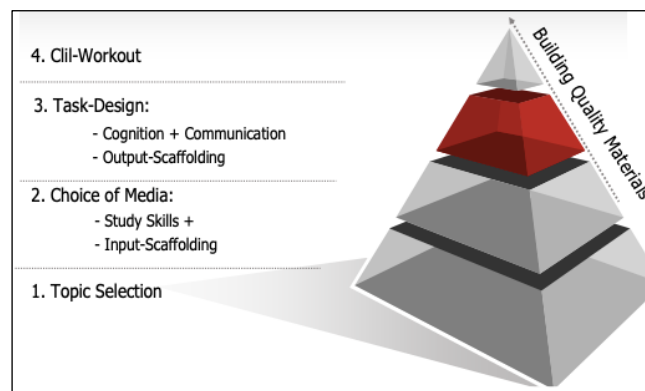


Figure 3.2: The CLIL-Pyramid

Source: Meyer (2013: 308)

The CLIL-Pyramid offers a systematic and proven sequence for planning CLIL units and accompanying materials. It commences with topic selection. The specific content required for the subject is determined. The material to support the content subject is chosen. Multimodal input is selected and distributed proportionately across the new CLIL unit. This helps to ensure differentiated materials to cater for diverse learning styles. The necessary scaffolding needs are determined based on the input material as well as the students' familiarity with it. Tasks are then designed in order to stimulate higher-order thinking and foster authentic communication in various ways (e.g. pair work, group work, etc.). The output scaffolding is determined based on the required output (e.g. presentation, interview, etc.). The process concludes with the CLIL workout, which is essentially a review of the key content and language elements covered in the CLIL unit.

Meyer notes that one of the key benefits of employing the CLIL-Pyramid as a planning tool is that it "makes it possible for teachers/material writers to create an interdisciplinary progression of study skills and literacies which can be spread across different units, different age groups or even different content subjects" (2013: 309). As such, the CLIL-Pyramid would support the concepts of cross-age teaching and Languages Across the Curriculum (LAC).

In order to ensure successful CLIL strategic planning, MFL teachers and content teachers need to make explicit the relationship between content objectives and language objectives. As such, *Coyle et al.* propose the *Language Triptych*. The aim of the *triptych* is to help teachers and students identify the three types of language required for optimal CLIL.

1. *Language of learning* is the language required to access the basic concepts and skills that connect with the topic.
2. *Language for learning* is the language required to be able to function in a foreign language environment.
3. *Language through learning* requires the learner to become actively involved both in terms of language and thinking so that effective learning can take place.

(Adapted from Coyle *et al.*, 2010: 37)

Mehisto *et al.* (2008: 32) make a number of important observations on how CLIL should successfully operate in practice in the classroom. Typically, the teacher should speak at a slow pace and employ a lot of repetition, as well as demonstrations, visual material and realia. However, with time, the students should adapt and the teacher can speak at a more natural speed. Moreover, in addition to providing the necessary building blocks for successful CLIL practices (e.g. content and language resources), teachers should respond without delay to students' immediate linguistic needs as they arise. Should a student wish to say something and lacks the necessary words to do so, the student should be assisted in doing so through the target language.

Mehisto *et al.* (2008: 33) highlight what a typical 60-minute CLIL class could entail:

- holding a warm-up discussion or playing a game that somehow connects with the topic (five minutes),
- discussing language, content and learning skills outcomes with students (three to five minutes),
- finding out what the students already know, guiding them in organizing that information and helping them articulate what else they want to learn about the topic (eight to ten minutes),
- having students individually read a short text looking for specific information (five minutes),
- doing peer co-operative work to compare results from the reading, and using information to create something new such as a plan or a list of recommendations (fifteen minutes),
- asking two or three questions of the entire class that encourage students to think critically/constructively about how they could improve the end result of their group work (content and language) (five minutes),
- presenting one group's outcome and having other groups contest or add to the information presented, and agreeing on one class outcome (ten minutes),
- reviewing the lesson's learning outcomes, deciding the extent to which outcomes were achieved and deciding on the next steps (three to five minutes).

With this approach, Mehisto *et al.* note that “[w]ithin a few months of starting the programme, students are usually able to use the CLIL language for almost all classroom communication” (2008: 32). Moreover, they state that the “language learning, which is certainly not considered incidental by parents or teachers, in many ways is incidental to the students” (2008: 32). For the students, they do not learn vocabulary for the sake of learning vocabulary. Rather, they learn the language as a means to an end; they learn the vocabulary in order to immerse themselves in the content. Mehisto *et al.* note that “paradoxically, more language is learnt when the focus on direct language teaching is reduced and the content teaching is increased” (2008: 32). Furthermore, they state that “[b]y guiding

students through experiments or activities that relate directly to their lives and communities, and by focusing on the learning of content while providing language support, language learning is actually maximised” (2008: 32). In this way, the significant advantage is that the students engage with the MFL and learn in a natural way.

The above model is a generic one that offers a *point de départ* for teachers. It may be adapted to meet the various needs of each school subject. A maths teacher will likely take a different CLIL approach from a history teacher. Class groups will vary according to the amount of MFL that can be used in the content classroom. What works for one class may not work for another. As CLIL offers a flexible approach, it allows for considerable latitude amongst stakeholders to establish a programme that works on even an individual-class basis.

The successful practice of CLIL has already taken place in a pilot-project form in Ireland. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) initiated a number of CLIL pilot projects during the 2005 – 2006 school year. In total, six primary schools were involved in the project (NCCA, 2005: 28) and a number of benefits were noted. Teachers found that there was increased motivation among the children involved. Teachers also reported an increased use of the target language by the pupils, more opportunities for weaker children, greater enjoyment in learning, as well as an increased sense of pupil achievement. Teachers also advised that CLIL offered greater potential for making links across the curriculum. Nonetheless, some challenges to CLIL were highlighted. These included: the lack of resources and guidelines for implementing CLIL in the classroom; a difficulty in selecting an appropriate language, strands and strand units of the curriculum to teach through CLIL; as well as differentiation issues and a lack of time. Teachers also experienced difficulty with assessment, querying how both the language and content could be assessed accurately.

The children’s experiences of CLIL were very positive in the pilot projects. They were enthusiastic and felt learning through CLIL was more fun, leaving a positive effect on their attitude to the curricular area being taught (NCCA, 2005: 29). To date, there has been little implementation of CLIL in the teaching of MFLs in second-level schools in Ireland. The DES has taken the decision to review this and will establish a number of pilot projects implementing CLIL in Transition Year (DES, 2017a: 23).

A key motivation for introducing CLIL is that it is often considered a way to overcome the perceived weaknesses of FL teaching and learning in the traditional classroom. Indeed, Dalton-Puffer points out that:

public expectations regarding CLIL center on its being efficient and effective for foreign language learning, expectations that are fueled by dissatisfaction with the outcomes of school-based foreign language learning and a somewhat stereotypical view of foreign language lessons as a series of mechanistic grammar drills. CLIL is thus believed to deliver the goods more reliably and with less pain for the learners (2011: 193).

The CLIL approach has several advantages. Graddol refers to CLIL as the “ultimate communicative methodology” (2006: 86). As students learn content and language, CLIL provides a realistic solution to arguments that MFL learning in school lacks relevance (Lasagabaster, 2009). Likewise, as students learn the key concepts of the content subject through their MFL, the learners benefit by engaging more actively in the content (Dalton-Puffer, 2008). In this way, the students remember more of the material taught. In addition, Coyle *et al.* (2010) note that a positive attitude towards the content language may transfer to the MFL the student is studying. The CLIL approach can improve student motivation. They highlight that, where students voluntarily participate through the additional language, it “can enhance overall motivation towards the subject itself” (2010: 11). Furthermore, given that CLIL reinforces language acquisition and learning in a relatively natural way, it develops the MFL fluency levels of students of all abilities (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Lyster, 2007).

Furthermore, CLIL stimulates cognitive flexibility, enriches the understanding of concepts, and broadens conceptual mapping resources (Coyle *et al.*, 2010: 10). As students have to think through a different language, Marsh (2009) argues that CLIL therefore advances learners’ cognitive development. Moreover, CLIL “enables better association of different concepts and helps the learner advance towards a more sophisticated level of learning in general” (Coyle *et al.*, 2010: 13). As such, CLIL goes beyond simply developing language and content; it provides a more holistic education to students. In addition, Bernaus *et al.* advise that CLIL:

builds intercultural knowledge and understanding, develops intercultural communication skills, improves language competence and oral communication skills, develops multilingual interests and attitudes, provides opportunities to study content through different perspectives... complements other subjects rather than competes with them... [and] increases learners' motivation and confidence in both the language and the subject being taught (2011: 15).

In terms of developing lifelong skills, CLIL can help prepare students for learning or working through an additional language in their future lives.

Moreover, Bruton notes that the “apparent attraction of CLIL... is that the students get two for the price of one... school-subject content and FL development simultaneously” (2013: 588). Indeed, exposure to the FL is very important as the “length of time that students are in contact with the L2 has been found to be a major predictor of L2 learning success” (Escobar Urmeneta, 2019: 10). CLIL can truly provide students with meaningful exposure. Escobar Urmeneta notes that “[n]ot only is the

amount of contact time with the L2 higher in CLIL, but the quality of the interactions is also usually higher, or at least different and complementary to the type that takes place in the standard FL classroom” (2019: 11). Given that CLIL students receive extra exposure to the target language through the content subjects, Dalton-Puffer (2017) notes that it:

therefore comes as little surprise to learn that CLIL students are always several test scores ahead of their peers, and indeed often (though not always!) in all the assessed dimensions of language competences. The most pronounced positive effect can be found in the vocabulary of CLIL students, however.

Coyle *et al.* also note that a further advantage to the CLIL approach is that it incorporates both language learning and language acquisition. Language learning is the active learning of an additional language, whereas language acquisition is incidental learning (e.g. subconscious learning of one’s mother tongue). They note that “[s]uccessful language learning can be achieved when people have the opportunity to receive instruction, and at the same time experience real-life situations in which they acquire the language more naturalistically” (2010: 11). Marsh notes that it is “this naturalness which appears to be one of the major platforms for CLIL’s importance and success in relation to both language and other subject learning” (2000: 5).

In terms of its implementation in second-level schools, Harrop notes that “CLIL offers a budgetary efficient way of promoting multilingualism without cramming existing curricula” (2012: 58). As MFL classes generally cover the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the language, there is rarely sufficient time left for students to put into practice what they have learned. Indeed, providing extra language class time for students is very difficult due to timetabling constraints and the number of other subjects students need to study. CLIL thus provides an opportunity to students and teachers to use their MFL beyond the language classroom. In addition, from the teacher’s perspective, by having to employ various new methods to teach CLIL classes, this can offer them an opportunity to regenerate professionally (Coyle, 2010: 12).

The Department of Education and Skills (2017) recognises the numerous advantages to employing CLIL. As such, the DES advises of its intention to examine the possibility of introducing CLIL in both primary and second-level schools (DES, 2017a). One of the benefits of adopting the CLIL approach is that it can be easily adapted into the national curriculum. In fact, “[m]ost strategies that are essential for CLIL can also be considered good practice in education” (Mehisto *et al.*, 2008: 27). Mehisto *et al.* note that adopting CLIL is “more likely to require a modification, as opposed to a major change, in daily classroom practice” (2008: 27). This may explain why CLIL is gaining momentum and extending as an educational approach across continents. Coyle *et al.* point out that:

the operational success of CLIL has been in transferability, not only across countries and continents, but also across types of schools. The educational success of CLIL is in the content- and language-learning outcomes realised in classrooms. CLIL provides pathways to learning which complement insights now emerging from interdisciplinary research within the neurosciences and education (2010: 1).

The Department of Education and Skills notes that, if the Irish education system takes the decision to adopt the CLIL approach, there are already solid foundations in place for its implementation. In particular, the DES highlights the increasing number of Irish-medium schools and states that these schools “exemplify good practice in teaching and learning subjects through a student’s second language, a model of CLIL which could be extended to the learning of other languages at all levels of education and training” (2017a: 16).

In terms of implementing CLIL, Ireland should avoid the mistakes made by many other national education systems in Europe. While the Commission of the European Communities states that CLIL has a “major contribution to make to the Union’s language learning goals” (2003: 8), such top-down support is generally not being realised on the ground. Indeed, Dalton-Puffer notes that few of the European national education systems “have actually responded with substantial investments into CLIL implementation, teacher education, and research, leaving the impetus to the grassroots stakeholders” (2011: 185). As such, considerable investments, both financial and in terms of teacher training, as well as a coordinated strategy that is regularly reviewed by stakeholders, are required to develop a successful CLIL system in Ireland.

Notwithstanding the numerous benefits that CLIL bestows, Dalton-Puffer notes that CLIL is “not a panacea” (2011: 195). In terms of CLIL research findings, Bruton believes it is important to exercise caution. He states that the “[r]esults of some empirical research can be interpreted and biased in various ways, depending very often on researcher interests” (2011: 528). He further advises that “[s]ome of the studies are very limited, and the results questionable in numerous ways, particularly in terms of pretesting, sampling, and observation data on actual instruction” (2011: 528). Banegas states that “[b]ecause CLIL shortcomings are not fully addressed... a rather evangelical picture is offered, implying to teachers that very few problems will emerge” (2011: 183).

One of the weaknesses of many CLIL studies is that they do not assess the language proficiency levels of the CLIL and control groups before the students commence their CLIL programme (Dalton-Puffer, 2017). As such, it is difficult to accurately measure each student’s MFL progress having undertaken a CLIL programme. Notwithstanding the foregoing, the research indicates that CLIL students “already achieve significantly better results in the initial aptitude tests, and also exhibit generally higher levels

of language learning motivation and linguistic talent” (Dalton-Puffer, 2017). Dalton-Puffer (2017) thus concludes that as “CLIL is de facto selective in the sense that CLIL programmes attract students with a greater interest in learning and a talent for languages”, it is not possible to state that CLIL leads to better language proficiency per se. Indeed, Bruton states that “many of the potential pitfalls which CLIL might encounter are actually avoided by selecting for these programs students who will be academically motivated to succeed in the FL” (2011: 524). An additional concern that Dalton-Puffer (2017) raises is that while CLIL students tend to have the initial lead in terms of aptitude, motivation and linguistic talent, they do not appear to build on this in their CLIL programme.

In addition, much of the research surrounding CLIL involves English as the target language. As English is the global lingua franca, where students are very often exposed to English through various means outside the classroom, such as through pop culture, business, technology, entertainment, science and international politics, the findings of CLIL studies through English cannot be unequivocally applied to CLIL programmes through other languages (Dalton-Puffer, 2017). Indeed, Harrop notes that in a native English-speaking country, learners are “unlikely to see the instrumental need of learning a content subject in a foreign language other than English beyond providing a more authentic communicative context” (2012: 63).

Several research studies find that students require a minimum FL proficiency in order to truly participate in and benefit from a CLIL programme. In one such study, involving a three-year CLIL project in a secondary school in Hong Kong, the authors state:

In summary, Hong Kong high school students were very disadvantaged by instruction in English in geography, history, science, and, to a lesser extent, mathematics. The size of this disadvantage was reasonably consistent across the first three years of high school (Marsh et al., 2000: 337).

In this study, those who were the least disadvantaged had higher levels of FL proficiency to begin with. The authors conclude that unless students have a threshold FL level, they cannot achieve their true potential in a CLIL programme. Indeed, Bruton also advises that “students need to have achieved a threshold in the L2 to be able to cope [in the content class]” (2013: 592).

Moreover, Content and Language Integrated Learning can be demanding. In a study of a CLIL programme in schools in Madrid, Hidalgo (2010) noted that the initial findings indicated that 10% of students dropped out of the programme due to their inability to keep up with the rigours of the CLIL initiative. This was not an isolated case: Bruton highlights that, in many CLIL programmes, there can be significant drop-out rates as students’ “FL proficiency cannot cope” (2013: 590). An additional concern with CLIL is that it places a limit on overachievement. In Seikkula-Leino’s (2007) study in

Finland, there were few students exceeding the expected linguistic level, with the demanding nature of the CLIL approach attributed to this.

Moreover, it should be noted that CLIL classes do not necessarily prepare students for everyday usage of the FL beyond the classroom. Dalton-Puffer advises that as content subjects are still relatively specific classroom-based contexts, CLIL “cannot therefore be expected to prepare learners for other situational contexts in any direct way” (2011: 195). Nonetheless, she highlights that language proficiency gained through CLIL does offer “considerable potential” for more general contexts outside of school.

In a comparative study, undertaken by Vollmer, he found that CLIL students demonstrated, even at the age of 16, substandard academic writing skills in L1 and L2. The students also underperformed considerably in terms of expressing themselves adequately in subject-specific content. He notes:

Another important result is that both groups of learners show considerable deficits in their academic language use, in the knowledge and mastery of academic forms of communication and of writing in particular: the specific competences in handling the language dimension adequately and in expressing their thoughts and findings appropriately or functionally according to the genre(s) demanded are equally low, they show a serious lack of command over or sensitivity for the requirements of academic language use, both in L2 and in L1 (2008: 272).

Bruton advises that one of the key arguments in favour of CLIL is that by learning a content subject through a FL, this will develop FL proficiency. However, in practice, this is not always true. He notes that to “any outside observer, it should immediately raise suspicions that apparently changing the medium of instruction of content subjects to a FL is really fairly problem-free and beneficial to all concerned” (2013: 588). The reality is that CLIL is “so complex a task that it can malfunction” (Mehisto, 2008: 108). As noted earlier in this chapter, CLIL requires significant coordination and planning in order to ensure an optimal content and language integrated programme that meets the needs of all learners.

In addition, students who are new to CLIL often feel under considerable pressure and usually participate less in these lessons compared to if the classes were in their L1 (Dalton-Puffer, 2017). While they may participate less, students new to CLIL have “very high expectations with regard to the positive effects of this approach” (Dalton-Puffer, 2017). This is in marked contrast with those who are “[e]xperienced CLIL students [who] take a more sober and doubtless more realistic view of these effects; however, they describe themselves as being relaxed about using the target language spontaneously” (Dalton-Puffer, 2017).

Harrop challenges the assertion that the CLIL approach improves motivation in all learners. While CLIL can improve motivation in learners (Lasagabaster, 2009; Alonso *et al.*, 2008), Harrop advises that the evidence also suggests there are limitations. Indeed, Bruton (2013) argues that instead of increasing student motivation, CLIL can do the opposite. He advises that if students do not have the required language proficiency, they may experience decreased motivation, and may participate less in content subjects through their FL than would be the case if the classes were held through their L1. He further points out that without the necessary FL proficiency, students will find it harder to assimilate the content-subject material. Moreover, Lasagabaster (2009) advises that CLIL learners experience a greater deterioration in motivation compared with their non-CLIL counterparts over the years of their second-level education. In Seikkula-Leino's study (2007), although the CLIL students maintained higher motivational levels towards their MFL compared with their non-CLIL counterparts, they experienced a lower self-concept of themselves as MLF learners.

One possible solution to keep students engaged and motivated in their MFL studies is for teachers to discover the additional language goals as well as the interests of their students. Dörnyei advises to "find out what your students' goals are and what topics they want to learn about, then build these into your curriculum as much as possible" (2012: 63). However, this may be easier said than done. Not every student will know what their goals are and be able to articulate what topics would motivate them to learn. Moreover, Wentzel and Brophy note that what may motivate a large number of students will likely not motivate all, as there are "individual differences in what students will find interesting and not all students will necessarily respond in the same way in a given situation" (2014: 118). As such, a trial-and-error approach could be adopted by teachers to make the learning more relevant to students (Doyle, 2018).

Harrop also questions the assertion made by many CLIL proponents that the CLIL approach "not only increases linguistic proficiency, but that it also enhances content knowledge, cognitive skills and creativity in learners of all abilities" (2012: 63). Harrop accepts that a "substantial body of research proves that CLIL learners suffer no disadvantage in their levels of achievements in their first language or the content subjects, and that very often they outperform their non-CLIL peers" (2012: 63). However, she highlights that this balance of integrating content, language and cognition does not always effectively occur. She notes that the reality is "[t]eachers' abilities are key in this area, but the lack of specific training is an all too frequent hurdle" (2012: 64). Indeed, Escobar Urmeneta advises that it is not uncommon to find "teachers in charge of CLIL classes whose scientific, linguistic or CLIL-specific pedagogical qualifications are insufficient or inappropriate" (2019: 13).

Harrop contends that any failure to properly meet the linguistic needs of learners will “inevitably fail the weakest” (2012: 64). She also advises that many teachers lack the strategies to make the content language understandable in the interlanguage for all learners, and as a consequence they may not necessarily develop all learners’ abilities. Moreover, Harrop (2012: 64) notes that, where the content teacher is lacking in MFL proficiency, this can result in the learners making the same mistakes.

The level of L2 proficiency the CLIL teacher should have in order to be able to effectively implement CLIL is an important consideration. The Finnish Board of Education requires a C2 level of L2 proficiency (Ludbrook, 2008: 24), while the European Schools system generally prefers native-speaker teachers; it states that “the appointment of a non-native speaker should remain a pragmatic and exceptional answer to a scarcity situation” (OSG, 2018: 2). Overall, there is no agreement on the minimum L2 competence considered necessary for effective CLIL teaching, although it is generally recognised that the CLIL teacher does not always need to have native-speaker L2 proficiency when teaching lower-level learners. Coyle *et al.* state that “[t]eachers do not need to have native or near-native competence in the target language for all forms of delivery, although naturally they need a high level of fluency” (2010: 17). In the case of Ireland, the DES (2017) has outlined its requirement for all applicants for registration as MFL teachers to have a minimum CEFR level of B2.2 across all language skills. Partial CLIL instruction may be achievable in the Irish context as teachers would not be required to have native-like mastery of the foreign language in question nor would students be required to have any significant level of fluency either. Notwithstanding the above, it should be noted that CLIL is “difficult to implement unless the subject teachers are themselves bilingual” (Graddol, 2006: 86).

Harrop is critical of the assertion made by CLIL enthusiasts that CLIL increases the intercultural awareness of students. She maintains that the development of intercultural awareness depends very much on the subject the student studies. If a student does CLIL studies in Science, Maths, or PE, these subjects usually do not involve an intercultural component and, as such, the amount of intercultural awareness can be limited. Nonetheless, Coffey (2005) argues that, even in such subjects, the fact that students are conversing through the medium of a foreign language means they are engaging in a decentring process of their own linguistic worldview, and are as such partaking in an intercultural process.

Indeed, as previously discussed in this chapter, Coyle’s 4Cs Framework places culture firmly at the core of the CLIL process. However, it should be noted that not all CLIL models attribute the same level of importance to culture and intercultural understanding as Coyle’s Framework. Some European

CLIL models place language and communication as the core elements of their CLIL models with culture as a peripheral component (Dalton-Puffer, 2008). In such models, the focus is on the instrumentality of the language (Byram & Risager, 1999), as opposed to a focus on culture. Nonetheless, MFL learning is never culturally neutral (Byram & Risager, 1999), as references to cultural realities will always be embedded in languages. This cultural component to CLIL can be most beneficial to students. It can encourage students to develop a truly global sense of citizenship. In so doing, students have the opportunity to see the world beyond themselves and their own culture, to perceive the world from the perspective of the other, and to become more holistically developed people in an increasingly interconnected world.

Harrop advises that it is important to set realistic expectations of CLIL. She urges proponents not to suggest that CLIL is on par with immersion programmes such as bilingual schooling. CLIL students generally do not achieve the same linguistic standards. She states that there is “evidence that the amount of foreign language knowledge needed for the benefits of bilingualism to be evident is substantial... [and that there] is so far no evidence that the much more limited scope of cross-curricular CLIL can deliver the same sort of linguistic proficiency” (2012: 65).

Developing a realistic approach of what CLIL can provide and addressing limitations in the CLIL model are crucial to ensuring success in any implementation in a second-level education system. Harrop notes that the “risk of implementing CLIL under the weight of unrealistic expectations and without specifically addressing its emerging shortcomings is one that we cannot afford to run [as] [i]t would lead to CLIL being perceived as a quick fix rather than a timely solution” (2012: 68). Getting the right CLIL model in place can therefore make all the difference in achieving a plurilingual second-level education system.

In terms of achieving a successful CLIL programme, a language policy can play a significant role (Harrop, 2012; Rumlich, 2020). Rumlich states that a “whole-school CLIL-for-all policy seems to offer great potential for altering mindsets, encouraging professional development, inducing cooperation among teachers, and improving educational practice in general” (2020: 116). However, as discussed in Chapter One, it is very important that there is strong language planning in place to support the language policy as it is “not unusual to find schools whose plan to develop plurilingualism is poorly designed or executed, or absent altogether” (Escobar Urmeneta, 2019: 13).

Teacher training is essential to an optimal CLIL programme. Escobar Urmeneta highlights the “[I]ack of adequate training for CLIL commonly results in the inability to deal with the complexities of CLIL

settings in effective ways” (2019: 13). For a CLIL programme to be successful, “teachers who carry it out in the classroom must have appropriate and sufficient training in not only subject content but also the L2 vehicle they will use to deliver that content” (Escobar Urmeneta, 2019: 17). In addition to continuous professional development, ongoing teacher cooperation is required as it is an “important means to tackling several of the challenges CLIL teachers face on a daily basis” (Rumlich, 2020: 117). A positive relationship between MFL teachers and CLIL teachers strongly affects planning, implementation, synchronising MFL vocabulary with the CLIL content, and devising appropriate formative and summative assessments. This collegial relationship is also fundamental as issues such as when the CLIL teaching is to be scheduled within the curriculum, and over what period of time, have a strong influence on the choice of CLIL model adopted, as well as on its proceeding development.

For an effective CLIL programme to function, it requires substantial work to integrate both language and content. In practice, the implementation of CLIL projects does not always deliver the desired expectations as CLIL is “regularly interpreted simply as a change of the language of instruction with little focus on the integration of language and content, subject-specific literacies or students’ L1” (Rumlich, 2020: 116). By contrast, in some CLIL programmes, the content the student receives through the FL can be in the form of simplified texts and explanations (Bruton, 2013). This can therefore impact on the level and standard of content taught.

If the DES chooses to implement CLIL in second-level schools in Ireland, numerous school subjects could become CLIL subjects. From an international perspective, the content subjects most commonly taught are History, Geography and Social Sciences. Mathematics and Biology are also taught in some countries (Papaja, 2014: 9). In Finland, since 1991, teachers in state schools can use a foreign language to teach any school subject. Dalton-Puffer (2017) advises that subjects with a greater emphasis on activity such as Art or PE may be suitable for introducing students with a lower level of language proficiency to CLIL.

In reality, partial CLIL in the Irish second-level education system could work in the case where the MFL teacher is also qualified and accredited by the Teaching Council to teach a content subject (e.g. Maths, Business, Science, etc.). In the case of MFL teachers who are not qualified and accredited to teach a content subject, perhaps they could teach through the MFL parts of a subject that does not require a qualification and accreditation (e.g. Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), etc.).

In terms of the initial stages, having only 5% to 10% of a content class through the MFL may be sufficient. Indeed, there is “no orthodoxy as to how, exactly, CLIL should be implemented and diverse practices have evolved” (Graddol, 2006: 86). If introduced, MFL classes could help to prepare students with the MFL vocabulary needed to follow the MFL part of the CLIL classes. Students who do not study an MFL would clearly not partake in CLIL classes. Those who have significant language-based learning difficulties, but still doing an MFL, could be exempted from CLIL classes.

The CLIL model discussed so far in this chapter largely refers to its initial implementation within second-level schools. However, a longer-term scenario for implementation should be considered for optimal additional language learning. Coyle *et al.* (2010) advise that CLIL is best developed over the following stages:

- *Between the ages of 3 – 5 years:* This would involve games and other play-based activities, where the MFL is used to varying degrees. These models are often called “‘immersion’ and involve introducing sounds, words and structures where the main focus is on stimulating, fun activities” (Coyle *et al.*, 2010: 16). Coyle *et al.* point out that “whilst they [the children] are aware that they are learning to listen to and use sounds and words from another language, their main focus is on the doing – be it playing, singing, drawing, building models, or other activities” (2010: 16).
- *Pupils in primary school between 5 – 12 years:* Depending on both the ability of the student, as well as the proficiency of the teacher, various types of CLIL can be used. These can range from small projects to parts of a course (including whole content topics) being taught through the MFL.
- *Pupils in post-primary education between 12 – 19 years:* More advanced models of CLIL can be implemented at second level. At this stage, students are familiar with CLIL and have acquired the language learning skills from primary school. At second-level, schools could consider introducing a second or third additional language. It is also recommended to incorporate CLIL with new technologies. Longer-term planning is essential at this stage. Coyle *et al.* advise that the lower-secondary curriculum “often provides a particularly suitable environment for the introduction of CLIL[,] [as] [p]ressures of examinations tend to complicate higher-level curricula in secondary education” (2010: 22).

As noted in the Introduction Chapter, the European Schools system offers a strong CLIL model in its primary- and second-level schools. At primary level, in years 3 to 5, the subject *European Hours* is taught through the pupils’ L2 or in the language of the host country. In addition, at second level, in years 1 to 5, “art, music, ICT and physical education are taught to mixed language groups in one of

the three L2s (English, French or German) or in the language of the host country” (OSG, 2009b). From year 3 of secondary education, “all pupils study human sciences and religion or ethics in their first foreign language” (OSG, 2019b). From year 4, history, geography and economic courses are taught through the students’ L2. In years 6 to 7, art, music, and physical education continue to be taught through the students’ L2 (OSG, 2019b). In addition, the Administrative Board of each European School may permit other subjects to be taught through the students’ L2. How well the CLIL model works in practice in the European Schools system will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Pérez Cañado advises that ultimately to establish a strong future CLIL model, further research is required. She notes that, initially, in terms of CLIL research, CLIL advocates greatly exceeded its detractors. Cenoz, Genesee and Gorter (2013) refer to this as the “bandwagon effect”; as CLIL enjoyed largely unequivocal support, many authors essentially jumped on the CLIL proverbial bandwagon. However, Pérez Cañado notes that in “the past few years, the pendulum has violently swerved to the opposite extreme, initiating a second phase in CLIL research which harbors a pessimistic outlook on its effects and feasibility” (2016: 17). She points out that a central issue in the CLIL research is that there have been a number of methodological flaws and what is required is to establish new studies “devoid of research design and statistical problems [which] should be conducted in order to have unbiased, balanced, and methodologically sound research shed light on the true effects of CLIL” (2016: 18).

Rumlich supports such calls for further research on CLIL. In particular, he advises:

The complexity of CLIL and the diversity of contexts in which it is realised render it highly context-sensitive, and, as a result, we are in dire need of mixed-method studies and classroom observations to forge a better idea what it actually is that we conduct research on. This will add depth to our insights and help to reliably interpret the (absence of) effects (2020: 117).

Pérez Cañado states that “[i]f time and patience dovetail with continuous stocktaking, rigorous research, and ongoing collaboration, we firmly believe that a solid template can be built for the future, where the CLIL agenda will continue advancing strongly and steadily” (2016: 22).

As much of the research involving CLIL relates to English as the target language, Dalton-Puffer states that in future research on CLIL, it will be “vital to keep in mind the realization that conceptualizations and findings based on the global lingua franca English as a CLIL medium need to be carefully examined for their transferability to other languages” (2011: 197). In addition, Cenoz, Genesee and Gorter advise further research is needed in order to “examine more carefully if content is acquired to the same extent when taught through the medium of the L2 in comparison with students’ native language” (2013: 257).

In terms of the Irish second-level education system, it is important to understand that, at present, it would be very difficult to introduce a significant CLIL programme nationwide. The reality is that there is a considerable shortage of modern foreign language teachers. The problem is so serious that “[s]chools may drop foreign languages due to [a] lack of teachers” (O’ Brien, 2019). In addition, as noted earlier in this chapter, given that MFL teachers are only required to have a B2.2 CEFR level in their MFL, this is likely an insufficient standard to teach content classes through the MFL. As a result, teachers may not feel confident teaching CLIL classes. As also discussed earlier in this chapter, there is a substantial lack of continuous professional development for teachers. This too would need to be addressed in order to have an effective CLIL programme in place. CLIL is realistically a medium- to long-term goal; too many impediments currently exist for CLIL to be a viable option in the short term throughout the Irish second-level education system.

The literature indicates that the introduction of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has the potential to be very beneficial in second-level schools in Ireland. In addition to the official 380 MFL class-contact hours throughout one’s second-level schooling, being actively exposed to and interacting through one’s MFL in a content subject (e.g. CSPE, PE, etc.) should lead to students developing greater plurilingual competences. While CLIL offers a flexible approach, and is commended for developing MFL fluency in learners, it is not without its critics, who raise serious issues concerning its effectiveness in many respects, including student attainment and motivation. In practical terms, there are at present too many impediments to introducing a nationwide CLIL programme in post-primary schools in Ireland. Several issues, including a shortage of MFL teachers, teacher MFL competency standards, and a lack of MFL teacher training, need to be addressed over the medium-term for this to take place. Nonetheless, none of these issues are insurmountable. In the short- to medium-term, Ireland should learn from several successful international CLIL models, such as that of the European Schools system. The Gaelcholáistí in Ireland, which effectively follow a CLIL model at post-primary level, are certainly worthy of exploration. Moreover, given the criticisms of bias in a lot of the CLIL research to date, the Irish education system would be well advised to carry out its own independent CLIL research. By doing so, a realistic picture of the benefits as well as the challenges will emerge. If CLIL is then deemed advantageous to developing the plurilingual competences of students, a series of pilot projects could be implemented in some second-level schools. The task would then be to fine-tune that CLIL model and create one that could work in second-level schools across the country. When the impediments to a nationwide CLIL programme have been adequately addressed, a well-calibrated CLIL model could be implemented on a gradual basis in post-primary schools countrywide.

3.5 European Language Portfolio

As noted earlier in this chapter, the current second-level education system in Ireland rewards rote learning. While the proposed CEFR examination model has several merits for reasons highlighted throughout this thesis, even with this assessment strategy, students may still depend on rote learning to maximise their exam performance. The key to reducing the need for rote learning is to actually improve student MFL competences; if students actually know the language, this mitigates the perceived need for rote learning. While Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is certainly one way to help achieve this, this thesis wishes to explore the feasibility of implementing the European Language Portfolio (ELP) as an additional method.

The creation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) paved the way for the European Languages Portfolio (ELP). The ELP was developed by the Language Policy Unit of the Council of Europe to:

- support the development of learner autonomy, plurilingualism and intercultural awareness and competence;
- allow users to record their language learning achievements and their experience of learning and using languages (COE, 2018).

The Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio (ELP) has three obligatory components:

- *Language Passport*: this "summarises the owner's linguistic identity by briefly recording second/foreign languages (L2s) learnt, formal language qualifications achieved, significant experiences of L2 use, and the owner's assessment of his/her current proficiency in the L2s he/she knows" (COE, 2011: 7);
- *Language Biography*: this is "used to set language learning targets, monitor progress, and record and reflect on especially important language learning and intercultural experiences" (COE, 2011: 7);
- *Dossier*: this "can serve both a process and a display function, being used to store work in progress but also to present a selection of work that in the owner's judgement best represents his/her L2 proficiency" (COE, 2011: 7).

The main aims of the European Language Portfolio (COE, 2018) are:

- to help learners give shape and coherence to their experience of learning and using languages other than their first language,
- to motivate learners by acknowledging their efforts to extend and diversify their language skills at all levels,
- to provide a record of the linguistic and cultural skills they have acquired (to be consulted, for example, when they are moving to a higher learning level or seeking employment at home or abroad).

In essence, the European Language Portfolio (ELP) encourages students to reflect on their language learning and intercultural experiences. By using the ELP, students can document their own learning,

make necessary assessments, and self-motivate. The ELP also encourages student autonomy and taking responsibility for their MFL learning and progress. The benefits of the ELP are very important in terms of ongoing additional language acquisition.

While the European Language Portfolio has many benefits, Little (2016) points out that the ELP is not widely used in most Council of Europe member states. He offers four reasons to explain why the ELP has been a relative failure. Firstly, the ELP could not live up to the “widespread expectation that it would be a “magic bullet”, spontaneously providing a universal remedy for the ills of language teaching and learning” (2016: 166). Secondly, in most member states, learner autonomy and critical thinking are not deeply embedded in MFL teaching and learning. As such, the “ELP’s pedagogical focuses were alien to the majority of educational systems” (2016: 166). In reality, the “radical changes it [the ELP] demands in teaching approaches and classroom discourse are simply incompressible to the majority of teachers and educational administrators” (2016: 166). Thirdly, the ELP failed to integrate with national education systems in at least three ways:

- a) when the ELP was introduced, it was generally not done so as part of greater curricular reforms. This impacted the ELPs checklists of “I can” descriptors which often did not align to the curriculum goals;
- b) most L2 classes use a textbook. Using the ELP in addition to the textbook resulted in considerable extra work for most MFL teachers;
- c) the ELP implies an “assessment culture in which learners are active agents via self-assessment and the reflective learning on which it depends, but in most educational systems such a culture is unthinkable” (2016: 166).

Fourthly, Little advises that the “ELP itself is not without problems” (2016: 166). By way of an example, the “I can” checklists are in the target language. If developing plurilingualism is the objective, then having checklists in several different target languages is “likely to reinforce the tendency to see them as entirely separate entities” (2016: 167) and thus working against the “principle of plurilingualism” (2016: 166). On the contrary, “providing checklists in the language of schooling may support plurilingualism” (2016: 167).

Nonetheless, Little is confident that the ELP can still work successfully, although in a revised form, in education systems. Studies on the use of the ELP in immigrant language learning programmes in Ireland, in pilot projects in other countries, as well as in successful implementations in both Albania and Turkey indicate that the ELP can work very well. Little proposes a series of changes that ought to take place in order to ensure the successful use of the ELP across Europe. Little advises that

educational reforms from the bottom-up at school level are required for the ELP to optimally work. While general guidelines from the top-down may be provided on the use of the ELP in schools, he believes that individual schools are best placed to make the ELP work successfully for their students. Little also argues that it is important to establish a strong link between the ELP and the official curriculum so that they are in line with the CEFR's "can do" descriptors. In addition, he recommends to "redesign the ELP to suit our particular context, whatever that may be, taking advantage of the new freedom available to ELP developers now that the validation and registration have come to an end" (2016: 169). Finally, Little contends that "[o]ne of the most important of the CEFR's many innovative features is the fact that "can do" descriptors bring curriculum, teaching/learning, and assessment into closer interaction with one another than has usually been the case" (2016: 170). As such, he argues that "we should redesign our local assessment procedures so that self-assessment, peer, teacher and institutional assessment are all informed by the CEFR's view of language learning as language use" (2016: 170). In addition, at class level, Little believes that the target language (e.g. L2) should be used "spontaneously and authentically as the preferred medium of teaching and learning" (2016: 168). Little also highlights the importance of monitoring. He contends that "monitoring begins as a reflective process driven by self-assessment; and using the target language as the channel of explicit monitoring helps to develop our learners' capacity for involuntary and implicit monitoring that is fundamental to spontaneous and autonomous language use" (2016: 168).

Employing the European Languages Portfolio would be very advantageous to the strategies proposed in this chapter. As the ELP is designed to be used by learners as they progress through the various levels of the CEFR, the ELP would complement the proposed new system of the division of students by their CEFR level. Similarly, it would be beneficial in terms of preparing students for the CEFR exams as students would document through the ELP what they are expected to learn at each stage. The ELP would also offer them the opportunity to reflect on their progress and learn from their mistakes. The ELP could also benefit Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) classes. It could encourage students to reflect on their progress in CLIL classes, and ideally to take action on those reflections. Another key benefit is that the ELP values all key competences, whether they are gained inside or outside formal education. The ELP thus encourages the learning of languages beyond the classroom. Moreover, the ELP remains the property of the learner, and as such, language learning can become a more personal experience.

In order to incentivise students to regularly use their ELP, an overall grade for the student's ELP could be given alongside their CEFR exam grade. A similar system is already in operation with the Junior Cycle oral classroom-based assessment (CBA). This CBA grade is noted on the official Junior Cycle

certificate alongside the final Junior Cycle MFL exam grade. In order to encourage students to maintain a high-quality ELP, a similar system to the CBA-grade reporting could work for the ELP. The ELPs could be graded in schools, alongside the in-house CEFR-like exams, by MFL teachers at SLAR meetings. The process of how SLAR meetings work has already been documented in this chapter.

While there are numerous benefits to the implementation of the ELP, Little notes that ELPs can be quite complex documents and, as such, he advises that they need to be introduced gradually. He believes that for ELPs to successfully work they need to be fully integrated into the learning process (Little, 2014). As such, by synchronizing the ELP with the division of students, as defined by the CEFR, and the examining of students based on the CEFR, it would work very well to create a far greater student-centred learning experience, where the student is the key agent of their own drive for success.

In conclusion, this chapter has examined several components. It firstly outlined ten significant impediments to students becoming plurilingual in the second-level education system in Ireland. The chapter then proceeded to explore the feasibility of introducing three strategies that aim to foster greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students. The first two strategies – harmonising post-primary MFL classes in line with the CEFR and replacing the current State MFL exams with CEFR international exams – demonstrate significant potential and could be implemented in the medium term. The third strategy, introducing content and language integrated learning, while very promising, would have significant hurdles to overcome, and as such, should be considered a longer-term ambition. Finally, the European Language Portfolio, if implemented well, could act as a very helpful support in developing students' MFL competences.

Chapter Four

Methodological Framework

Within the context of Ireland's commitment to the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002) and its plurilingual vision for Europe, the overarching aim of this thesis is to provide a number of salient recommendations on how to greatly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students in Ireland. In particular, this thesis sets out to answer the following three research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of key stakeholders of modern foreign language (MFL) teaching, learning and assessment in post-primary schools in Ireland?
2. To what extent would the three proposed strategies that aim to advance the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs at post-primary level in Ireland be feasible within the current education system?
3. What are the implications of the responses to a) the above questions, as well as b) the qualitative research carried out beyond Irish shores, for future language-in-education policies and practices in the Irish post-primary education system?

While the literature review undertaken in this thesis offers significant insights, in order to answer the above questions, empirical research was conducted with key stakeholders in the Irish post-primary education system. By way of a comparative model, some additional research took place with members of the senior management team in the European Schools system.

This chapter discusses the methodological framework of the research project. In particular, the decision to employ case-study research in four post-primary schools is explained. The rationale for applying Grounded Theory as the main methodological approach is also expounded. The chapter outlines how the research participants and sites were selected. The ethical procedures are also documented. The quantitative and qualitative research methods employed in the project are then discussed in detail: the rationale for each choice, the advantages and disadvantages of each method, their design and development, their use in the pre-piloting to full-study administration phases, etc. Finally, the process of data analysis and ensuring maximum reliability and validity are addressed. In total, as illustrated in table 4.1 below, there were four phases involved in the data collection process: design, pre-piloting, piloting, and the final study.

Design	Development		Data Collection
Phase 1 Research Design	Phase 2 Pre-Piloting	Phase 3 Piloting	Phase 4 Final Study
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Choice of research methods • Establishing case-study site criteria • Initial contact with case-study sites • Design and development of questionnaires and interview schedules • Peer-review of questionnaires and interview schedules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus group with MFL students • Focus group with MFL teachers • Interviews • Review of questionnaires and interview schedules • Literature review • Redesign of questionnaires and interview schedules • Ethical approval • Contact with schools regarding piloting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-site piloting of questionnaires and ethical procedures • Follow-up discussion on questionnaires • Analysis of data • Literature review • Alterations to questionnaires • Organise final case-study sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical approval • Finalise arrangements with case-study sites • On-site visit to 4 study sites • Administration of questionnaires • Conducting semi-structured interviews • Transcription and coding • Literature review • Analysis of data and discussion of findings
Apr 2017 – Sept 2017	Sept 2017 – Nov 2017	Nov 2017 – May 18	Sept 2018 – Jan 2020

Table 4.1: Phases of the research

4.1 The researcher as a practitioner

The background of the researcher is important to declare in any quality research project (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). The author of this thesis attended both primary and second-level schooling in Ireland. He has also worked for the past two decades in both the Irish education system as a second-level teacher as well as in the European Schools system as the director of one of their Accredited European Schools (AES). The author has therefore significant experience as a student, teacher, and school manager.

In addition to being the director of an Accredited European School, the author was the elected representative of all the directors of the AES for one year. As such, he represented all the AES at an official level at meetings in Brussels (e.g. Joint Teaching Committee, etc.). He was keenly involved in programme development, curricula, and syllabi. He also liaised considerably with stakeholder groups

in order to reach workable agreements. He has substantial experience in leading projects from their genesis to completion.

Given the background of the author and his first-hand experience of directing a school in Ireland that has realised the ambition of the Barcelona Summit Agreement, he acknowledges his bias that he believes this ambition (Mother Tongue + 2) can be achieved in second-level schools throughout Ireland provided the right structures and supports are established. As Polit and Beck advise, “[t]o some extent, bias can never be avoided totally because the potential for its occurrence is so pervasive” (2014: 107). However, in order to mitigate any potential bias, as evidenced throughout this chapter, the author acted with impartiality at all stages of this research project. In addition, the research involved a multi-site case study. Moreover, mixed-methods research was employed, and triangulation at several levels took place. Furthermore, verification strategies that ensure both reliability and validity were applied. This process involved “ensuring methodological coherence, sampling sufficiency, developing a dynamic relationship between sampling, data collection and analysis, thinking theoretically, and theory development” (Morse *et al.*, 2002: 18).

The ontological and epistemological positions taken by researchers are very important as they form the philosophical basis of a research project. This foundation “impacts every aspect of the research process, including topic selection, question formulation, method selection, sampling, and research design” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011 :4).

Ontology and epistemology are two core dimensions of research projects. Ontology is the “study of being. It is concerned with ‘what is’, with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such” (Crotty, 1998: 10). Blaikie (2000: 8) offers a more ample definition stating that ontology is the:

claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other. In short, ontological assumptions are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality.

Conversely, epistemology concerns the “very bases of knowledge – its nature and forms, how it can be acquired, and how communicated to other human beings” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007: 7). Grix states that epistemology “focuses on the knowledge-gathering process and is concerned with developing new models or theories that are better than competing models and theories” (2002: 177).

In short, ontology is the study of being, while epistemology is the study of knowledge. Hesse-Biber and Leavy advise that methodology is the “bridge that brings our philosophical standpoint (on

ontology and epistemology) and method (perspective and tool) together” (2011: 6). The methodologies and methods employed in this research project are outlined in this chapter.

The term “paradigm”, introduced by Thomas Kuhn (1970), was employed to discuss the “shared generalizations, beliefs, and values of a community of specialists regarding the nature of reality and knowledge” (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019: 1). A paradigm can be considered a “set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a *worldview* that defines, for its holder, the nature of the “world,” the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 106). Paradigm or worldview (Mertens, 2019) influences the researcher’s selection of ontology, epistemology and methodology (Elshafie, 2013).

Constructivism is the paradigm employed in this research project. Constructivism is the:

recognition that reality is a product of human intelligence interacting with experience in the real world. As soon as you include human mental activity in the process of knowing reality, you have accepted constructivism (Elkind, 2005: 334).

With constructivism, the “goal of the research... is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation” (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 24). Constructivist research is “shaped from the bottom up, i.e., from the individual perspectives, to broad patterns, and ultimately to broad understandings” (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019: 2). Constructivists are “observers in a way observing reality being formed in daily life or in science” (Ültanir, 2012: 195).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that constructivist research is relativist from an ontological perspective. Relativism implies that “no objective truth can be known” (Hugly & Sayward, 1987: 278). With constructivism’s relativism, there are “multiple, apprehendable, and sometimes conflicting social realities that are the products of human intellects, but that may change as their constructors become more informed and sophisticated” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 111). In terms of the epistemological position, constructionism was employed. A constructionist epistemology assumes that:

different individuals construct meaning of the same object or phenomenon in different ways; how an individual engages with and understands their world is based on their cultural, historical, and social perspectives and thus meaning arises through an interaction with a human community (Moon & Blackman, 2014: 6).

A core value to constructionist research is that it facilitates the generation of contextual information and understanding of the topic under investigation. In terms of methodology, constructivism requires an interaction between and among the researcher and the respondents. These varying

constructions are then interpreted by employing conventional hermeneutical techniques. Through a dialectical interchange, these constructions are compared and contrasted. The ultimate aim of this process is to “distill a consensus construction that is more informed and sophisticated than any of the predecessor constructions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 111).

4.2 Case Study

In order to answer the research questions as outlined in this thesis, the decision was taken to employ a multi-site case-study research project. This section will outline some theoretical perspectives on utilising a multi-site case-study research project. The rationale for this type of research will also be provided, as will an explanation of its mixed-methodological underpinnings.

Case studies are considered intensive studies, with the aim of achieving a thorough understanding of a situation, phenomenon or event. A case study may be defined as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009: 18).

Although case studies are widely used, as a research method they are held in low acclaim. Indeed, there is no common consensus on what a case study actually is, how the research should be conducted, and how valid its results are (Merriam, 1994). Yin states that “[a]lthough the case study is a distinctive form of empirical inquiry, many research investigators nevertheless disdain the strategy” (2009: 14). The rationale for such contempt is multifactorial. Researchers can lack vigour in conducting case-study research. Furthermore, researchers may not follow systematic procedures, or they might act in a biased manner that influences the direction of the findings or conclusion (Yin, 2009: 14).

Case studies are often criticised as they offer little foundation for scientific generalizations (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 8). Nonetheless, Yin (2009: 15) refutes such an evaluation and argues that case studies can be generalizable, given that a theory can be developed from a case study:

case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study, like the experiment, does not represent a “sample,” and in doing a case study, your goal will be to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization).

In fact, a lot can be learned from a particular case study or a small number of case studies. Eisner (1991: 199) offers the example of how a thorough description by the researcher can provide a “vivid portrait of excellent teaching, for example – can become a prototype that can be used in the

education of teachers or the appraisal of teaching". Indeed, Erickson (1986) affirms that as case studies are examples of wider practice, what is learned from one case study can be transferred to similar settings. In addition, Flyvbjerg (2006) enumerates the experiments of Bohr, Darwin, Einstein, Freud, Galileo, and Newton as examples of human and natural science being advanced based on a single case.

Yin (1994) contends that the strength of case-study research is that it facilitates triangulation. Triangulation is the combination of methodologies in studying the same phenomenon (Jick, 1979). By utilising both quantitative and qualitative data in case-study research, each methodology can compensate for the other's methodological weaknesses and provide a more thorough insight into the phenomenon under analysis. The benefit of taking such an approach is that while the evidence from one method (interview, questionnaire, etc.) could be called into doubt, if evidence from all methods employed yield the same conclusions, it would be overwhelming. It would therefore provide great impetus to improve and amend any policy (Corson, 1999: 39). In addition, utilising multi-site case-study research further reinforces the validity and reliability of the research findings. Both validity and reliability are discussed later in this chapter.

In the multi-site case-study research undertaken as part of this research project, the four most common second-level school types were chosen – all-boys (English-medium), all-girls (English-medium), co-educational (English-medium) and co-educational (Irish-medium) / Gaelcholáiste. Each school's MFL sixth year students, MFL teachers, as well as the senior school management, were invited to participate in the research. All four schools partaking in the research fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of Education and Skills, and as such adhere to national legislation, policies, guidelines and MFL curricula. Given the foregoing details, all schools that partook in this research project can be considered microcosmic examples of wider practice.

4.2.1 Justification for a mixed-methods case-study research design

The researcher carried out a mixed-methods research project, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods in order to answer the research questions outlined earlier in this chapter. The methods employed in conducting the research were chosen based on which methods would most likely yield the best results. Bell states that quantitative researchers "collect facts and study the relationship of one set of facts to another. They use techniques that are likely to produce quantified and, if possible, generalizable conclusions" (2005: 7). Whereas, researchers adopting a qualitative researcher perspective "are more concerned to understand individuals' perceptions of

the world. They seek insight rather than statistical analysis” (Kane & Brún, 2001: 198). The aim of qualitative research is therefore to understand the meaning of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

Dörnyei defines mixed-methods research as “some sort of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods within a single research project” (2007: 44). Dörnyei advises that how the qualitative-quantitative combination occurs is the main issue in mixed-methods research, stating that several combinations are possible. In addition, at the data analysis stage, qualitative and quantitative principles can be combined by either ‘quantitising’ or ‘qualitising’ the data. Dörnyei states that a mixed-methods study allows for multi-level analyses of complex issues. By converging numeric trends (quantitative) with specific details (qualitative), this can lead to a better understanding of complex phenomena. Indeed, words can add meaning to numbers, while numbers can provide a greater understanding of the words.

Strauss and Corbin (1998: 34) explicate the uniqueness of adopting a mixed-methods approach:

Qualitative and quantitative forms of research both have roles to play in theorising. The issue is not whether to use one form or another but rather how these might work together to foster the development of theory. Although most researchers tend to use qualitative and quantitative methods in supplementary or complementary forms, what we are advocating is a true interplay between the two. The qualitative should direct the quantitative and the quantitative feedback into the qualitative in a circular, but at the same time evolving, process with each method contributing to the theory in ways that only each can.

Dörnyei points out that there are a number of strengths to the mixed-methods approach. Firstly, he states that by employing both qualitative and quantitative approaches “researchers can bring out the best of both paradigms, thereby combining quantitative and qualitative research strengths” (2007: 45). As such, the strengths of one method can overcome the weaknesses of the other method in the research study. Dörnyei suggests that a good way to strengthen the research is to have the quantitative phase followed by the qualitative phase, as this will provide depth to the quantitative results. Moreover, Dörnyei advises that mixed-methods research has a “unique potential to produce evidence for the validity of research outcomes through the convergence and corroboration of the findings” (2007: 45). Finally, Dörnyei states that a “benefit of combining QUAL and QUAN methods is that the final results are usually acceptable for a larger audience than those of a monomethod study would be” (2007: 46).

However, there are some weaknesses to the mixed-methods approach. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) advise that the assumption that employing a mixed-methods approach is better than a monomethod approach does not always hold true. A monomethod approach should be used where that will provide the best data, e.g. statistical studies. They also advise against the notion that, when

in doubt, use a mixed-methods approach. Moreover, they question how knowledgeable any researcher can be in both qualitative and quantitative research methods, stating that researchers who are not adequately trained in both methods can do more damage than good to the research. Indeed, they argue that researchers fully competent in both methodologies are few in number. Moreover, Maxwell and Loomis (2003) advise that the diversity of possible combinations of various methods is larger than any typology can contain. Furthermore, Dörnyei questions the principled approach to the variety of combinations in mixed-methods research “so that we do not end up with an ‘anything goes as long as you mix them’ mentality” (2007: 46). A mixed-methods approach was employed in this research project to obtain both quantitative data and qualitative data in order to more thoroughly understand the phenomenon under investigation. The quantitative data provided the statistics, while the qualitative data provided a more complete understanding as to the ‘why.’ As such, gathering mixed-methods data provided the researcher with a greater insight into the respondents’ answers.

In terms of the research that took place in the four schools, the quantitative research involved separate questionnaires for MFL sixth year students and their MFL teachers. The qualitative research consisted of interviews with, where possible, some MFL teachers and senior school management in the same participating schools. The combination of both quantitative and qualitative research methods was important for a number of reasons. It was only possible to do quantitative research with the sixth year students. Second-level schools indicated to the researcher that they were very unclear about student participation in the research in the form of an interview given the then-recent introduction of GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) guidelines. Nonetheless, the student questionnaire of 58 questions provided most insightful findings. The student questionnaire was taken during the same period as the teacher questionnaire, with many of the questions looking at the same issues but from different perspectives. This allowed the researcher to see the views from the main stakeholders involved in teaching and learning. Moreover, the qualitative research took place some months after the researcher had compiled and collated the quantitative findings. This meant the researcher had time to reflect on the quantitative findings. The qualitative research with MFL teachers and senior school management permitted the researcher to obtain a greater understanding of the phenomena in question. Their insights were of particular importance as they are major actors in facilitating reforms. Having compiled and collated all the findings from the four different schools, this allowed the researcher to make comparisons and contrasts, as well as draw pertinent conclusions.

Research instruments are selected and developed with the aim of yielding the best results. These instruments obtain, measure and analyse the data in order to answer the research questions. Bell points out that the overriding aim of a thesis is to “obtain as representative a range of responses as possible to enable you to fulfil the objectives of your study and to provide answers to key questions” (2005: 120). Thus, Bell states that two issues are of fundamental importance to the discharge of the research – 1) reliability and 2) validity. Reliability is “essentially an umbrella term for dependability, consistency and replicability over time, over instruments and over groups of respondents” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018: 268). Reliability answers the question – can we believe the results? For research to be reliable, it “must demonstrate that if it were to be carried out on a similar group of respondents in a similar context (however defined), then similar results would be found” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018: 268). Indeed, reliability “not only has to be achieved but has to be seen to be achieved” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018: 282). Transparency is therefore a fundamental component to reliability.

In order to ensure the reliability of the research, the investigator carried out a pre-pilot test as well as a pilot test. This helped to ensure that any issues that could affect reliability (e.g. unclear wording, reducing the number of abbreviations, providing some additional time for questionnaire completion, etc.) could be addressed. In terms of the actual research itself, the investigator ensured that there was consistency across all study groups (interrater consistency): the four most common second-level school types were chosen – all-boys (English-medium), all-girls (English-medium), co-educational (English-medium) and co-educational (Irish-medium). In advance of conducting the research, the same procedures applied to each school. All respondents for the questionnaire were given the same information, instructions and recommended time for completion. As for the interviews, all participants were given the same information. The same quantitative (sixth year student and teacher questionnaires) and qualitative (teacher and school management interviews) research applied to each participating school. By comparing the results from all four types of schools, it was possible to confirm there was a strong correlation in the research through similar replies and findings. In terms of the qualitative research with MFL teachers and school leaders, the same core questions were asked to all MFL teachers in the interviews. As for the school leaders, they all received their own list of key questions. While there were common questions for MFL teachers and separate generic questions for school leaders, there were also individualised questions for MFL teachers and school leaders based on the findings of the quantitative research in their respective schools. Naturally evolving questions that arose during the course of the interviews were also asked.

Validity is the capability of a research instrument to measure what it is intended to measure (De Vaus, 2002). Validity is the trustworthiness of the data, its analysis, as well as its interpretation (Waltz, Strickland & Lenz, 2005: 217). Indeed, if a piece of research is deemed invalid, it is considered “worthless” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018: 245). Cohen, Manion and Morrison advise that ‘warrants’ play a vital role in validity. A ‘warrant’ is “the logical link made between data and proposition, between data and conclusions... which supports the weight given to the explanation offered in the face of alternative, rival explanations” (2018: 245). In essence, a piece of research “is valid if the warrants that underpin it are defensible and, thereby, if the conclusions drawn and the explanations given can stand their ground in the face of rival conclusions and explanations” (2018: 245). Cohen, Manion and Morrison advise of the importance of ensuring validity at the data-gathering stage, the data-analysis stage and the data reporting stage (2018: 267).

In terms of ensuring validity in the quantitative and qualitative research, the appropriate measuring tools were chosen. Questions that could be easily answered by questionnaire were asked in the questionnaires (student and teacher). Questions that were more appropriately asked by interview with teachers and other stakeholders were asked by interview. Moreover, before the creation of the questionnaires and the questions for the interview schedules, all areas for questioning were thoroughly researched by the investigator. A considerable amount of time was dedicated to ensuring clear, concise questions in order to avoid any lack of clarity. Questions aimed to be of high quality and targeted, with no unnecessary duplication. In terms of the questionnaires, the MFL student and teacher ones largely employed the 5-point Likert scale throughout. The Likert scale will be discussed later in this chapter.

In addition, prior to the full-study administration of the questionnaires, both a pre-pilot test and a pilot test of the questionnaires were carried out. Similarly, the questions for the interview schedules were reviewed several times with some of the researcher’s colleagues in advance of conducting the full-study interviews. Issues that arose during these phases were quickly addressed. These measures helped to ensure high levels of validity in the research.

In carrying out the research, it was important to address issues concerning both internal and external validity. Internal validity may be defined as the “truth value, applicability, consistency, neutrality, dependability, and/or credibility of interpretations and conclusions within the underlying setting or group” (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007: 234). In essence, internal validity gauges how strong one’s research methods are. It’s about “establishing trustworthy evidence of cause and effect” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012: 247).

There are, however, several threats to internal validity. The table below delineates the main threats, provides a definition of each one, and explains what the researcher did in order to mitigate these threats.

Threat to internal validity	Explanation	How the researcher minimised the threat
<i>Selection of participants</i>	“Biases resulting from selection of two groups of respondents that are not equivalent to one another in age, motivation, education, etc.” (Fink, 2009: 72).	All research was carried out with stratified random-sampled participants that were equivalent. In terms of the questionnaires with students, they were all sixth year students in the four post-primary schools. The same applied to the MFL teachers; all participants were practicing MFL teachers. Interviews with teachers were done on a voluntary basis. While the interviews with MFL teachers were semi-structured, all participants were qualified and experienced MFL teachers, and they all received the same main questions.
<i>History</i>	During the completion process, unanticipated events occur.	The questionnaires and interviews with students and staff took place over a maximum of a four-month period. No unanticipated events occurred.
<i>Maturation</i>	As time passes, participants change. This particularly affects projects that take place over a long duration.	As questionnaires took place once, no maturation issues occurred. The interviews with MFL teachers took place within three months of completion of the questionnaire. It is unlikely that such a short period of time would affect the internal validity.
<i>Testing</i>	The effects taking the first test will impact the second test.	There was no pre- and post-testing. Participants only took one questionnaire. The interviews with MFL teachers expanded on the contents of the questionnaire. The benefit of providing the teachers with the questionnaire before the interview is that they had time to reflect on the proposals as

		opposed to being put on the spot, so to speak, during an interview. As part of the student and teacher questionnaires, the respondents also had the opportunity to reflect on and propose alternative strategies to develop plurilingual second-level students.
<i>Instrumentation</i>	Changes in the instrument, observers or scorers make change outcomes.	There were no changes in the instrument, observers or scorers.
<i>Statistical regression</i>	When participants are selected based on extreme scores and regress to the mean.	Participants for the questionnaires and MFL teacher and principal interviews were not chosen. They all volunteered.
<i>Attrition</i>	The loss of participants from one or more groups.	This issue only occurred with some MFL teachers who completed the questionnaire and did not do a follow-up interview. Nonetheless, the findings of the initial questionnaire were still valid to the research.

Table 4.2: Threats to internal validity
Source: Adapted from Fink (2009: 72)

External validity issues also need to be considered in research. External validity is the “extent to which the results of a study can be generalized to and across populations of persons, settings, times, outcomes, and treatment variations” (Johnson & Burke, 2012: 247). There are threats to the external validity of research. Table 4.3 below identifies the key threats, defines each of them, and explains what the researcher did in order to mitigate these threats.

Threat to external validity	Explanation	How the researcher minimised the threat
<i>Interaction effects of selection biases and the experimental treatment</i>	This occurs when an “intervention or program and the participants are a unique mixture, one that may not be found elsewhere. This threat is most apparent when groups are not randomly constituted” (Fink, 2009: 73).	There were no unique mixtures. All schools were post-primary schools following the same national policies, curricula and procedures. All groups were randomly constituted. The researcher had no say in the groupings of students or which teachers or management members would participate.

<i>Reactive effects of testing</i>	A pre-measurement may impact on an “after” measurement. While in research “a “before” measurement is desired... it is recognized that making such a measurement may alert the subjects that they are participating in a study” (Smith & Albaum, 2005: 299). By doing a “before” measurement, they may “surmise that an “after” measurement will be taken [and] may become sensitized to the variables involved and behave differently as a result” (Smith & Albaum, 2005: 299). As such, the findings from such a study may not generalise.	Students only did one questionnaire. MFL teachers did a questionnaire and some of those that completed the questionnaire also did an interview. However, there was no “after” measurement. The main focus of the interviews revolved around the three strategies. All those who partook in an interview were interviewed once.
<i>Reactive effects of experimental arrangements or Hawthorne effect</i>	This occurs when respondents are aware they are participating in an experiment; knowing that they are being observed, they modify their behaviour.	All student and teacher participants knew they would be anonymous. There was no incentive to modify their behaviour. They were informed that this was a genuine attempt to address their issues and concerns. As such, providing genuine answers was the incentive. As for the interviews with the management of the schools and other stakeholders, they were neither students nor teachers, so they had no incentive to modify their behaviour. Moreover, the study was based on reported practices and views; no classroom observations were conducted where modified behaviour would have been a significant issue.
<i>Multiple programme interference</i>	When participants interact in complementary activities and programmes, it cannot be determined that one programme alone led to X result.	Participants did not interact in complementary activities that would affect the findings of the research.

Table 4.3: Threats to external validity

Source: Adapted from Fink (2009: 73)

Given the mixed-methods orientation of this research, triangulation was selected as the means of integrating both the quantitative and qualitative data. It was also chosen as a method to validate the data. Triangulation examines a situation from different perspectives, employing different methods (Laws, Harper & Marcus, 2003: 280). In essence, triangulation is a “research methods strategy that uses multiple data sources, researchers, theories, or research methods to ensure that the data, analysis, and conclusions of a research study are as comprehensive and accurate as possible” (Moon, 2019: 103).

Moon advises that triangulation increases the validity of the research as it helps to “ensure that the information we derive from research data accurately reflects the truth about phenomena under investigation” (2019: 103). Nonetheless, Robson (2002: 483) advises that triangulation is not a panacea. It can prove problematic when data sources conflict or prove inconsistent. Coleman and Briggs (2002: 70) affirm that, while triangulation lends to validity, its contribution can be overrated. As such, Bechhofer and Paterson (2000: 58) suggest employing several different methods in the triangulation process.

In 1978, Denzin identified four key types of triangulation: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation and methodological triangulation. Two forms of triangulation were conducted in this research project: data triangulation and methodological triangulation. Data triangulation is the “use of multiple data sources in a single study” (Rugg, 2010: 13). Data triangulation involves time, space and people. This means that data is collected at different times, in different contexts, and with different people. Data was collected through the sixth year MFL student and teacher questionnaires. Data was also collected through various interviews with key stakeholders. The dataset triangulation was subdivided into locational (4 case-study sites) and perspectival (students, teaching staff, school principals and other key stakeholders).

By contrast, methodological triangulation or mixed-methods research is the “use of multiple methods to conduct a study” (Rugg, 2010: 13). Employing methodological triangulation has a number of advantages. It is beneficial in terms of resolving the limitations that exist with single-method studies (Kendall, 2005). It helps overcome issues with using one research method, as the weaknesses of one method can be countered by the strengths of another (Kirby, 2000: 9). It is also considered “beneficial in providing confirmation of findings, more comprehensive data, increased validity and enhanced understanding of the studied phenomenon” (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012: 2).

Methodological triangulation can be divided into two types:

- 1) Within-method involves the use of “multiple methods within the qualitative or quantitative paradigm towards increasing internal credibility of the research findings” (Hussein, 2009: 4). The aim of the within-method triangulation is the “crosschecking for the internal consistency” (Hussein, 2009: 4).
- 2) Between-method involves “combining and utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods in studying a single phenomenon” (Hussein, 2009: 4). The aim of the between-method triangulation has the “aim of achieving convergent validity and testing the degree of external validity” (Hussein, 2009: 4). In the case of this research, a between-methods approach, involving quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews), was undertaken.

This research project involved both quantitative and qualitative research methods. By employing both research methods, this aided to counterbalance any weaknesses associated with solely using one research instrument, and therefore increased the reliability and validity of the research. Further triangulation took place by way of conducting qualitative research with some members of the senior management team in the European Schools system. The European Schools system acted as a contrast to the Irish education system. All of the in-school research in Ireland took place over the academic year 2018-2019. Interviews in the European Schools system took place in November 2019.

4.2.2 Selection criteria for case-study sites

As expounded throughout this thesis, the education system is the most pragmatic institutional setting to develop greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students. Numerous reasons have been given for this: as students are obliged to attend school, they are in an environment that facilitates language learning and affords them the time to develop language competences. In addition, schools can play a considerable role in fostering positive attitudes and behaviours towards learning (Ferguson, 2006: 33), including language learning. Moreover, there is substantial evidence to suggest that there is a critical period to learn a new language (Johnson & Newport, 1989; Birdsong & Molis, 2001; Muñoz, 2006; Vanhove, 2013; Hartshorne *et al.*, 2018). As this timeframe correlates with the time people attend school, the school-going years are an opportune period to develop plurilingualism.

The researcher took the decision to carry out research with the following three cohorts: sixth year MFL students, their MFL teachers as well as their school principals/deputy principals in four post-primary schools based on the following criteria:

- one single-sex boys' second-level school (English-medium),
- one single-sex girls' second-level school (English-medium),
- one co-educational second-level school (English-medium),
- one co-educational second-level school / Gaelcholáiste (Irish-medium).

This decision was made on the basis that they represent the four most common types of post-primary schools in Ireland. Indeed, in the Republic of Ireland, the breakdown of second-level schools is as follows: in 2020, there were 723 post-primary schools funded by and under the jurisdiction of the Department of Education and Skills. Of these, 101 (14%) were single-sex boys schools, 129 (18%) were single-sex girls schools and 493 (68%) were co-educational schools (CSO, 2020). Of the 723 post-primary schools, 69 (9.5%) were Irish-medium with the remainder being English-medium (Gaeloideachas, 2020). The researcher chose to conduct the research in a cross-section of these post-primary schools in order to achieve greater reliability and validity, as well as to strengthen the generalisability of the findings.

The table below provides a breakdown of the research participants according to school type and the research instruments utilised for data collection:

Type of School	MFLs studied by the students	Sixth Year MFL Students (Questionnaire)	MFL Teachers (Questionnaire)	MFL Teachers (Interview)	School Principal/Deputy Principal (Interview)
Single-sex Boys' School	French	30	1	2	1
Single-sex Girls' School	French and Spanish	14	3	0	0
Co-educational School (English medium)	French and Spanish	22	2	1	0
Co-educational School (Irish medium)	French and German	21	1	1	1
Total		87	7	4	2

Table 4.4: Breakdown of school types, participants, and research instruments

As outlined in the Introduction Chapter, the only languages this thesis considers under the heading “modern foreign languages” (MFLs) in the Irish education system are French, German, Italian and Spanish, as they are the only MFL curricular subjects taught throughout all years of the second-level education system in Ireland. While the researcher would have preferred to have had all four MFLs represented in the research, the reality is that the French language dominated and Italian was not present. To a large extent, this reflects national trends. In 2016, 46.2% of Leaving Certificate students took French, while only 13.7% did German, 8.4% took Spanish and 0.9% did Italian (see Appendix M).

4.3 Grounded Theory

The main methodological philosophy employed in this thesis is that of Grounded Theory. The method was formulated in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss in response to the need to have a verification paradigm in qualitative research. The aim of Grounded Theory is “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 2). Grounded Theory is specific to the context in which it is developed. The theory is ‘grounded’ in the data from the research and, as such, has greater rigour and applicability. Glaser states that Grounded Theory is used to “get through and beyond conjecture and preconception to exactly the underlying processes of what is going on so that professionals and laymen alike could intervene with confidence to help resolve the participants’ main concern” (1998: 5). There is no one version of Grounded Theory. In fact, Dey affirms that there are “probably as many versions of grounded theory as there are grounded theorists” (1999: 2). Grounded theory identifies in a progressive manner and integrates categories of meaning from data. By identifying and integrating categories as a method, it produces a theory. Willig (2013: 70) states that:

Grounded theory as method provides us with guidelines on how to identify categories, how to make links between categories and how to establish relationships between them. Grounded theory as theory is the end-product of this process; it provides us with an explanatory framework with which to understand the phenomenon under investigation.

As a methodology, Grounded Theory beholds a number of advantages and disadvantages. In terms of its benefits, these include “its intuitive appeal, ability to foster creativity, its conceptualization potential, and its systemic approach to data analysis, and the fact that researchers using it can gather rich data” (El Hussein *et al.*, 2014: 2). As for its “disadvantages,” El Hussein *et al.* (2014: 5) advise that the term “limitations” is more justified, given that the theory’s limitations can be addressed with time and experience. The theory’s limitations include that it can be an exhaustive process (Meyers, 2009). Moreover, it has a high potential for methodological error by focusing more on purposeful instead of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 1989).

There are multiple approaches to Grounded Theory (El Hussein *et al.*, 2014: 7). Indeed, the proposing theorists (Glaser & Strauss) developed fundamental differences of opinion in terms of their understanding and application of the theory. Glaser argues that theory is a “momentary product that is still developing, and is subject to further testing and verification by gathering new data” (El Hussein *et al.*, 2014: 7), while Strauss believes that “theory can be used in practice without the need for further verification, as verification is done in the data during the process of generation” (El Hussein *et al.*, 2014: 7).

Grounded Theory is central to the methodology of this thesis. The research project aimed to generate data concerning the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs in second-level schools in Ireland from MFL sixth year students, their MFL teachers, as well as other stakeholders in the education system. As part of this research, the respondents’ feedback relating to the three strategies to greatly increase the number of plurilingual second-level students was also compiled, collated and analysed. From this data, the researcher endeavoured to formulate a theory to explain current issues in the education system and to set forth a potential blueprint to improve current practices.

Grounded Theory was used in the application of coding procedures during the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in the pre-piloting, piloting, as well as the full-study phases of the project. In order to develop a theory, Grounded Theory researchers employ several strategies. Willig (2013) advises that there is a series of major analytical constructs, or building blocks, of the Grounded Theory method, all of which were used in this research project using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

- *Categories*: This is the open-coding stage. Instances of data (events, processes and occurrences) are grouped together into categories that share commonalities. Categories can commence at a low level of abstraction where they serve as descriptive labels (or concepts). For example, ‘content’, ‘satisfied’ and ‘frustrated’ could be classified under the category heading of ‘emotions’. As the analysis progresses through Grounded Theory, it is possible to identify categories at a greater level of abstraction. Categories become analytical as opposed to descriptive. Both descriptive and analytic categories work on the basis of the identification of relations of similarity and difference (Dey, 1999: 63). Figure 4.1 below provides an illustration of this process.

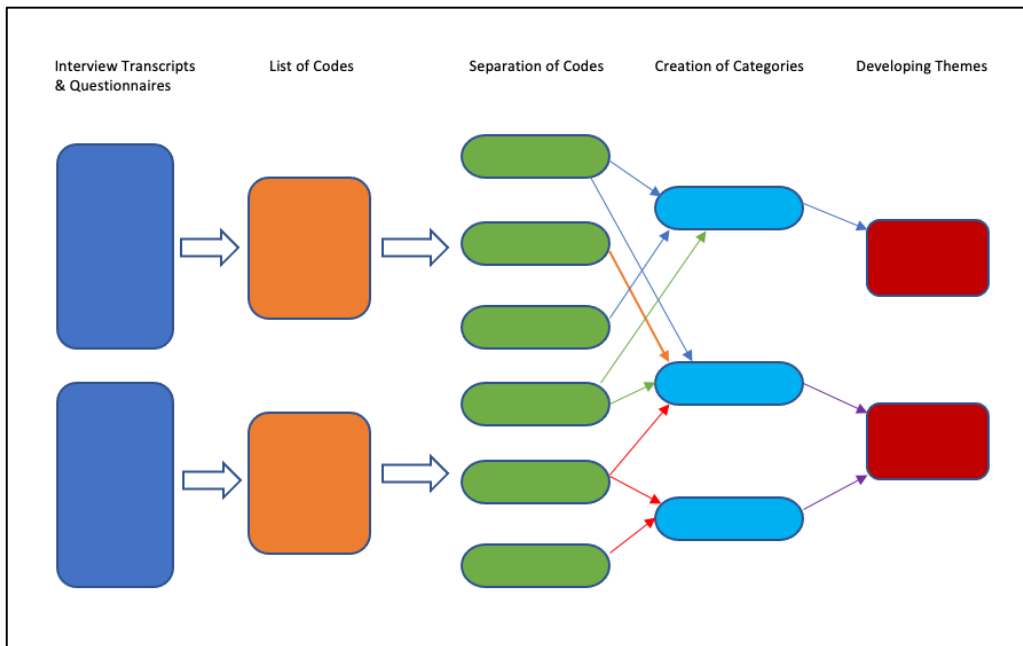


Figure 4.1: Basic example of the development of a Grounded Theory

The main themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis and Grounded Theory are outlined in table 4.5 below. These will be elaborated upon in Chapter Five.

Main themes from the qualitative analysis and Grounded Theory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Factors affecting poor plurilingualism • Reasons for optimism for future plurilingual students • Motivation in language learning • Pros and cons of harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR / cross-age teaching • Implementing (including challenges) of harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR / cross-age teaching • Pros and cons of replacing the current State MFL exams with CEFR international exams • Implementing (including challenges) of replacing the current State MFL exams with CEFR international exams • Pros and cons of adopting CLIL • Implementing (including challenges) of CLIL • Language policy and planning • Importance of the dominant language • Fostering plurilingualism from primary school • Curriculum, syllabus, and assessment • Culture of high expectations • Teacher training • Effectuating change • Adapting the European Schools model • European Schools system advice for Ireland

Table 4.5: Main themes from the qualitative analysis and Grounded Theory

- Coding:** Categories are identified through the process of coding. At the initial stages of analysis, coding is mainly descriptive. As a result, low-level categories generally emerge. As the process of coding continues, higher-level categories arise integrating the low-level categories into purposeful categories. It is important that the categories develop organically by being grounded in the data and should therefore not be derived from existing theories. Axial coding, linking the different categories with lines and arrows, takes place. This forms part of a coding paradigm, or a logic diagram, process which acts as a visual representation of the evolving theory. Figure 4.2 below provides an illustration of the development of a Grounded Theory to help explain poor plurilingual levels amongst second-level students.

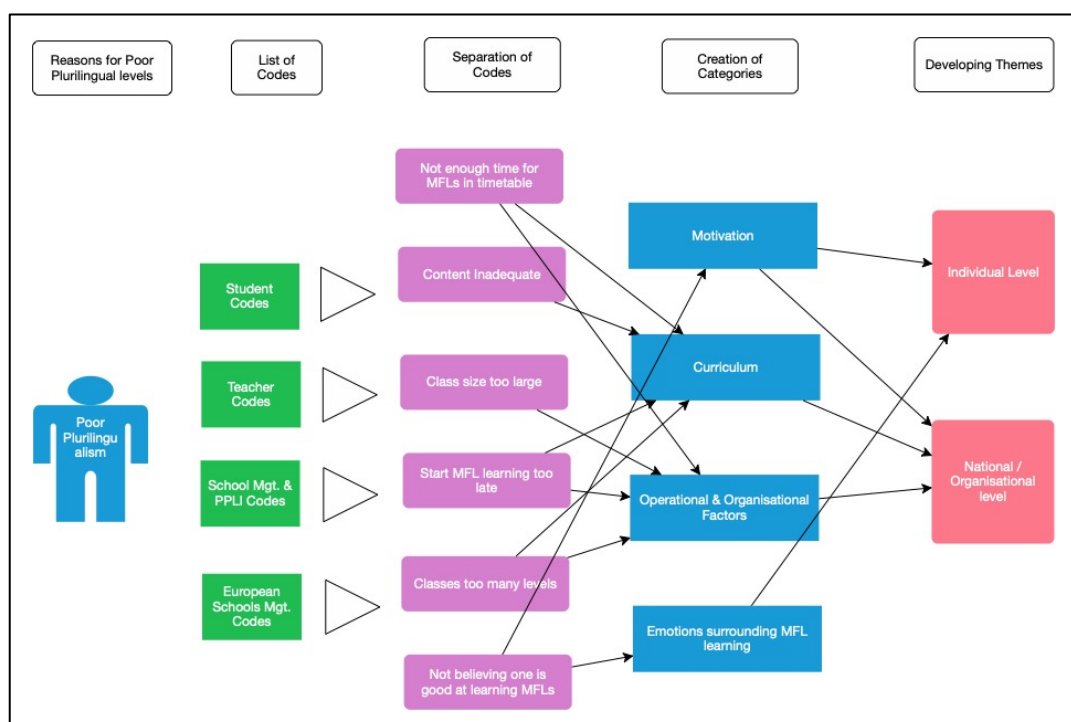


Figure 4.2: Developing a Grounded Theory to explain poor plurilingual levels using NVivo

- Constant Comparative Analysis:** Willig advises that constant comparative analysis “ensures that the coding process maintains its momentum by moving back and forth between the identification of similarities among and differences between emerging categories” (2013: 71). After identifying commonalities that bring together instances, the process of identifying differences within a category should take place. In essence, where possible, subcategories should be determined. For example, if a category contains emotions, this category could be subdivided into different types of emotions, e.g. positive and negative. By subcategorising, categories become smaller and more meaningful. As such, “the full complexity and diversity

of the data can be recognized, and any homogenizing impulse can be counteracted. The ultimate objective of constant comparative analysis is to link and integrate categories in such a way that all instances of variation are captured by the emerging theory” (Willig, 2013: 71).

- *Negative Case Analysis*: When a category, or a linkage between categories, is identified, the Grounded Theory researcher has to look for negative cases; these are instances that do not work. By doing this, it “allows the researcher to qualify and elaborate the emerging theory, adding depth and density to it, so that it is able to capture the full complexity of the data on which it is based” (Willig, 2013: 71).
- *Theoretical Sensitivity*: This is the process which progresses the researcher from a descriptive to an analytic level. The researcher asks questions about the data. At this stage, the researcher interacts with the data. As a result of the emerging answers, the data is modified. Willig states that “[e]ach emerging category, idea, concept or linkage informs a new look at the data to elaborate or modify the original construct” (2013: 71).
- *Theoretical Sampling*: During this phase, additional data is collected as a result of categories that have already surfaced from previous stages of data analysis. Willig states that “[t]heoretical sampling means checking emerging theory against reality by sampling incidents that may challenge or elaborate its developing claims” (2013: 71). Theoretical sampling concerns the refinement of categories.
- *Theoretical Saturation*: Both data collection and data analysis preferably continue until the researcher achieves theoretical saturation. In essence, “the researcher continues to sample and code data until no new categories can be identified, and until new instances of variation for existing categories have ceased to emerge” (Willig, 2013: 71). Theoretical saturation should only be considered a goal as it is not always possible to achieve as modifications and changes in perspective can occur. Glaser and Strauss (1967: 40) advise that Grounded Theory is always provisional:

When generation of theory is the aim, however, one is constantly alert to emergent perspectives, what will change and help develop the theory. These perspectives can easily occur on the final day of study or when the manuscript is reviewed in page proof: so the published word is not the final one, but only a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory.

Willig advises that memo-writing is a core component of the Grounded Theory method. Importantly, “[t]hroughout the process of data collection and analysis, the researcher maintains a written record of theory development. This means writing definitions of categories and justifying labels chosen for them, tracing their emergent relationships with one another, and keeping a record of the progressive integration of higher- and lower-level categories” (2013: 72). Memos have several advantages; they highlight changes of direction in terms of the analytic process, as well as emerging perspectives; they

furnish reflections on the adequacy of the research question; and they inform about the research process and its significant findings.

Willig advises of the importance of having a realistic expectation of Grounded Theory. He states that Grounded Theory:

does not provide the researcher with a series of steps, which, if followed correctly, will take him or her from the formulation of the research question through data collection to analysis and, finally, to the production of a research report. Instead, grounded theory encourages the researcher to continuously review earlier stages of the research and, if necessary, to change direction (2013: 72).

A supplementary methodological focus was applied by way of *Theory Elaboration*. Fisher and Aguinis (2017: 4) define this theory as:

the process of conceptualizing and executing empirical research using preexisting conceptual ideas or a preliminary model as a basis for developing new theoretical insights by contrasting, specifying, or structuring theoretical constructs and relations to account for and explain empirical observations (2017: 4).

Theory elaboration involves using “inductive strategies for more fully developing existing theories that explain particular research findings by merging different theoretical perspectives in a more general way” (Vaughan, 2007: 4). As an example, data emerging from the research project concerning reasons for poor MFL competences amongst second-level students developed existing hypotheses found in the literature, official reports, as well as findings from international studies.

4.4 Research participants

4.4.1 Profile

In order to obtain a balanced and extensive insight into the experiences and contributions of those directly involved in the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs in second-level schools in Ireland, the decision was taken to divide the participants into three meta-cohorts: students, teachers, and school principals/deputy principals. The student meta-cohort was further subcategorized into four separate groupings to reflect the different types of schools – all-boys (English-medium), all-girls (English-medium), co-educational (English-medium) and co-educational (Irish-medium). The teacher meta-cohort was also subcategorized into the same four categories of schools. All four principals and deputy principals were put into one cohort. Separate cohorts were created for the MFL inspectors, the Parents’ Representative of the National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCPP), the Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), as well as the Secretary General and other senior management members of the European Schools system. These categorizations are outlined in the table below.

Cohort 1	Students – All-boys (<i>English-medium</i>)
Cohort 2	Students – All-girls (<i>English-medium</i>)
Cohort 3	Students – Co-educational (<i>English-medium</i>)
Cohort 4	Students – Co-educational (<i>Irish-medium</i>)
Cohort 5	Teachers – All-boys (<i>English-medium</i>)
Cohort 6	Teachers – All-girls (<i>English-medium</i>)
Cohort 7	Teachers – Co-educational (<i>English-medium</i>)
Cohort 8	Teachers – Co-educational (<i>Irish-medium</i>)
Cohort 9	School Principals/Deputy Principals
Cohort 10	MFL School Inspectors
Cohort 11	Parents' Representative National Parents Council Post Primary
Cohort 12	Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland
Cohort 13	Secretary General of the European Schools, Deputy Secretary General of the European Schools, Head of the Pedagogical Development Unit of the European Schools, Directors of the European Schools

Table 4.6: Cohorts of participants in the research project

While thirteen cohorts were created, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills informed the researcher that their internal policies preclude them from participating in student research. In addition, despite multiple efforts made by the researcher to invite a representative of the National Parents Council Post Primary to partake in an interview, the offers were declined.

In terms of the cohorts, the sixth year students and their MFL teachers were best positioned to provide an insider or *emic* perspective. As for the school principals, they could contribute both *etic* (outsider) and *emic* perspectives as they are charged with responsibility for ensuring MFL provision takes place at school level, and at the same time, they work with the MFL students and their teachers concerning MFL teaching, learning and assessment in their schools. Finally, the second-level MFL inspectors, the Parents' Representative of the National Parents Council Post Primary, the Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland and the senior management of the European Schools would be able to provide insightful perspectives.

As outlined in the Introduction Chapter, the decision to limit the student research sample to only sixth year second-level students was taken because these students would likely have been the longest learners of MFLs at their schools. As such, they would be in the best position to reflect upon and provide feedback on their overall MFL experiences from First Year at their post-primary school.

They would also be best placed to provide a more thorough appraisal of the researcher's three proposed strategies on how to foster greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students.

4.4.2 Ethical considerations

Full ethical clearance for this research project was achieved on two separate occasions from Maynooth University's Research Ethics Committee. The first approval was obtained for the academic year 2017-2018 and the second approval was attained for the academic year 2018-2019. All potential participants received a detailed information sheet explaining the research project, as well as the terms of their participation. In this information sheet, all potential participants were advised that Maynooth University's *Research Ethics Guidelines* would be fully complied with in the undertaking of the research. In all cases, candidates were informed of the limits to confidentiality as outlined in section 3.3 of the university's ethics policy (Maynooth University, 2018: 9). No information about the research procedure or the purposes of the investigation was withheld. In the case of the schools, participants were informed that their names would not be used or recorded. However, their roles as a student, teacher or principal in the institutional setting may be (e.g. post-primary principal single-sex boys' school, etc.). Further identifying information (e.g. the school name) would not be noted anywhere in the research.

Notwithstanding the above, participants who could be considered public representatives or in a position to effect national changes (e.g. MFL inspectors, the parents' representative of the National Parents Council Post Primary, and the Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland) as well as the senior management team in the European Schools system, were given the option of being named or remaining anonymous in the research. If these participants chose not to be identified, the identifiers in the audio recordings (only possible method of identification) would be removed upon transcription and the data would then be treated as anonymised. If these participants advised that their names could be used, the participants were informed that they could withdraw their approval up to the date of publication of the thesis. Furthermore, the named participants were informed that their names may be used in future publications. However, in this case, permission would be sought in advance on a publication-by-publication basis. All participants signed a consent form detailing the terms of their agreement.

School principal, MFL teacher and parental consent were all required for the sixth year students to partake in the quantitative research (questionnaire). Where the school principal and MFL teachers agreed to the research, the MFL teachers asked their sixth year students if they would be interested

in participating in the research. For those students who were interested, they were given an information sheet about the research, a consent form, as well as a copy of the questionnaire, and their parents were required to sign the consent form. Only students who had a parental signature or were 18 years old or older were permitted to partake. In the case of students over 18 years old, they signed their own consent form. The consent forms were checked by the relevant MFL teacher (not the researcher). The researcher did not have access to the students' names. The teachers involved confirmed by email to the researcher that the students all had parental consent or consented themselves (if 18 years old or older). The number of students cited by the MFL teachers as having participated in the research correlated in each case with the exact number of questionnaires completed.

For MFL teachers who were interested in participating in the research (school principals had already given prior agreement), an information sheet outlining the research was given to them, along with a copy of the questionnaire and a consent form. If they agreed to partake, they signed the consent form. Upon completing the questionnaire, the teachers were asked to insert the initials of their names on the questionnaire so that their responses could be considered by the researcher in advance of a voluntary follow-up interview. If they did not wish to participate in an interview, no initials were required.

As for the desired qualitative research involving the MFL post-primary school inspectors, the representative of the National Parents Council Post Primary, the Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland, and the members of the senior management team of the European Schools system, the researcher wrote to them by email, providing them with the relevant information sheets, consent forms and interview schedules. They were asked to confirm participation in writing. All respondents who agreed to partake did so by emailing the researcher and signing a consent form.

Audio files and transcripts from interviews were encrypted and stored on the researcher's computer in his office with a back-up copy on a secure sever at Maynooth University. Questionnaires and notes taken as well as all anonymised data will be retained for a period of ten years to comply with Maynooth University's Research Integrity Policy. The identities of the participants were not recorded anywhere except for the public representatives who advised in writing that they were happy for their names to be published. The researcher informed all participants that the completed thesis would be made available to them for reading upon request.

In terms of potential conflicts of interest, the researcher believes that none of the areas in the research involved any conflict of interest as the research was about language teaching, learning and assessment. Moreover, the research was conducted in schools in which the researcher did not know the principals, MFL teachers and students. In addition, participation in the data collection process via questionnaires and interviews was entirely voluntary. In all cases, all potential research participants had the option to decline participation. For those public officials who chose not to remain anonymous, they were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time until the publication of this thesis.

4.5 Quantitative research – questionnaires

As part of the research, both MFL sixth year second-level students as well as their MFL teachers partook in separate questionnaires. Brown states that questionnaires are “any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing out their answers or selecting from among existing answers” (2001: 6). Denscombe (2010) suggests a number of advantages to using questionnaires. He advises that questionnaires are economical and as a research method are easier to arrange. In addition, questionnaires usually provide pre-coded answers which make it easier for the respondent to answer. Moreover, as “all respondents are posed with exactly the same questions – with no scope for variation to slip in via face-to-face contact with the researcher... [t]here is little scope for the data to be affected by ‘interpersonal factors’” (Denscombe, 2010: 169). Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010: 9) also suggest that questionnaires are efficient in terms of researcher time and effort. Furthermore, processing the data can be straightforward.

However, there are a number of disadvantages to using questionnaires. Indeed, Gillham advises that in terms of research methodology “no single method has been so much abused” (2008: 1). By way of example, questionnaires are “so easy to do quickly and badly that, in a way, they invite carelessness” (Gilham, 2008: 11). Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010: 10) suggest that employing questionnaires in one’s research has “some serious limitations”, claiming that it is “very easy to produce unreliable and invalid data by means of ill-constructed questionnaires” (2010: 10).

Moreover, in terms of pre-coded questions, they can be “frustrating for respondents, and, thus, deter them from answering” (Denscombe, 2010: 170). Indeed, pre-coded questions can “bias the findings towards the researcher’s, rather than the respondent’s, way of seeing things” (Denscombe, 2010: 170). In addition, researchers can receive incomplete or poorly completed answers. A further

drawback to utilising questionnaires is that they offer little opportunity for the researcher to check the truthfulness of the answers given by the respondents. Denscombe (2010: 170) states:

Because the researcher does not meet the respondent and because the answers are given 'at a distance', the researcher cannot rely on a number of clues that an interviewer might have about whether the answers are genuine or not.

Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) outline some additional disadvantages to questionnaires:

Simplicity and superficiality of answers: as questions need to be reasonably simple and straightforward so that all respondents can understand them, this limits the questionnaire in terms of its ability to probe more deeply into issues (Moser & Kalton, 1971), and as such, results can be quite superficial. Furthermore, as respondents are usually willing to spend a rather short amount of time answering the questions, this also inhibits the depth of investigation. In terms of this research project, the questions in both the MFL student and teacher questionnaires were quite short and direct. In order to obtain further analysis on some questions, students and teachers were requested to answer either an additional question in either a yes/no format or Likert-scale format. Some questions were also open-ended questions, which afforded the respondents the opportunity to develop more freely. By adopting the above approach, it reduced the superficiality of questions. As students completed the questionnaire during class time under the supervision of their teacher, and in one school with the researcher present, the student respondents had an ample amount of time in a suitable setting to answer the questions. As MFL teachers had also voluntarily agreed to participate in the research, there was an expectation that they would complete in full the questionnaire. While a small number of questions were left unanswered, the teachers completed all sections of the questionnaire.

Unreliable and unmotivated respondents: Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) advise that, as respondents generally do not enjoy or profit from participating in a questionnaire, they may not be thorough in their responses. Results can differ greatly from one respondent to the other. Moreover, some respondents may leave questions blank. Respondents can easily misread or misinterpret questions. If submitting the questionnaire to the researcher is left to the respondents to do, many respondents may not bother to do so if it involves much effort. In order to address these issues in this research project, a number of measures for students were put in place: the MFL student questionnaire (and MFL teacher questionnaire) had a colourful and attractive design (see Appendices A and B); at the start of the questionnaire, students were informed about the areas the questionnaire deals with; they were informed of the importance of their contribution and that their views and opinions would have a direct impact on the findings of the research; clear written explanations were given before each section in the questionnaire; if anything was unclear, they were invited to ask questions at any

time of their MFL teacher and/or researcher; and they were told that it would only take around 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire but they could take up to 20 minutes if necessary. At the end, the students gave the questionnaires to their MFL teacher. The MFL teachers then gave these questionnaires, along with the teacher questionnaires, to the researcher. By adopting the above measures, it aimed to address the issue of unreliable and unmotivated student respondents. As for the MFL teachers, the fact that they agreed to participate in the research, and in many cases gave the student questionnaires to their students to complete, demonstrated that they would not be unreliable or unmotivated respondents.

Respondent literacy problems: Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) point out that some respondents may have literacy issues which inhibit their full participation in the questionnaire. For such respondents, completing a questionnaire can be overwhelming. Literacy issues can therefore affect participation, completion and the results when completed. In terms of this research project, all students were in Sixth Year doing a modern foreign language, so the vast majority would not have literacy issues. If students did require assistance, their MFL Teacher (and in one school the researcher) was available to assist. Extra time was given to all students, so that those who may have a literacy or mild general learning condition would have some extra time. It was not possible to only award this extra time to specific students, as learning difficulties would come under GDPR rules and the researcher would not have access to those details. Teachers were not allocated a specific number of minutes to complete their questionnaire. If they experienced any difficulties, they were invited to contact the researcher.

Little or no opportunity to correct the respondents' mistakes: Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) advise that the researcher has little opportunity to double-check the validity of the respondents' answers. It is possible that respondents misread a question or forget to take something into account when answering a question. In addition, respondents may answer questions without indicating their lack of knowledge to fully answer. If the researcher is not present to go over each question and double-check on certain items, this can clearly affect the results. As noted earlier, in this research project, all questions were relatively short and direct. Every effort was made to ensure the questions were easy to understand and that students would have adequate time to complete all questions. There were pre-pilot and pilot stages which addressed any initial interpretation of questions issues. Moreover, MFL teachers (and in one school the researcher) were available to answer any questions that students may have while completing the questionnaire. MFL teachers were afforded the opportunity to develop points in an interview. MFL teachers had the contact details of the researcher. If they experienced any difficulties, they were invited to contact the researcher.

Social desirability (or prestige) bias: this occurs when the “results represent what the respondents report to feel or believe, rather than what they actually feel or believe” (Dörnyei and Taguchi, 2010: 12). The main reasons for this is the social desirability or prestige bias. Dörnyei and Taguchi advise that respondents are good at discerning “what the desirable/acceptable/expected answer is, and some of them will provide this response even if it is not true” (2010: 12). In order to address this concern, in terms of the questionnaires, MFL students and teachers were informed that there were no right or wrong answers, and they were encouraged to give genuine responses.

Nonetheless, Denscombe (2010: 170) states that “in many respects the potential disadvantages go hand in glove with the potential advantages. You can’t have one without the other”. In addition to the measures highlighted above, in order to endeavour to address some of the noted disadvantages, at the end of the questionnaire, there was a section for students and teachers to put forward any suggestions they may have on how to foster greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students. Moreover, the researcher invited participating teachers to a follow-up interview in order to discuss their responses in their questionnaires. This process triangulated the data and provided greater reliability and validity to the study. It also aided in obtaining a deeper insight into the findings.

4.5.1 Design and development

Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010: 16) state that devising a good questionnaire requires a series of steps and procedures. These include:

- Deciding on the general features of the questionnaire, such as the length, the format, and the main parts;
- Writing effective items/questions and drawing up an item pool;
- Selecting and sequencing the items;
- Writing appropriate instructions and examples;
- Piloting the questionnaire and conducting item analysis.

Firstly, Dörnyei and Taguchi advise that a series of important decisions ought to be taken in relation to the general features of the questionnaire. These include the maximum length of time the questionnaire will take, format characteristics, and finally anonymity if the questionnaire will involve sensitive or confidential topics. In relation to length, it is inadvisable to cover too much ground. The more focused a questionnaire is in terms of questions, the better as “long questionnaires can become counterproductive” (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010: 18). In terms of optimal length, in the field of L2, Dörnyei and Taguchi advise that the optimal questionnaire length is 4 to 6 pages. They state that “[m]ost researchers agree that anything that is more than 4-6 pages long and requires over half an hour to complete may be considered too much of an imposition” (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010: 8). When estimating time for completion, it is important to calculate time based on the slowest readers. As

such, if it takes the average reader 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire, some extra time should be allotted to facilitate slower readers. This ensures everyone has the opportunity to complete the questionnaire.

In the original questionnaire with students and teachers, there were 112 questions in each questionnaire. This number of questions was condensed to 58 for students and 57 for teachers following the piloting phase. Reducing the number of questions focused the researcher's scope. The questionnaire completion time for students was a maximum of 20 minutes. From the pre-piloting and piloting phases, it was clear that most students would complete the questionnaires in under 15 minutes. However, the researcher decided to allocate 20 minutes as some students may have a learning difficulty that could affect how quickly they could complete the questionnaire. In addition, there were 2 open questions and 3 semi-open questions in the student questionnaire; as such, the researcher did not want the students feeling rushed or not having enough time to complete it. MFL teachers were not given a specific number of minutes to complete their questionnaire.

Sanchez (1992: 216 – 217) recommends that the design of the hard copy of the questionnaire layout is very important for respondents as it serves as the main interface between the researcher and the respondents. Dörnyei and Taguchi state that “producing an attractive and professional design is half the battle in eliciting reliable and valid data” (2010: 13). To achieve such a look, the questionnaire must not only be short but must look short. In addition, the pages should not look crowded.

Bradburn, Sudman and Wansink (2004: 307) state that:

Perhaps the most common mistake many researchers make when constructing a questionnaire is to crowd questions together in the hopes of making the questionnaire look short. Although length is important, the respondent's perception of the difficulty of the task is even more important on self-administered questionnaires. A less cluttered questionnaire with substantial white space looks easier to fill out and generally results in higher cooperation and fewer errors by either respondents or interviewers.

Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) suggest that the layout of the questionnaire should be orderly. They also suggest good quality paper. With regards to the aforementioned areas, the researcher got professionally designed two questionnaires (one for the students and one for the teachers). Each questionnaire (see Appendices A and B) was nicely coloured, attractive looking, had a clear layout, and had a watermark map of Europe representing the European MFLs on the curriculum.

There were several different types of questions included in the questionnaires. The table below details the different question types in both the student and teacher questionnaires.

Target Group	Closed Q's	Closed Q's: multiple Q parts	Open Q's	Likert Q's (semi-open)	Total Q's
Students	52	1	2	3	58
Teachers	47	2	1	7	57

Table 4.7: Distribution of question types in each target audience questionnaire

The rating scales is the most popular item in quantitative research which “require the respondent to make an evaluative judgement of the target by marking one of a series of categories organized into a scale” (Dörnyei and Taguchi, 2010: 36). The *Likert* scale (1932), a multi-item scaling technique, is the most commonly employed rating scale in research as it is “simple, versatile and reliable” (Dörnyei and Taguchi, 2010: 36). In this psychometric scale, the respondent is asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with a series of statements which generally range from ‘I strongly disagree’ to ‘I strongly agree’. The *Likert* scale, as illustrated below, was the most common response option employed in both the student and teacher questionnaires.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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Table 4.8: Main Likert scale employed in the quantitative research

In the 5-point Likert scale used in this research project, it consisted of two extreme poles (‘strongly disagree’ and ‘strongly agree’) with a neutral option in the middle. This scale therefore adequately facilitated a range of agreement/satisfaction. A significant advantage of the Likert scale, compared with the absolute Yes or No response format, is that it can “assess the strength of the responses provided by the respondent” (Madu, 2003: 7). Moreover, “[s]tatistical studies have shown that responses obtained using Likert scale have higher reliability than those obtained using the categorical Yes or No response” (Madu, 2003: 7). The rationale for only using a 5-point Likert scale as opposed to a 7-point or 9-point scale is that there is a “definite levelling off in the increase in reliability after 5 scale points” (Lissitz & Green, 1975: 13). Lonzano, García-Cueto and Muñiz advise that “when the number of alternatives exceeds five or six, reliability hardly increases further” (2008: 73). Given this, and the fact that a 5-point Likert scale would allow two options for positive, two options for negative, and one neutral, the decision was taken to employ this scale.

Multi-choice items also featured in both the student and teacher questionnaires. One of the advantages of multi-choice items, Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010: 43) argue, is that they are “relatively straightforward” for the reader. Depending on the question, the respondent is asked to mark one or

more options. If an answer does not apply, the respondent may choose no answer. However, it is good practice to have the respondent tick a 'does not apply' box. If an alternative answer is possible, the respondent should be allowed to mark 'other' with the option to state the other answer.

The questionnaires also included closed-ended questions, with ready-made response options to choose from, usually by ticking a box or placing an 'X' to indicate one's chosen answer. In addition, the student and teacher questionnaires contained numeric items. Such items require the respondent to insert a numeric value such as the number of years the respondent has been learning or teaching their MFL. Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010: 43) advise that these are a closed-ended question type, as the range of answers is, in effect, limited; in practice, it would just take up too much space in the questionnaire to place all the various number options. Dörnyei and Taguchi suggest that one of the major benefits of this type of question type is that their "coding and tabulation is straightforward and leaves no room for rater subjectivity" (2010: 35). This form of answer is also very easy to collate for the researcher.

In a number of parts of both the student and teacher questionnaires, there were open-ended questions. An open-ended question is one where there are no response options but rather there is a blank space for the respondent to answer. Dörnyei and Taguchi point out that questionnaires are not "particularly suited for truly qualitative, exploratory research" (2010: 47). However, they argue that questionnaires can have open-ended questions requiring a relatively short reply. They advise:

Although we cannot expect any soul-searching self-disclosure in the responses, by permitting greater freedom of expression, open-format items can provide a far greater "richness" than fully quantitative data. The open responses can offer graphic examples, illustrative quotes, and can also lead us to identify issues not previously anticipated. Furthermore, sometimes we need open-ended items for the simple reason that we do not know the range of possible answers and therefore cannot provide pre-prepared response categories (2010: 47).

There are however some disadvantages to utilising open-ended questions in a questionnaire. Depending on the number, they can consume a considerable amount of the respondents' time; this can affect questionnaire completion rates. Furthermore, they can "require far more care and time to analyse adequately, and may require researchers with different skills to work together in order to achieve rigour in both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the questionnaire" (Greener, 2011: 43).

4.5.1.1 Student questionnaire design

The student research population involved 87 sixth year second-level students across four post-primary schools in Ireland. The student questionnaire (see Appendix A) was divided into two parts. The first part contained 39 general questions in relation to the students' own experiences of the

teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs in the second-level education system in Ireland. The second part of the questionnaire (19 questions) requested student feedback on the three proposed strategies to greatly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students in Ireland. The final question was an open-ended question inviting participants to provide any additional suggestions on developing plurilingual second-level students.

In the questionnaires, before each of the sections relating to the three proposed strategies, an explanation and an example were given. Based on this information, students were then prompted to complete a series of questions. Questions took the format of a number of statements where each student was requested to provide his/her answer. Most questions had five potential answers – ‘I strongly disagree’, ‘I disagree’, ‘I neither agree nor disagree’, ‘I agree’ or ‘I fully agree’ (balanced Likert-type scales).

For strategy one, students were required to firstly advise to what extent they were familiar with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). They then proceeded to answer questions on the proposed division of students according to their CEFR levels. The questions related to what extent such a system is worth trialling, if it would make it easier for the student to learn their MFL, if it would make learning the MFL more enjoyable for the student, if it would motivate the student more to learn the MFL, if it would improve the student’s MFL fluency, if it would encourage the student to see MFL learning as a lifelong skill, and finally to what extent the student believes it could potentially increase the number of plurilingual students at post-primary level. Based on extensive reading by the researcher, the above questions were posed as they are key factors noted in literature that could affect the successful implementation of a new MFL strategy.

The second strategy section simply requested students to give one answer on the proposal to replace the current State MFL exams (Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate) with CEFR international exams. Students were given the following statement “I would be in favour of doing an international CEFR exam instead of the Junior Cycle / Leaving Cert. exams”. Using a Likert scale, the students indicated the extent to which they either agreed or disagreed with the statement.

The third strategy section invited students to answer a series of questions on the proposed introduction of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The same questions for the first strategy were also asked in this section. However, students were asked two additional questions. Firstly, if they were in favour of the introduction of CLIL, what year in second-level education do they think would be best to introduce it. Secondly, if the students were in favour of the introduction of

CLIL, they were requested to advise how much class time they believe should be spent teaching through the MFL at the start of the strategy's introduction in a school. To answer this question, students were invited to tick one of a series of boxes indicating different percentages of class time.

4.5.1.2 Teacher questionnaire design

The research with second-level MFL teachers initially involved a questionnaire (see Appendix B). It was then followed up with an interview with some of the participants who had completed the teacher questionnaire. Closely resembling the student questionnaire, the first part of the teacher questionnaire contained 35 general questions in relation to the MFL teachers' own experiences of the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs in the second-level education system in Ireland. The second part of the questionnaire (22 questions) requested teacher feedback on the three proposed strategies to greatly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students in Ireland. The final question was an open-ended question inviting participants to provide any additional suggestions they may have on how the second-level education system can develop plurilingual second-level students.

In a similar layout to the student questionnaire, in the second part, at the start of each proposed strategy, an explanation and an example were given. Based on this information, teachers were then prompted to complete a series of questions. Questions took the format of a number of statements where the teacher was requested to provide his/her answer. Most questions had five potential answers – 'I strongly disagree', 'I disagree', 'I neither agree nor disagree', 'I agree' or 'I fully agree' (balanced Likert-type scales). The questions for the first, second and third strategies in the MFL teacher questionnaire were largely the same as those in the MFL sixth year student questionnaire. However, these questions related to the MFL teachers' perspectives on the proposed strategies.

4.5.2 Pre-piloting and piloting phases

In order to ensure the clarity and suitability of the explanations and questions in the sixth year student questionnaire, the researcher took the decision to test the questionnaire. Piloting one's questionnaire is an important component of the research process as it is advantageous in refining the survey. Dörnyei and Taguchi recommend piloting questionnaires at various stages in its development as "trial runs allow the researcher to collect feedback about how the instrument works and whether it performs the job it has been designed for. Based on this information, we can make alterations and fine-tune the final version of the questionnaire" (2010: 63). Indeed, Oppenheim (1992: 47) notes that:

Questionnaires do not emerge fully-fledged; they have to be created or adapted, fashioned and developed to maturity after many abortive test flights. In fact, every aspect of a survey has to be tried out beforehand to make sure that it works as intended.

Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010: 65) recommend that while ongoing piloting is useful, the questionnaire should go through two formal trials. Firstly, when the researcher has completed the item pool. This is the pre-piloting phase and can be done with family, friends, colleagues, etc. Secondly, when the almost final version of the questionnaire is ready (piloting phase).

In terms of pre-piloting the questionnaire, Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) recommend the following process:

1. Select a small group of “three to four people who are motivated to spend some time to help you and whose opinion you value” (2010: 66).
2. The small group of respondents should “go through the items and answer them, and then to provide feedback about their reactions and the answers they have given” (2010: 66). It is best for the researcher to be present to conduct this phase, as the researcher will be able to observe the respondents’ reactions and answer any questions.
3. The researcher should then ask the respondents for any general comments and then carry out a brainstorming session.

Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010: 66) recommend providing the pilot group with some basic guidelines to focus on. For instance, respondents should highlight any wording that causes an issue for them (they may provide alternative wording afterwards). In addition, respondents should mark any parts they believe to be unnecessary. They should also be encouraged to propose other questions that may be worth considering.

Dörnyei and Taguchi also advise conducting a final piloting. Having adequately addressed the issues from the initial piloting, a near final version of the questionnaire can be piloted. The aim at this stage is to ascertain if the respondents will respond to the questionnaire in the manner envisaged. Dörnyei and Taguchi suggest “administering the questionnaire to a group of respondents who are in every way similar to the target population the instrument was designed for” (2010: 67). In this scenario, the respondents are unaware that this is a questionnaire that is still a work in progress (Converse & Presser, 1986: 53). The results from the data collated can be used to fine-tune and complete the questionnaire. The results should be utilised to screen out any part that has not worked properly. In this regard, Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010: 56) advise checking three aspects of the response pattern:

- 1) Missing responses and possible indications that the respondents did not understand the instructions correctly;
- 2) Responses that are either endorsed by everyone or by almost no one should be avoided as they are “difficult if not impossible to process statistically” (2010: 69). In this case, it may be useful to add additional response categories or reword the question in order to increase item variation.
- 3) The internal consistency of the multi-item scales should be maintained. In essence, each item on a scale ought to correlate with the other items and with the overall scale score of the questionnaire. This reduces the unpredictable impact of item wording.

In keeping with the above, when the initial draft of the student questionnaire was complete, six students who had recently sat their Leaving Certificate MFL exams in 2017 completed the pre-pilot questionnaire. The students participating in the initial questionnaire did not have an issue completing it. However, there was some minor rephrasing of terms required. These issues were addressed for the piloting of the questionnaire to be used in second-level schools.

In October 2017, an all-Irish speaking post-primary school (Gaelcholáiste) agreed to take part in the research. The school principal assigned an MFL teacher to liaise with the researcher. The researcher met with her to go over the research in greater detail. The MFL teacher agreed to distribute the necessary documentation to the MFL sixth year students and their parents and to look after the required consent forms. 17 students and one MFL teacher partook in the research by way of an online questionnaire. An issue soon became apparent in the student questionnaires; the majority of students did not complete the full online questionnaire. This was of particular concern, as the final third of the questionnaire sought to gauge students’ responses to the three strategies that aimed to greatly increase the number of plurilingual second-level students.

The researcher noted two potential reasons as to why the six students who had taken part in the test questionnaire had no issues completing it while the group of real research participants did. Firstly, the test questionnaire was in paper format whereas the questionnaire the students did in the Irish-medium school was online. The researcher believed it was quicker for students to complete the questionnaire in paper format. Secondly, the students in the test research did the research in one sitting with the researcher present whereas the students partaking in the real research had to do it at home during their private time.

Upon reflection, the researcher decided to reduce the number of questions for all future student participants so that the students could do the questionnaire in one sitting during an MFL class or a study period in school. The researcher decided that the maximum duration of the quantitative research would be 20 minutes per student. Most participants would have the 58 questions completed in less than 15 minutes. However, an additional 5 minutes was allocated in case any students had a learning difficulty that may affect their completion of the questionnaire. Moreover, although the researcher could not insist on it, he decided he would request that the questionnaires be completed during class time in school. To make it easier for schools to facilitate the research in class, the researcher decided the questionnaire would no longer be conducted online, but instead would be completed in hard copy format. By having a captive audience of students completing the questionnaire at the same time, it facilitated a high completion rate and a timely turnaround time.

In a similar process to the student questionnaire, pre-pilot research took place on the teacher questionnaire with three MFL second-level teachers the researcher knew. There were no issues raised in the feedback and therefore no amendments were required. In addition, as noted above, one MFL teacher from the Gaelcholáiste participated in the pilot questionnaire and there were no issues noted either.

As the sixth year students in the Gaelcholáiste were approaching their Christmas 2017 exams and would have their mock examinations at the end of January 2018, to be then followed by the actual Leaving Certificate oral and written exams, the researcher consulted with his supervisor and made the decision to pause the research until the start of the academic year 2018 – 2019. Over the course of the summer of 2018, the researcher worked on reducing the number of questions from 112 to 58 for sixth year MFL students. It was possible to refine the questionnaire battery to examine more succinctly the most salient issues pertinent to the thesis. As the number of questions was reduced for the student questionnaire, a similar reduction in the number of questions (112 to 57) was effected in the teacher questionnaire. It was logical for both students and teachers to give their opinions via a questionnaire on the narrower focus of the research, as opposed to having teachers answer questions on material that would no longer form part of the project. Once the questionnaires were revised, the researcher then consulted with his supervisor and the final questionnaires for students and teachers were agreed. By mid-September 2018, the University's Research Ethics Committee approved the revised research questions. The on-site research was ready to take place in schools from October 2018 to May 2019.

Given the questionnaire completion issues some students faced in the Gaelcholáiste, the researcher decided to consider his original testing of the student questionnaire with six students and the teacher questionnaire with three MFL teacher colleagues as the pre-pilot phase. As such, the research with the sixth year students and one MFL teacher in the Gaelcholáiste became the school-based pilot phase. The full-study administration with the revised final questionnaires took place in a different Gaelcholáiste.

4.5.3 Pre-piloting focus groups

As part of the pre-piloting phase of the questionnaires, the researcher chose to engage in focus group activities with both students and teachers separately in order to gauge their feedback to the questions in the quantitative research (questionnaires). Focus group methodology is widely used and can trace its origins back to Emory Bogardus. In 1926, he employed group interviews as a means to advance a social distance scale (Wilkinson, 2004). Kroll, Barbour and Harris (2007: 690-8) advise that using focus groups in research has increased in popularity in recent times because they are regarded as a methodology that can provide swift results.

Powell and Single state that a focus group is “a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (1996: 499). However, a focus group should not be confused with a group interview, as the latter focuses on responses from the participants to the researcher’s questions. At its broadest sense, “any group discussion may be called a focus group as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction” (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999: 20). The primary focus is the “interaction within the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher” (Morgan, 1997: 12). As such, the key feature of a focus group is that participants speak with one another as opposed to only interacting with the researcher (Barbour, 2007).

Originally, the researcher aimed to conduct a number of focus groups and interviews with the students who participated in the questionnaires in the full-study phase of the research. However, given the introduction of the 2016 EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), schools were unclear if their students could participate in focus groups or interviews. It was agreed with school management that student completion of an extensive questionnaire would be sufficient.

In the case of this research project, upon completion of the initial questionnaires, one focus group took place with the pre-pilot student participants and a separate focus group was held with the pre-pilot teacher participants. At these focus groups, the researcher was afforded the opportunity to

discuss with the participants their impressions of the questionnaires, any amendments they would recommend, as well as a suggested quantity of time for questionnaire completion. Krueger (1994: 44) affirms that focus groups may be used in the preliminary research stages when “insights are needed in exploratory or preliminary studies. This could occur at the beginning of a large-scale research effort or when the study has a limited scope”.

As a methodology, focus groups have many strengths and weaknesses. While a key positive is that one can access an expansive range of people and groups in distinct environments (Liamputtong, 2011: 2), given that focus groups generally only involve small numbers of respondents, this can “significantly limit generalization to a larger population” (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007: 43). The table below delineates the various advantages and disadvantage of employing focus groups in research.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>Flexibility</i>	Flexibility in how they are used	This flexibility can lead to focus groups being conducted in a haphazard way
<i>Face validity</i>	Focus groups have high face validity: they measure what they are intended to measure.	-
<i>Cost</i>	Costs can be contained if using internal resources (in-house moderator and free-of-cost meeting rooms).	Can be expensive if external resources are used (moderators and renting rooms). Large-scale projects are also expensive.
<i>Planning and Preparation</i>	-	Large focus group projects require significant planning and preparation which are time-consuming and effortful.
<i>Type of Information Gathered</i>	As focus groups make it possible to understand the “why” behind a participant’s comments, they are better than surveys and brainstorming groups.	It is not possible to collect numerical information from a focus group.
<i>Moderator Reliance</i>	-	A successful focus group depends greatly on the skills of the moderator. The moderator can influence the discussion in many ways that can compromise the findings.
<i>Influence of the Group Processes</i>	When one participant contributes, it can lead to additional participants commenting.	Participants may not give their true opinions, but instead go along with what other participants or the moderator says.
<i>Direct Contact with Participants</i>	Direct contact can assist in vicariously experiencing what the participants have	-

	experienced. One can also observe participants' nonverbal behaviour.	
<i>Analysing the Findings</i>	Sophisticated analysis methods, such as those for questionnaires, are not required.	Analysing the information can be time-consuming and effortful.

Table 4.9: Advantages and disadvantages of focus groups

Source: Adapted from Jayanthi and Nelson (2002: 8)

4.5.4 Full-study administration

The administration of the quantitative research (questionnaires) took place in advance of the qualitative research (semi-structured interviews). The rationale for this sequence was due to the fact that the interview questions with MFL second-level teachers largely depended on their responses to their teacher questionnaires. In addition, having the answers to the student and teacher questionnaires permitted the researcher to discern common trends amongst both MFL students and teachers, which could better inform the researcher in his interviews with other stakeholders.

As outlined earlier, the research was conducted in each of the following types of schools:

- one single-sex boys' second-level school (English-medium),
- one single-sex girls' second-level school (English-medium),
- one co-educational second-level school (English-medium),
- one co-educational second-level school / Gaelcholáiste (Irish-medium).

The researcher visited approximately five of each of the types of schools, selected by way of random online searches, within a thirty-kilometre radius of Maynooth University. Schools within a ten-kilometre proximity of Maynooth were not considered as the researcher is a known second-level teacher in the area. The reason the researcher chose to approach up to five of each type of second-level school was that he noted early in the project that gaining access to schools to conduct the research was challenging, especially as the researcher was not known to the schools. In fact, when the researcher spoke to a number of the school principals, although they were, in many cases, in favour, they advised that staff may not be as amenable to the idea of the research. In the end, the researcher gained access to one of each of the four types of post-primary schools in Ireland through contacts he made. All schools that participated in the research were located in Dublin City (one school) and its suburbs (three schools). The contextual details of the schools are as per table 4.10:

	All Boys	All Girls	Co-ed English	Co-ed Irish
Denomination	Catholic	Catholic	Multi-denominational	Catholic
Type of Post	Voluntary	Voluntary	Private School	Voluntary
Primary	Secondary	Secondary		Secondary
Location	Suburb of Dublin	Suburb of Dublin	Suburb of Dublin	Dublin City
Fee Paying	No	No	Yes	No
Students (approx.)	350	750	450	300

Table 4.10: Contextual information about participating schools

The full-study administration took place between October 2018 and May 2019. For the schools that agreed to participate in the research, a total of 35 student questionnaires and 5 teacher questionnaires were given to each school. In line with the same procedures as the piloting phase, an information sheet and consent form were given to all participants including the students' parents. Participation was voluntary. Only those who consented to participate took part. Of the 35 student questionnaires distributed to each school, there was a relatively high return rate. However, the number of returns of teacher questionnaires was less than desired. The table below details the numbers of returned questionnaires from each school:

School Type	Student Questionnaire Returned	Teacher Questionnaires Returned
<i>Single-Sex Boys (English-medium)</i>	30	1
<i>Single-Sex Girls (English-medium)</i>	14	3
<i>Co-educational (English-medium)</i>	22	2
<i>Co-educational (Irish-medium)</i>	21	1
Total	87	7

Table 4.11: Numbers of returned student and teacher questionnaires in each school

The researcher offered to be present in each school while the students would be completing the questionnaire. Three schools advised that it would not be necessary, while one school (Gaelcholáiste) availed of the offer. In three schools, the student questionnaire research was completed in a class with the teacher/researcher present, while in one school (all-girls second-level school) they requested that the students complete the questionnaire outside of school time. Issues concerning the intelligibility of the questionnaire for students were negligible in the school in which the researcher was present. No such issues were reported in any of the other schools.

The teachers were requested to have the student and teacher questionnaire completed by mid-December 2018. The teacher and student questionnaires were collected in person by the researcher in each school. From mid-December 2018 to March 2019, the researcher compiled, collated, and analysed the data. The interviews with MFL teachers and school principals (deputy principals if the principals were not available) took place between March and May 2019.

Criterion sampling did not apply in the quantitative research (questionnaires) population. The aim of criterion sampling is to “review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2002: 238). Given the manageable numbers of MFL student and teacher questionnaires, it was not necessary to consider its undertaking. As such, all submitted student and teacher questionnaires were examined.

4.5.5 Coding and analysis

Upon receiving the questionnaires from both the MFL students and their teachers, the researcher assigned each questionnaire an alphanumeric code – a letter indicating the type of school and a number representing each individual participant. For this quantitative data analysis, SPSS was employed. SPSS (short for *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*) analyses social science data. Dörnyei advises that SPSS is the “software package most commonly used in applied linguistics and educational research” (2007: 198).

In terms of the process, the responses from each closed question were converted into codes and input into SPSS for an initial analysis. This preliminary analysis served to inform the researcher of key data in advance of the semi-structured interviews with teachers and other stakeholders. The open questions could not be coded in SPSS. As such, all open-ended questions were processed via coding in NVivo.

Three schools returned their questions by mid-December 2018. The data was coded in SPSS at the end of December 2018. The fourth school had their questionnaires collected by mid-March 2019 and the coding was complete some days later. Upon completion of the data input into SPSS, the researcher began a process known as ‘data cleaning’ (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010: 88). This operation is employed to correct impossible data due to human inaccuracy either by the researcher when inputting the data or by the respondent completing the questionnaire. Essentially, the action involves correcting as many errors and inaccuracies as possible in advance of undertaking the actual data analysis. The quantitative analysis in this research project only includes descriptive statistics.

Figure 4.3 below offers a sample of the coding from some of the student questionnaires using SPSS:

	School	ID_Student	LC_Student	Gender	L1	L1_Other	MFL_Studied	Start_Post_Primary	MFL_should_start_primary	Years_studying_MFL
1	Co-ed (English-medium)	1	Yes	Male	English		French HL	Yes	Yes	5
2	Co-ed (English-medium)	2	Yes	Female	English		French HL	No	.	3
3	Co-ed (English-medium)	3	Yes	Male	English		French HL	No	.	5
4	Co-ed (English-medium)	4	Yes	Female	English		French HL	Yes	Yes	5
5	Co-ed (English-medium)	5	Yes	Male	English		French HL	Yes	No	5
6	Co-ed (English-medium)	6	Yes	Male	English		French HL	Yes	Yes	5
7	Co-ed (English-medium)	7	Yes	Male	English		French HL	Yes	Yes	5
8	Co-ed (English-medium)	8	Yes	Female	English		French HL	No	.	5
9	Co-ed (English-medium)	9	Yes	Female	English		French HL	Yes	Yes	5
10	Co-ed (English-medium)	10	Yes	Male	English		French HL & Spanish HL	Yes	Yes	5
11	Co-ed (English-medium)	11	Yes	Female	English		Spanish HL	Yes	Yes	5
12	Co-ed (English-medium)	12	Yes	Female	English		French HL & Spanish HL	Yes	Yes	5
13	Co-ed (English-medium)	13	Yes	Male	Other	Korean	Spanish HL	No	.	.
14	Co-ed (English-medium)	14	Yes	Male	English		French HL & Spanish HL	Yes	Yes	8
15	Co-ed (English-medium)	15	Yes	Male	English		French HL & Spanish HL	No	.	5
16	Co-ed (English-medium)	16	Yes	Female	English		French HL & Spanish HL	Yes	Yes	5
17	Co-ed (English-medium)	17	Yes	Male	English		French HL & Spanish HL	Yes	Yes	5
18	Co-ed (English-medium)	18	Yes	Female	Other	Nepalese	French HL & Spanish HL	Yes	Yes	5
19	Co-ed (English-medium)	19	Yes	Female	English		Spanish HL	Yes	No	5
20	Co-ed (English-medium)	20	Yes	Other	English		French HL & Spanish HL	No	No	5
21	Co-ed (English-medium)	21	Yes	Female	English		French HL	Yes	Yes	5
22	Co-ed (English-medium)	22	Yes	Male	English		French HL	No	.	5
23	Co-ed (Irish-medium)	23	Yes	Male	Other	Spanish	German HL	No	.	5
24	Co-ed (Irish-medium)	24	Yes	Female	English		French OL	Yes	Yes	5
25	Co-ed (Irish-medium)	25	Yes	Female	English		German HL	Yes	Yes	5
26	Co-ed (Irish-medium)	26	Yes	Female	English		French HL	Yes	Yes	5
27	Co-ed (Irish-medium)	27	Yes	Male	English		French OL	Yes	Yes	5
28	Co-ed (Irish-medium)	28	Yes	Male	English		French HL	Yes	Yes	4
29	Co-ed (Irish-medium)	29	Yes	Male	English		French HL	Yes	Yes	5

Figure 4.3: Sample of coding of MFL student questionnaire on SPSS

The main two data analyses that were employed using SPSS were those of frequency and comparison. A frequency test is a “descriptive statistical method that shows the number of occurrences of each response chosen by the respondents” (CAL State LA, 2020: 7). Using frequency analyses, it was also possible to calculate the mean, median as well as the mode (measures of central tendency). Figure 4.4 provides a basic example of a frequency test output.

Statistics					
Gender of Student					
N	Valid	87			
	Missing	0			
Gender of Student					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	54	62.1	62.1	62.1
	Female	32	36.8	36.8	98.9
	Other	1	1.1	1.1	100.0
Total		87	100.0	100.0	

Figure 4.4: Example of a frequency output ('gender') using SPSS

Using the Crosstabs functionality, it is possible to examine the relationship between two variables. Figure 4.5 demonstrates the relationship between gender and the type of schools involved in the research.

Case Processing Summary							
		Valid		Cases Missing		Total	
		N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Gender of Student * School		87	100.0%	0	0.0%	87	100.0%

Gender of Student * School Crosstabulation						
Count		School				Total
		Co-ed (English-medium)	Co-ed (Irish-medium)	All-Boys (English-medium)	All-Girls (English-medium)	
Gender of Student	Male	11	13	30	0	54
	Female	10	8	0	14	32
	Other	1	0	0	0	1
Total		22	21	30	14	87

Figure 4.5: Crosstabulation of gender and school type using SPSS

As the data from all four schools were inputted into the same file (separate files for students and teachers), data manipulation was required for a more thorough analysis. This process allows the user to split the file (e.g. school groups) into multiple parts. Figure 4.6 below is an example of data manipulation where the researcher considers only one of the schools (co-educational Irish-medium) and wishes to determine how many students had “English”, “Irish” or “Other” as their mother tongue. Figure 4.7 provides the same output information, but this time across all four post-primary schools.

Case Processing Summary							
		Valid		Cases Missing		Total	
		N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Gender of Student * Student's Mother Tongue		21	100.0%	0	0.0%	21	100.0%

Gender of Student * Student's Mother Tongue Crosstabulation					
Count		Student's Mother Tongue			Total
		English	Irish	Other	
Gender of Student	Male	10	1	2	13
	Female	7	1	0	8
Total		17	2	2	21

Figure 4.6: Example of data manipulation to localise specific variables using SPSS ('gender' and 'students' mother tongue')

Gender of Student * Student's Mother Tongue Crosstabulation						
Count			Student's Mother Tongue			Total
School			English	Irish	Other	
Co-ed (English-medium)	Gender of Student	Male	10		1	11
		Female	9		1	10
		Other	1		0	1
	Total		20		2	22
Co-ed (Irish-medium)	Gender of Student	Male	10	1	2	13
		Female	7	1	0	8
	Total		17	2	2	21
All-Boys (English-medium)	Gender of Student	Male	26		4	30
	Total		26		4	30
All-Girls (English-medium)	Gender of Student	Female	12		2	14
	Total		12		2	14

Figure 4.7: Example of comparison of specific variables across all schools using SPSS ('gender' and 'students' mother tongue')

4.6 Qualitative research – one-to-one semi-structured interviews

In research, especially in the field of Applied Linguistics, the “interview is the most often used method in qualitative inquiries” (Dörnyei, 2007: 134). A spectrum of interview types exists, ranging from structured to unstructured. In contexts where the researcher has an extensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and desires to develop a more in-depth overview, a semi-structure format is advisable (Dörnyei, 2007: 136). Such a method affords the researcher the possibility to incorporate the responses from the quantitative research and have flexibility in terms of questioning throughout the various interviews.

In terms of this research project, the researcher held a series of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the Irish education system. The main aim of these interviews was to achieve a more in-depth understanding of how the Irish education system could realistically increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students. By way of comparison with the second-level education system in Ireland, further semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher in the European Schools system. Interviews in Ireland and abroad were conducted with the following participants:

- MFL Teachers (see Appendix C)
- School Principals/Deputy Principals (see Appendix D)
- Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (see Appendix E)
- Secretary General of the European Schools (see Appendix F)
- Deputy Secretary General of the European Schools (see Appendix G)
- Head of the Pedagogical Development Unit of the European Schools (see Appendix H)
- Directors of the European Schools (see Appendix I)

Each participant was interviewed once. There was a maximum interview time of 40 minutes per interviewee. The audio files from the interviews were later transcribed.

As part of the qualitative research, it was envisaged to have a three-pronged approach to this mixed-methods study – semi-structured interviews, focus groups and open-ended questions in the questionnaires. The researcher intended to host some focus group sessions with MFL students and teachers post questionnaire completion in order to gain a greater depth of understanding to the phenomenon under investigation. The focus groups would have been separate sessions for students and teachers. However, due to unavoidable logistical factors and issues surrounding the various interpretations in schools concerning GDPR, it was not possible. Nonetheless, as noted earlier, focus groups were an integral part of the research in the pre-piloting phase. Moreover, while there were no semi-structured interviews or focus groups (post questionnaire) with students, there were some open-ended questions as part of the student questionnaire which provided insightful qualitative data.

4.6.1 Design and development

The role of the interview is to endeavour to understand the world and experiences from the interviewee's point of view (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009: 1). A successful interview is one that explores the various topics to be discussed, and does so in a way in which the interviewer facilitates the interviewee providing great insight. Given the exploratory nature of this research project, interviews were a very effective way of gaining significant insights into the experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders in the Irish education system and the European Schools system. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were not only efficient in terms of collecting data, they were also an excellent way to probe issues that required further exploration.

Attentive planning is essential to optimise the success of an interview. Devising the questions for the semi-structured interviews requires significant time, not only to carefully consider the questions for the respondents to answer, but also time to design and develop the interview schedule. In addition, building a rapport with the interviewee is a key component of successful semi-structured interviews. If participants feel comfortable with the interviewer, they may become more forthcoming with their replies. In terms of this research project, as the researcher had been both a second-level teacher, as well as a principal/director, this aided him in being able to identify with and build a rapport with the participants.

There are a number of advantages to using interviews for research purposes. Gratton and Jones highlight that “[b]y using interviews, the researcher can introduce him or herself to the subject and establish trust and rapport, especially if any information is considered confidential, or sensitive” (2004: 142). Lodico *et al.* (2010: 126) advise that interviews can focus on small groups of significant interest, and they provide “flexibility to modify and individualize questions and probe responses”. As such, interviews are “particularly good at producing data which deal with topics in depth and in detail. Subjects can be probed, issues pursued, and lines of investigation followed over a relatively lengthy period” (Denscombe, 2010: 192). In this way, the researcher is “likely to gain valuable insights based on the depth of the information gathered and the wisdom of ‘key informants’” (Denscombe, 2010: 192). In addition, interviews only require simple equipment to undertake. Interviews are also a “good method for producing data based on informants’ priorities, opinions and ideas [and as such] [i]nformants have the opportunity to expand their ideas, explain their views and identify what they regard as the crucial factors” (Denscombe, 2010: 192). Interviews provide validity as “[d]irect contact at the point of the interview means that data can be checked for accuracy and relevance as they are collected” (Denscombe, 2010: 192). Denscombe also notes that interviews generally have a high response rate as they are usually organised in advance and at a time and place that is convenient to the interviewee. Finally, interviews can be therapeutic because “there is a more personal element to the method, and people tend to enjoy the rather rare chance to talk about their ideas at length to a person whose purpose is to listen and note the ideas without being critical” (Denscombe, 2010: 193).

Despite the above, there are a number of disadvantages to using interviews. Lodico *et al.* (2010, 126) advise that interviews generally involve small samples, administering them is time consuming, and summarizing and analysing the data can be a complex process that requires significant time. There can also be a lot of non-standard answers that need to be interpreted. Moreover, interviews are not always reliable as the “impact of the interviewer and of the context means that consistency and objectivity are hard to achieve” (Denscombe, 2010: 193). In addition, the use of a recording device may inhibit the informant from answering fully. Also, if there is tactless interviewing, it can be an invasion of privacy and/or upsetting to the informant. Equally, as Gratton and Jones point out, there is the possibility that the interviewee becomes dominant and leads the “interview in unwanted directions” (2004: 143).

Indeed, two additional drawbacks of conducting interviews are closely related – *interviewer bias* and the *halo effect*. *Interviewer bias* is where the personal interaction between the interviewer and interviewee may bias the data. For example, the type of questions by the interviewer may

demonstrate a partiality towards a preconceived response. Such conduct can distort the outcome of the interview (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009: 242 – 248). Similarly, the *halo effect* occurs where the interviewee either adapts their answers to present themselves in the most positive light, or they answer the questions how they believe the interviewer would like them answered (Patton, 2002: 567). To counterbalance such effects in this research project, the researcher carefully worded his questions and had them reviewed by colleagues to help ensure impartiality. During the interviews, the researcher ensured his questions were indeed questions and not statements. The researcher sought to mitigate the *halo effect* by emphasising with participants at the start of each interview that the research was exploratory, that the researcher desired to know all aspects – both positive and negative, and that there were no right or wrong answers.

While having an interview schedule is considered discretionary in exploratory interviews (McCracken, 1988: 24), it is nonetheless necessary to have one (Brenner, Brown & Canter, 1985). By employing an interview schedule, there is a clear structure to the interview, where key topic areas that will be discussed are known in advance (Dörnyei, 2007: 137). In this research project, while there were prepared interview schedules for all interview participants, in order to facilitate the natural flow of the interviews, the researcher allowed for considerable latitude in terms of new questions for unanticipated directions. As such, the question battery for the interviews was an amalgamation of prescribed questions in advance of the interview, as well as unanticipated questions that emerged organically during the natural flow of each interview. Such a semi-structured interview design allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the topics.

As detailed in table 4.12, in total, 6 stakeholders from the four participating schools agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview: 4 second-level MFL teachers, 1 principal and 1 deputy principal. As noted earlier in this chapter, the Department of Education and Skills advised that MFL inspectors were not permitted to participate in student research projects. The National Parents Council Post Primary chose not to partake in the research.

Type of School	School Principal/Deputy Principal Interviews	MFL Teacher Interviews
Single-sex Boys' School (English medium)	1	2
Single-sex Girls' School (English medium)	0	0
Co-educational School (English medium)	0	1
Co-educational School (Irish medium)	1	1
Total	2	4

Table 4.12: Breakdown of interviews in each school

Additional interviews were conducted with the Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland as well as with members of the senior management team of the European Schools system. The list of these additional interviews is as follows:

- Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (see Appendix E)
- Secretary General of the European Schools (see Appendix F)
- Deputy Secretary General of the European Schools (see Appendix G)
- Head of the Pedagogical Development Unit of the European Schools (see Appendix H)
- Director of European School II Brussels (see Appendix I)
- Director of European School III Brussels (see Appendix I)

In total, 12 interviews were conducted in Ireland and Brussels. Given the manageable sample population, *criterion sampling* (Patton, 2002: 238) for the interviews did not apply.

4.6.2 Pre-piloting and piloting phases

The interview schedules for stakeholders in the Irish education system shared several commonalities, ranging from understanding the educational context from the interviewee's perspective to discussing the three strategies with the ambition of developing greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students. However, specific questions applied to each participant, depending on their position (MFL teacher, principal/deputy principal or Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland). For those MFL teachers who completed the questionnaire and agreed to do a follow-up interview, some specific questions also related to their questionnaire responses.

Similarly, the separate interview schedules for members of the senior management team in the European Schools system also shared commonalities, mostly relating to how the European Schools system develops plurilingual second-level students. However, several specific questions applied to each participant group (directors of schools, head of Pedagogical Development Unit, Deputy Secretary General and Secretary General). The interview schedules for all participants may be seen in the appendices.

Developing the interview schedules from the initial stages to those in the appendices was a long process. The initial interview schedule for MFL teachers was reviewed by three teacher colleagues. One MFL teacher participated in a pre-pilot interview with the researcher. As for the draft interview schedules for the other participants (principals/deputy principals, MFL inspectors, representative of National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCPP), Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), as well as members of the senior management team of the European Schools system), two school managers the researcher knew as well as the three MFL teacher colleagues reviewed them. One of the school managers participated in a pre-pilot interview. In total, 5 professionals in the education system were involved in the pre-pilot phase of the interview schedules. Several minor adjustments to the wording of the interview schedules were made as a result. The researcher was informed that the number of questions was too many in most of the interview schedules. As such, several questions were refined, and where possible, some were removed. In addition, the researcher decided that the full-study interviews would need to be properly time managed, so that they do not become overly burdensome on the participants. When the second complete draft of the interview schedules was complete, the same colleagues reviewed them again. No further issues were identified. The interview schedules were ready for full-study administration.

4.6.3 Conducting the interviews

Interviews with three of the four MFL teachers were conducted in each school in a designated office facilitated by their school management. One MFL teacher interview took place in the teacher's home. The interviews with school principals (deputy principals in the case where the school principals were not available), the Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), the Secretary General as well as other senior managers of the European Schools system, were held in their offices. All interviews took place in Ireland with the exception of the interviews with members of the senior management team of the European Schools system, which took place in the Offices of the Secretary General in Brussels and the respective European Schools in Brussels. The rooms that were used for the interviews met the required standards for the holding of focus groups, which equally apply to one-to-one interviews in terms of size, composition and location (Litosseliti, 2003: 48-49).

In terms of recording the interviews, it was decided not to use a lot of note-taking as this practice fails to capture the nuances that are part of any interview (Dörnyei, 2007: 139). Moreover, given the then-recent introduction of GDPR, as well as the unnecessary and possibly perceived intrusive use of video recording, the researcher decided to use only voice recording for documenting the interviews in this project. As the use of a voice recorder was less obtrusive than that of a camera, this facilitated the researcher being able to establish a more positive rapport with the interviewees; a key ingredient in favourably conducting research interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005: 92).

At the start of each interview, the researcher thanked the participants for their time, advised them that there were no right or wrong answers, and informed them that their candid responses were being truly sought. The researcher then proceeded to highlight the aims of the research project and explain the format of the interview. If the interviewees required any clarification or had any questions, they were invited to let the researcher know. Once this stage was complete, the researcher proceeded with the interview questions. Interview times ranged from approximately 20 minutes for MFL teachers to circa 40 minutes for the Secretary General of the European Schools.

All interviews were held through the English language. The interview participants in Ireland were native speaker of the English language. However, of the five interview participants in the European Schools system, four were non-native speakers of English. While all of the non-native English speakers had a high level of English, the researcher paid particular attention to speak more clearly, and when appropriate, at a slower pace. On the rare occasions where there were misunderstandings, the researcher ensured to rephrase the questions.

At the end of each interview, the researcher thanked each participant for their valuable contribution. All participants were then invited to make any additional contribution to the interview. If they wished to add something, clarify something, etc. they were welcome to do so. Finally, the interviewer reassured the participants that the highest ethical standards would be adhered to in terms of the security of the data. In relation to their identity, the participants were informed that the agreement as per their signed consent form would be fully respected. For those who chose to have their identities made known as part of the research, they were advised that should they change their mind, they should contact the researcher by email prior to the publication of the thesis. After each interview ended, the interviewer transferred the encrypted interview data file to a laptop database, labelled it correctly, and made a back-up copy on Maynooth University's cloud. These measures were taken to ensure that all the data was securely backed up.

4.6.4 Transcription, coding, and analysis

A total of twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted in Ireland and Brussels as part of this research project. All interviews were initially transcribed by the researcher into Microsoft Word. Transcribing the data was relatively straightforward, although very time-consuming. In order to code and analyse the data from the interviews, NVivo was then employed. NVivo is a qualitative data computer software package. Transcriptions from the interviews as well as the open-ended question responses from the questionnaires were inputted into NVivo. The coding process using NVivo was outlined and illustrated in section 4.3. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this coding process, combined with elements of Theory Elaboration, facilitated the development of a Grounded Theory; the findings of which are detailed in the next chapter.

This chapter has explored in detail the methodological design underlying this research project. A rationale for employing a mixed-methods case-study design was elucidated. Particular focus was placed on the numerous forms of triangulation utilised in the research in order to ensure rigour and reliability in both the collection and analysis of the data. The reasons for employing Grounded Theory as the main methodological philosophy in the project were explained. The process of developing a Grounded Theory was also detailed. The strategy for identifying and bringing on board the four types of post-primary schools that partook in this research project was outlined. The participants involved in the research study were then discussed. The ethical considerations governing the collection of data within the study were detailed. The research instruments utilised for data collection were delineated. The complete research process from the initial stages to data collection and analysis were outlined. The findings from this undertaking are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

Analysis and Findings

In advance of presenting this analysis and findings chapter, it is important to once again outline the three research questions that were presented in the Introduction Chapter. These questions are as follows:

1. What are the lived experiences of key stakeholders of modern foreign language (MFL) teaching, learning and assessment in post-primary schools in Ireland?
2. To what extent would the three proposed strategies that aim to advance the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs at post-primary level in Ireland be feasible within the current education system?
3. What are the implications of the responses to a) the above questions, as well as b) the qualitative research carried out beyond Irish shores, for future language-in-education policies and practices in the Irish post-primary education system?

In this chapter, the first research question is discussed in Sections 5.1 and 5.2. The second research question is considered from Sections 5.3 to 5.5. Finally, the third research question is examined throughout Section 5.6.

As delineated in Chapter Four, in total, 87 sixth year second-level students across four post-primary schools participated in a student questionnaire (see Appendix A). 54 identified as male, 32 as female and 1 as other. 86% of the participants stated that English was their first language (L1), 2% said it was Irish while 12% advised that another language was their L1. 78 students did one curricular MFL, while 9 students did 2 curricular MFLs. 73 participants did French (8 at ordinary level and 65 at higher level), and 11 students did German (2 at ordinary level and 9 at higher level). No students did Italian, while 12 students did Spanish, all at higher level. For the remainder of the questions in the questionnaire, if participants did more than one curricular MFL, they were requested to answer the questions based on the curricular MFL they were strongest at in school. 92% of the respondents stated they had been studying their MFL for 5 years at second level (students could not consider Sixth Year as a school year, as they had not completed the academic year at the time of research).

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	54	62%
Female	32	37%
Other	1	1%
Total	87	100

Table 5.1: Breakdown of student population

Language 1	English	Irish	Other
Number	75	2	10
Percentage	86%	2%	12%

Table 5.2: Breakdown of students' first languages

Number of Students taking each MFL	Level at which student is taking their MFL	
French (73)	O.L.	H.L.
	8	65
German (11)	O.L.	H.L.
	2	9
Italian (0)	O.L.	H.L.
	0	0
Spanish (12)	O.L.	H.L.
	0	12

Table 5.3: Students' MFLs studied and levels
(O.L. = Ordinary Level; H.L. = Higher Level)

In terms of the research with second-level teachers, across the 4 participating post-primary schools, 7 MFL teachers completed the teacher questionnaire (see Appendix B). 4 MFL teachers, 3 of whom had completed the questionnaire, partook in an interview. A further breakdown per school is as follows: 1 MFL teacher from the all-boys post-primary school (English-medium) completed the questionnaire, but 2 MFL teachers from this school, 1 of whom had completed the questionnaire, participated in an interview. 3 MFL teachers from the all-girls second-level school (English-medium) completed the questionnaire but none were available for an interview. 2 MFL teachers from the co-education post-primary school (English-medium) completed the questionnaire and 1 of them did an interview. 1 MFL teacher from the co-educational second-level school (Irish-medium) / Gaelcholáiste completed the questionnaire and partook in an interview.

	Teacher Population Questionnaire	Teacher Population Interview
Gender	Number	Number
Male	1	2
Female	6	2
Other	0	0
Total	7	4

Table 5.4: Information on teacher participants in the research

As noted above, 7 MFL post-primary teachers completed the questionnaire and 4 participated in an interview. One of the MFL teachers who partook in an interview had not completed the teacher

questionnaire. As such, a total of 8 MFL teachers participated in the research project. All 8 MFL teachers were currently practising post-primary MFL teachers. There were 2 male and 6 female teachers. 6 taught only French, 1 taught French and German, and one taught only Spanish. None of the teachers were native speakers of the MFLs they taught. All 8 were fully qualified in all the MFLs they taught in their schools. Of the 8, only 1 taught in a school where he/she was the only teacher of their MFL. In terms of the highest educational level they had achieved – 1 ticked a primary degree, 2 chose a post-graduate teaching qualification, while 5 said they had a master’s degree. In terms of how much second-level MFL teaching experience they had, 2 noted 2 years, 1 chose 3 years, 1 wrote 6 years, 1 indicated 7 years, 1 stated they had 15 years teaching experience, while the teacher who did the interview, but not the questionnaire, did not indicate how many years he had been teaching. All 8 stated that they currently teach both the MFL Junior and Senior Cycles. Of the 7 participants who completed the questionnaire, 6 indicated that they are currently teaching the sixth year MFL programme in their schools.

In terms of how the students would rate their MFL competences in reading, writing, speaking and listening, the results are as follows:

	Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good	Excellent
<i>Reading</i>	1%	12%	52%	29%	6%
<i>Writing</i>	2%	25%	49%	18%	6%
<i>Speaking</i>	7%	27%	43%	17%	6%
<i>Listening</i>	4%	24%	43%	23%	6%

Table 5.5: Students’ self-rating of their MFL competences

The findings indicate that in terms of reading, writing, speaking and listening competences, the vast majority of students neither consider themselves “very poor” nor “excellent”. Indeed, over two in five students consider themselves “good” in their MFL competences. Just over one in ten students consider themselves “poor” in reading, while approximately one in four students believe that their writing, speaking and listening skills are “poor”. Of all four language skills, 29% of students believe they are “very good” at reading. This stands to reason, as seeing the written word is generally an easier way to understand a language, compared to writing, speaking or listening. Furthermore, 23% of students believe they are “very good” at listening. Less than one in five students believe they are “very good” at either writing or speaking. Only 6% of students believe they are excellent in their MFL skills. What is of particular concern is that 34% of students believe they are either “poor” or “very poor” at speaking their MFL.

In terms of the 7 MFL teachers who completed the questionnaire, of the 6 who were teaching an MFL to sixth year students, 5 of them rated what they believed were their students’ MFL competences in their final year of second-level education in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The findings are as follows:

	Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good	Excellent
<i>Reading</i>	-	40%	-	40%	20%
<i>Writing</i>	-	40%	20%	40%	-
<i>Speaking</i>	-	40%	60%	-	-
<i>Listening</i>	-	20%	60%	20%	-

Table 5.6: Teachers’ rating of their students’ MFL competences

The feedback from the MFL teachers parallels in many respects the findings of the MFL sixth year students. With the exception of reading, none of the teachers placed their current sixth year students in either the “very poor” or “excellent” categories. Similar to the students’ choices, the MFL teachers consider their students generally stronger at reading (40% “very good” and 20% “excellent”), with the majority of teachers (60%) choosing “good” for speaking and listening skills. MFL teachers also consider their students quite strong at writing (20% are “good” and 40% “very good”). Nonetheless, the findings are a serious concern with 40% of teachers considering their students “poor” in reading, writing, and speaking.

For the purposes of this research, ‘fluency’ was defined in both questionnaires as the “ability to communicate easily and effectively”. In the student questionnaire, only 9% of the student participants agreed that they consider themselves fluent in the MFL they study. Not one student ticked that they strongly agreed that they are fluent in their MFL. However, more than two-thirds of students (67%) disagreed that they are fluent in the MFL they study (26% strongly disagreed and 41% disagreed). 24% neither agreed nor disagreed. Moreover, students were asked if they would feel confident communicating with native speakers of the MFL they study on “everyday topics such as ordering a meal, booking a ticket, asking for directions, talking about my hobbies and interests, going to the doctor, making an appointment, etc.”. In response, only 13% strongly agreed and 20% agreed. 21% neither agreed nor disagreed, 32% disagreed, and 14% strongly disagreed. As only one third of students would feel confident engaging in basic everyday topics after having studied their MFL for 5 years, this indicates that a) the education system is failing to meet the basic linguistic needs of students, and/or b) what students learn in school does not adequately prepare them for real-life scenarios.

5.1 Factors affecting poor plurilingualism

As outlined in the Introduction, ‘plurilingualism’ refers to the language repertoire of an individual. It is the “language variety referred to as ‘mother tongue’ or ‘first language’ and any number of other languages or varieties” (Council of Europe, 2007: 8). By contrast, ‘multilingualism’ denotes the presence of more than one language in a given geographical area (Council of Europe, 2007: 8). Some operational and organisational factors may explain in part the underperformance of many students in their MFLs. Only 29% of MFL teachers agree that the current MFL curricular content is adequate for students to become fluent in the MFL they study. 29% neither agree nor disagree and 42% disagree with the statement. MFL Teacher 1 in the all-boys post-primary school explains that that this may be due to the fact that the MFL curricula prepares students for largely written, as opposed to spoken, Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate exams. She also raises the point that the material and exams could be more relevant to students’ lives. She states:

We do the DELF in Fourth and Fifth Year. One of the students has done in Sixth Year, last year. The B1. And I find that exam very relevant. The conversations, the roleplays and everything are very practical and they’re exactly what you would use when you go to France, whereas I just find our exams are not ... Students find that they’re able to write, but when they go to actually say something, they just don’t have that fluency. It seems to happen in First Year, but then you have to concentrate on exams and that just slows all that down.

In addition, MFL Teacher 1 in the co-educational second-level school (English-medium) advises that there is “too much content to cover in too little time”. Indeed, just 17% of teachers agree that there are “enough MFL class periods/time in the week for students to become fluent in the MFL they study”. 33% disagree and 50% strongly disagree. She also believes that the MFL curricula need to allow for “a more communicative approach to language learning”.

Class sizes are also a factor in effective MFL learning. 14% of teachers had an average of between 16 and 20 students in their MFL classes, 72% reported having 21 to 25 students, with a further 14% having 26 to 30 students in their classes. 50% disagreed and a further 50% strongly disagreed that the number of students in their MFL classrooms is “satisfactory for optimal language learning”. When asked to explain their answer, the teachers indicated the following reasons: class sizes are too large (MFL Teacher 2 in co-education second-level school (English-medium)) and that MFL classes should be “capped like practical subjects”, as “[n]ot all students can be given the sufficient amount of time needed to practice oral skills” (MFL Teacher 2 in all-girls second-level school).

Moreover, during a series of interviews, additional potential reasons were furnished to try to explain the poor levels of plurilingualism among school leavers in Ireland. The Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), Ms Karen Ruddock, believes that the causes are multifactorial, stating that

Ireland has two national languages and, therefore, the focus of MFLs does not start until later in the education system (MFL learning is not a curricular requirement until students commence second-level education in Ireland). She advises that:

the research all shows that it's in the early years that language learning will be most effective. But it's much better if children start even from preschool, from very early. The earlier they start learning a foreign language, the better.

MFL Teacher 2 in the all-boys post-primary school concurs, adding that, if pupils were doing an MFL “throughout primary school they would have such a better basis of the language” and, as such, it would be very beneficial to their plurilingual progress. The MFL teacher in the co-educational post-primary school (English medium) also raised this issue and believes that by not starting the learning MFLs at a younger age, this also has an impact on language competences at second level.

The Deputy Principal of the all-boys post-primary school believes that the “mindsets that students have around languages is probably instilled within the Irish system, is instilled with them through their experience of learning a different language apart from English, which up to that point is probably Irish”. The MFL teacher in the co-educational post-primary school (English-medium) concurs and states that the reasons for the poor plurilingual standards of second-level students “go beyond the classroom very much so”. She believes that there is a “national kind of cultural mentality or block or lack of confidence with languages. I think it's not unusual for Anglophone countries to be in this situation”.

The Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), Ms Karen Ruddock, also believes that “unfortunately, a lot of our kids have a negative experience of Irish when they're in primary school, which impacts maybe on their attitudes then towards learning foreign languages in post-primary”. Furthermore, she advises that “many parents would dissuade their children from learning a foreign language in post-primary because of their own experience, even, of learning Irish when they were children”. The Deputy Principal of the all-boys post-primary school is in agreement, stating that negative experiences of learning Irish is a barrier that MFL teachers have to overcome.

In addition, Ruddock believes that “there's been a lack of awareness in Ireland, as well, about the importance and the value of language learning”, stating that “I guess that's the challenge for us is to understand how to deliver that message, that language learning is actually very important. And that it's not just important for enterprise, it's also important in terms of developing skills”. MFL Teacher 2 in the all-boys post-primary school concurs, adding that “we need to explain to them [the students] earlier why it's good to learn foreign languages”. In the quantitative research undertaken in the four

post-primary schools, 16% of students strongly agreed that they had been informed of the advantages of being a fluent speaker of the MFL they study. 58% agreed, 17% neither agreed nor disagreed, 6% disagreed, and 3% strongly disagreed. In total, 74% of students either strongly agreed or agreed that they had been informed of the advantages of being a fluent speaker of the MFL they study. While the results indicate that further work needs to be done in this area, the findings are positive.

Moreover, the PPLI Director suggests that as Irish people traditionally went to English-speaking countries when they emigrated, they have not experienced the need to learn an additional language. She also highlights that being an island nation is a factor. Ruddock states that “I guess... If you are surrounded by four or five other language communities, there is more of... It's more obvious the importance of... Needing to communicate with people in different languages is more obvious”. MFL Teacher 1 in the all-boys post-primary school also states that the fact that “we're an island and... further away from Europe... I think we tend to be lazy about that”.

Furthermore, MFL Teacher 2 in the all-boys post-primary school believes that “students don't feel a need to learn a foreign language”, suggesting that “they don't see the point. And it's only when they get to say, choosing courses for college that then they go, ‘Oh actually, I'm glad I chose this because it's good for this job or this area’”. The MFL teacher in the co-educational post-primary school (English medium) also believes that “because you can get by quite easily with just English in the modern world, maybe that feeds into it as well”. Indeed, the MFL teacher at the Gaelcholáiste advises that, as English is the dominant world language, the usefulness of knowing an MFL is openly questioned by students “almost to the point where students were being candid and ask outright why you might need a language [MFL]”. The findings from the quantitative research carried out with the sixth year students in the four participating schools indicate that, in their final year, almost three-quarters (73%) of students do not believe the English language alone is sufficient for their future. Indeed, only 1% of students strongly agreed and 8% agreed with the statement that “English is the only language I need for my future”. 18% neither agreed nor disagreed, 37% disagreed and 36% strongly disagreed with the statement.

The MFL Teacher in the Gaelcholáiste believes that, as the education culture is “so focused on a points-driven system, and it's a race to the top”, the emphasis is more concentrated on grades as opposed to developing genuine fluency. The MFL teacher in the co-educational post-primary school (English medium) also thinks that, as students are so focused on the Leaving Certificate examinations, they are rigid in what they are willing to learn. She states that “I find that they're kind

of tied to this idea of, but I need to see something in the same format that I'm going to see in my final examination". Consequently, many students engage in rote learning for exams.

Furthermore, the fact that many second-level students do not know how MFLs are best learned may explain the underperformance of many second-level MFL students. In the research in the four participating second-level schools, the students were asked to advise the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statement: "I have been taught how modern foreign languages are best learned". In response, 2% strongly agreed, 20% agreed, 42% neither agreed nor disagreed, 28% disagreed, and 8% strongly disagreed. These findings demonstrate that up to 78% of students have not been taught how languages are best learned and 98% of students could be better informed. The fact that only 22% either strongly agreed or agreed indicates that there is certainly room for considerable progress to be made on teaching students how languages are best learned.

MFL Teacher 1 at the all-boys post-primary school believes that the main reason for students' poor plurilingual levels is that the MFL exams students take are essentially mostly written. She criticises the new Junior Cycle MFL specification for not going further and placing a far greater emphasis on the oral component. Under the traditional Junior Certificate MFL examinations, doing an oral exam with students was an option. The new Junior Cycle examination system does not facilitate this.

Further reasons that may explain the underperformance of MFL students were cited. The Director of PPLI, Ms Ruddock, believes that, as the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (MLPSI), which was "quite successful", was abandoned, this has negatively impacted on the plurilingual standards of students in second level as the students are no longer exposed to MFLs in primary school. The Principal of the Gaelcholáiste cites numerous reasons for poor plurilingual standards. In his opinion, the standards of levels have dropped at both Junior and Senior Cycles, many students are shy to participate, there is an engrained confidence issue, and laziness in learning MFLs is also a factor. He also believes that "students do way less than years ago", thus impacting on standards, adding that the lack of focus on speaking the language is also central to the issue. The Deputy Principal of the all-boys post-primary school also believes that where MFL teachers do not have the necessary ICT skills to help the students in their language learning, this has a negative impact on linguistic standards. The MFL teacher in the co-educational post-primary school (English medium) believes that short-class periods, those she considers to be less than an hour, also inhibit the development of fluency.

Summary of findings: Factors affecting poor plurilingualism

- Current MFL curricular content is inadequate.
- MFL curricula prepare students for largely written exams.
- Lack of focus on speaking the MFL.
- MFL exams lack relevance for students.
- Too much content to cover in too little time.
- Not enough MFL class periods/time in the week.
- Class sizes are too large.
- MFL learning only officially commences at post-primary level.
- Issues surrounding student mindset and MFL learning.
- A negative experience of learning Irish can impact MFL learning.
- Negative parental mindset surrounding additional language learning.
- Lack of awareness in Ireland about the importance of and need for additional language learning.
- Emphasis is more concentrated on grades as opposed to developing genuine fluency.
- Students generally do not know how MFLs are best learned.
- Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (MLPSI) was abandoned.
- MFL exam standards have dropped.
- Engrained confidence issue.
- Laziness in learning.

Table 5.7: Summary of findings: Factors affecting poor plurilingualism

5.2 Reasons for optimism for future plurilingual students

While the above findings outline the various potential reasons to explain the poor MFL competences of many second-level students in Ireland, the data from the research undertaken in the four post-primary schools indicates that there is considerable positivity amongst sixth year students towards developing their MFL competences. Indeed, for those students who identified themselves as not being fluent in the MFL they study, 87% advise that they “would very much like to be fluent” in the MFL they study (56% strongly agreed, 31% agreed, 12% neither agreed nor disagreed, 0% disagreed, while 1% strongly disagreed).

Moreover, while only 8% (2% strongly agreed and 6% agreed) of students were aware of the aim of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002) prior to the questionnaire, over three-quarters of them (76%) state that they support its ambition of two languages and mother tongue (29% strongly agreed with 47% agreeing, 15% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, 7% disagreeing and only 2% strongly disagreeing). As for the MFL teachers, 14% strongly agreed and 43% agreed that prior to the questionnaire they were aware of the aim of the Barcelona Summit agreement (2002). 14% of MFL teachers disagreed and 29% strongly disagreed. Nonetheless, some 86% of MFL teachers strongly agreed and 14% agreed that they “fully support the aim of the Barcelona Summit [Agreement]”. These findings clearly indicate that, amongst both learners and educators, there is strong support for the ambitions of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002).

Indeed, other responses from both students and teachers indicate a strong appetite for change in how MFLs are taught, learned and assessed at second level in Ireland. Only 43% of teachers agreed with the statement, “[b]y the end of Sixth Year, I am generally happy with the MFL fluency levels my students have achieved”, 14% neither agreed nor disagreed, with 43% disagreeing. Moreover, 56% of students (28% strongly agreed and 28% agreed) stated that they “get frustrated by the current system of MFL teaching and learning in Ireland”. A further 28% neither agreed nor disagreed, 15% disagreed and only 1% strongly disagreed. 71% of teachers (14% strongly agreed and 57% agreed) indicated that they also get frustrated by the current education system (29% neither agreed nor disagreed). In fact, 70% of students believe that, for students to become fluent in the MFL they study, the current education system needs to “change considerably” (30% strongly agreed, 40% agreed, 17% neither agreed nor disagreed, with 12% disagreeing, and only 1% strongly disagreeing). 86% of teachers (43% strongly agreed and 43% agreed) are also of the opinion that, for students to become fluent in the MFL they study, considerable changes in the education system are required (14% neither agreed nor disagreed, no teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement).

These findings are very positive and indicate that there is a clear desire amongst most of the student participants (87%) to become fluent in the MFL they learn at school. Moreover, there is considerable bottom-up support from both students and teachers for the ambitions of the Barcelona Summit Agreement. The findings also demonstrate a frustration with the current MFL educational model and a recognition that considerable changes are required in order to foster greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students.

<p>Summary of findings: Reasons for optimism for future plurilingual students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considerable positivity amongst sixth year students towards developing their MFL competences. • Students generally would very much like to be fluent in their MFL. • The vast majority of students and teachers support the ambition of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002). • A sizeable majority of students (70%) and teachers (86%) believe that, for students to become fluent in the MFL they study, the current education system needs to “change considerably”.

Table 5.8: Summary of findings: Reasons for optimism for future plurilingual students

5.3 Results concerning strategy 1: Harmonising post-primary MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

In order to obtain feedback on a number of areas relating to the three strategies, sixth year students, their MFL teachers and other stakeholders participated in quantitative and qualitative research. The sixth year students completed a student questionnaire, MFL teachers did the teacher questionnaire and/or an interview, while some other stakeholders partook in an interview.

Under the first strategy, that of harmonising MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) through cross-age teaching, MFL students would be set according to their CEFR level. Setting is the practice of grouping students “according to their attainment in a particular subject” (Ireson & Hallam, 2001: 10). While 86% of surveyed MFL teachers (72% strongly agreed and 14% agreed) stated they were familiar with the CEFR, only just over a third of students (34%) indicated that they were familiar with it (13% strongly agreed and 21% agreed).

MFL students and MFL teachers answered a series of questions concerning the first strategy in separate student and teacher questionnaires. When asked if cross-age teaching is “worth giving a trial”, the students replied as follows: 27% strongly agreed and 48% agreed, while 8% neither agreed nor disagreed, 9% disagreed, and 8% strongly disagreed. As for the MFL teachers, 57% strongly agreed and 43% agreed. In total, 75% of students and 100% of teachers were in favour of testing cross-age teaching as a system to be used in the second-level education system in Ireland. Such strong bottom-up support from MFL students and teachers for giving this initiative a trial is very important. It demonstrates a willingness to embrace significant structural changes. It may also indicate that these stakeholders believe such an initiative has merit in addressing many of the issues they face in the MFL classroom.

Only 29% of sixth year students either strongly agreed (6%) or agreed (23%) that they find it “easy to learn” their MFL. In the section outlining the strategy of harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR, students were asked if they believe cross-age teaching would “make MFLs easier for me to learn”. A majority were in favour – 20% strongly agreed and 36% agreed. However, 28% of students neither agreed nor disagreed. This indicates that, while students are willing to give the strategy a trial, they are not sure if it would make it easier for them to learn their MFL. Only 11% of students disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed with the statement. MFL teachers were asked if they believe this model of cross-age teaching could “make classes easier to teach”. In response, 57% strongly agreed and 43% agreed. The results show that a majority of students (56%) and all surveyed teachers believe that the model of cross-age teaching would make it easier to learn and teach their MFLs.

Teacher participants indicated that they believe that cross-age teaching would make classes easier to teach as all students in their groups would be of a similar level. Given the homogenous groupings, teachers believe they could cover the course material more quickly, and as such, students could advance their MFL studies at a speedier pace.

In the student questionnaire, 56% of students indicated that they enjoy (18% strongly agreed and 38% agreed) learning their MFL at school. When asked to what extent sixth year students believe harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR would make “language learning more enjoyable”, 19% strongly agreed and 25% agreed. 30% of students neither agreed nor disagreed, while 12% disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed. With 30% of students neither agreeing nor disagreeing, it may indicate that, as the concept of harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR may be so new to students, some may find it difficult to visualise how such a system could make language learning more enjoyable. The findings further indicate that students may benefit from being taught (more) about the CEFR in language learning. The MFL teachers were also asked if they believe the adoption of cross-age teaching would make language learning more enjoyable for students. In response, 43% of MFL teachers indicated that they strongly agreed, while 57% said they agreed.

As highlighted at various stages throughout this thesis, maintaining motivation in MFL learning is a significant issue. Scheidecker and Freeman state that “[m]otivation is, without question, the most complex and challenging issue facing teachers today” (1999: 116). As discussed in previous chapters, this lack of motivation amongst MFL learners exists for a myriad of reasons. In particular, for many second-level students, the MFL they study as well as the curriculum lack relevance to their lives (Bartram, 2010: 177). In addition, motivation may not be intrinsic; many students are “motivated solely by grades or other extrinsic rewards [and as a result] forget most of what they learned” (Wentzel & Brophy, 2014: 118). Indeed, having a positive attitude towards the MFL one is studying, as well as being aware of the advantages of learning an MFL, are both key to real motivation (Ager, 2001: 125-126).

In terms of the research carried out for this thesis, the data from the students demonstrates that almost two-thirds of students (65%) either strongly agreed (16%) or agreed (49%) that they are “motivated to learn the MFL” they study. While these findings indicate that students are motivated in their MFL studies, three points should be made. Firstly, only 16% of students strongly agreed that they were motivated to learn the MFL they study. Secondly, this motivation may be extrinsic, as students may require the MFL for matriculation purposes for many courses in third-level institutions, e.g. National University of Ireland. Similarly, many students may be motivated as the higher the

grade they achieve in their MFL Leaving Certificate examination will result in higher Central Applications Office (CAO) points for entry to tertiary education. Thirdly, it ought to be noted that this research only took place with sixth year students, namely those who chose to continue with their MFL after their Junior Cycle studies. As noted in the Introduction Chapter, the percentage of students who choose to do an MFL for the Senior Cycle decreases nationally from almost 90% at Junior Cycle to almost 70% at Senior Cycle (DES, 2017a: 16). As such, while the majority of respondents indicated that they are motivated to learn their MFL, the findings are in line with international research which demonstrates that the motivational levels of MFL students generally deteriorate as they progress through second-level education (Coleman *et al.*, 2007).

When asked if they believe this model of cross-age teaching would “motivate me more in learning my MFL”, 29% of students strongly agreed, while 31% agreed. 21% neither agreed nor disagreed, 12% disagreed, and 7% strongly disagreed. As for the MFL teachers, 57% strongly agreed, while 43% agreed that harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR would motivate students more in learning their MFL. Therefore, a majority of students (60%) and teachers (100%) believe that this model of cross-age teaching would play a positive role in inculcating motivation in students in terms of learning MFLs. The MFL Teacher in the co-education (English-medium) post-primary school believes that cross-age teaching would increase motivation as students would likely work harder to progress through the language levels. Other respondents noted that mixed ability MFL classes do not work. Indeed, a female student in the co-education Gaelcholáiste stated that it is important to “split the classes according to ability [as] mixed ability doesn’t serve anyone well.” Moreover, MFL Teacher 1 in the all-boys post-primary school advised that mixed ability classes can “become a little bit boring” when students are in classes with other students who have several different MFL levels. MFL Teacher 2 in the same all-boys second-level school highlighted that mixed ability classes are “very difficult.”

Returning to earlier data, only 9% of students agreed (none strongly agreed) that they would consider themselves “fluent in the MFL” they study. In the questionnaire, students were asked if they believe that harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR would “improve my fluency in the MFL I study”. 25% strongly agreed, while 43% agreed. 21% neither agreed nor disagreed, while 5% and 6% disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively. 57% of MFL teachers strongly agreed, while 43% agreed that this model of cross-age teaching would improve students’ fluency in their MFL. This data demonstrates that both learners and educators believe that the introduction of harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR would improve students’ MFL fluency levels. There are several reasons to explain this: the data indicates that students and teachers believe that MFL students are generally best served by being set according to their MFL levels. Cross-age teaching classes are more relevant

to the students' MFL levels and needs. MFL Teacher 2 in the all-boys post-primary school notes that "if the whole class was at the one level you'd be able to progress at a much better pace, or at a pace that's catered to them." Cross-age teaching also gives a clearly defined pathway of progress. The same MFL teacher noted that by harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR, students would "know the level that they're at, they [would] know what level they're working towards. Whereas I think with the Junior and the Leaving, they don't know what levels they're at or what levels they're supposed to be doing." Given the straightforward roadmap to advance through the various CEFR levels, the data from the research with both MFL students and teachers indicates that harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR could increase student motivation in MFL learning and, as a result, develop students' fluency levels more effectively.

In the student questionnaire, under a third of students (29%) either strongly agreed (11%) or agreed (18%) that they only study their MFL as it is a requirement for entry to many third-level courses. 18% neither agreed nor disagreed, 40% disagreed, and 13% strongly disagreed. In addition, 50% of students either strongly agreed (19%) or agreed (31%) that the MFL they study will help them in their future careers. 25% of students neither agreed nor disagreed, 13% disagreed, and 12% strongly disagreed. Moreover, 84% of students indicated that they "believe the MFL I study is a valuable lifelong skill". This is of particular interest, as Little notes that, as English is the language of "business, science, technology and international communication generally, this has led many in English-speaking countries to adopt the mistaken belief that proficiency in English is enough" (Little, 2014). The fact that 84% of students consider their MFL a valuable lifelong skill demonstrates that many students see the importance of an MFL for their futures.

Students were asked if they believe that harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR would "encourage me to see MFL learning as a lifelong skill". In response, 19% strongly agreed while 37% agreed. 29% neither agreed nor disagreed, 9% disagreed, and 6% strongly disagreed. 57% of MFL teachers strongly agreed, while 29% agreed and 14% neither agreed nor disagreed that harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR would encourage students to see MFL learning as a lifelong skill. The responses from both MFL students and teachers positively indicate that this model of cross-age teaching could encourage students to consider MFL learning as a lifelong skill. Nonetheless, it is noted that the vast majority of students had already indicated that they consider their MFL a valuable lifelong skill. Some students gave reasons to explain their answers. A female student in the co-educational (English-medium) post-primary school noted that "it is becoming a more desirable trait for employers if you know a foreign language. I think many students and parents are motivated by this." Another female student in the same co-educational school advised that "job opportunities

abroad” are a motivation for her parents and her in considering her MFL as a valuable lifelong skill. A male student in the Gaelchólaiste stated that he believes his MFL is valuable as he “would like to be able to communicate well with others who speak the language I am learning”, while another student in the all-boys second-level school advised that his MFL is valuable as he can use it on holidays.

The students were then invited to answer the question if they believe this model of cross-age teaching “could potentially increase the number of plurilingual students at post-primary level”. 24% strongly agreed and 38% agreed, 26% of students neither agreed nor disagreed, 8% disagreed, and 4% strongly disagreed. As such, over three-fifths of students believe that by introducing such a system it could increase the number of plurilingual second-level students. There is a sizeable portion who were unsure (26%), with only a relatively small percentage of students who either disagreed or strongly disagreed (12%). When the neither agreed nor disagreed are removed from the calculations, 84% of students believe that harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR could increase the number of plurilingual students, with some 16% disagreeing. As for the MFL teachers, 43% strongly agreed, with 57% agreeing that adopting this model of cross-age teaching could potentially increase the number of plurilingual second-level students. The responses from both students and teachers indicate that harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR could have a beneficial impact on developing increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students.

As noted earlier in this section, in addition to conducting separate questionnaires with MFL students and teachers, the researcher engaged in a qualitative investigation, by way of interviews, with some MFL teachers, as well as with the senior management of some of the schools that had undertaken the quantitative research. The Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland, Ms Karen Ruddock, also partook in an interview. During these interviews, the researcher discussed the potential adoption of harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR at post-primary level in Ireland. Each interviewee was asked their opinion on this potential initiative, as well as any possible drawbacks that could impede it from being successfully introduced.

The Principal of the Gaelcholáiste advised that the adoption of cross-age teaching would be “revolutionary”. He believes that it would be “very easy to approach staff” about trying it out and suggested that there would have to be pilot projects first to ascertain if it would be valuable and would work on a national level. The MFL teacher in his school also proposed that the initiative be piloted: “certainly, I think it's a good idea, and would be very curious to see how, if schools went along with, how they get on, what they find”.

The Deputy Principal of the all-boys post-primary school stated: “I can see the benefit. I can see the theory”. He proceeded to mention that he had previously managed an English-language summer school which employed the cross-age teaching approach, and that it worked very well in practice. He said that:

from the organization of the school, generally it worked very... Even from a social point of view, it worked well. You had a lot more interaction between kids at different ages and different nationalities and so on. You know, so, and from speaking to the teachers who were teaching the classes... the fact that they had like a 12-year old and an 18-year old in the same class didn't really pose any huge difficulties.

The MFL teacher at the Gaelcholáiste believes there is considerable merit in the adoption of cross-age teaching in the second-level education system. He stated that “when I did the questionnaire, it just hadn't been something I'd ever considered before”. He continued, “we're so kind of focused on age groups following one another up through the years, and when I saw it, it actually set a light bulb off in my head”. In addition, he advised, “I'd be coming from the point of view of, why not?”

MFL teacher 1 in the all-boys post-primary school was very much in favour of embracing this model of cross-age teaching in second-level schools: “I actually think that's a very good idea”. She advised that she would find classes more enjoyable to teach and also believes that, by adopting this system, students should have to achieve a CEFR level (or part of a level) each year. When asked if she would have any problem adapting to a cross-age MFL system, she stated: “No, I wouldn't have any problem adapting to that... I would really welcome it... I certainly would”.

MFL teacher 2 in the all-boys second-level school concurred that cross-age teaching would be advantageous to the development of plurilingual second-level students. When asked if he would embrace this model of cross-age teaching, he replied, “Yeah, definitely”, before stating that “mixed ability, it's very difficult... [w]hereas if the whole class was at the one level you'd be able to progress at a much better pace, or at a pace that's catered to [the students]”. When asked if he believes the students would welcome cross-age teaching, he stated:

Yeah. I think so because they'll know the level that they're at, they'll know what level they're working towards. Whereas I think with the Junior and the Leaving, they don't know what levels they're at or what levels they're supposed to be doing.

The MFL teacher in the co-educational post-primary school (English medium) believes there are many advantages to its adoption, saying: “it would increase motivation because, particularly if you were tying it into the CEFR levels, you know, student would be like, ‘Oh, I really want to get into that B2 class, so I'm going to work so hard to get into it’”. She did note that if senior students were in a low-level class, they might be “a little embarrassed”. When the MFL teacher was also asked if cross-

age classes were something she would look forward to teaching, she replied, “definitely... I think that could be quite motivating”.

The Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland, Ms Karen Ruddock, believes that cross-age teaching has merit. She presents the example of Melbourne, in Australia, where their Department of Education operates a language school outside of class time. Ruddock highlights that this system allows for cross-age teaching outside of school time and that it works. Moreover, Ruddock added that cross-age teaching is probably better for students, stating:

I think it's, honestly speaking, it's probably quite unnatural to put students all of the same age in the same class. It's probably healthier to have students of different ages together. But that's not how our society views it.

In the current system, she stated that “what happens is the excellent students get bored, and the students with... you know... who struggle with the foreign languages end up bored, as well, or switching off”. As such, Ruddock believes that cross-age teaching is beneficial on many levels.

While the interviewees largely expressed a positive disposition for the introduction of harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR, many participants raised a number of potential issues surrounding its adoption and implementation in the second-level education system in Ireland. The Principal of the Gaelcholáiste expressed concern that there would be “huge timetabling issues”. The Deputy Principal of the all-boys post-primary school concurred, advising that he believes that timetabling would be a large hurdle to overcome, and that “purely from a managerial point of view, it would be a bridge too far because just timetable-wise, you know, the school, our school, as I'm sure most other schools, are set up in a very sort of structured way around year groups. You know, the tutor system is around year groups”. He went on to advise that “if it wasn't for the structure or the mechanics of how a school generally works, I think it could, it definitely has merit”. The MFL teacher in the co-educational post-primary school (English medium), having spoken with her school principal, advised that “logistically there would be issues”, stating:

I did speak to the principal at my school about this because she is a language teacher as well, and she just had a quick look at it and she just said, "You know, it's a nice idea in theory," but she said she could not see it working on a practical level.

The school principal advised her staff member that for schools with a small student cohort, it would be very difficult to implement. However, in larger schools, it may be possible.

The Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland, Ms Karen Ruddock, questioned if the current education system in Ireland would welcome the adoption of this model of cross-age teaching. She noted that when she proposed putting students from a couple of different school years together so

that a language course could be run, the “principal told me that just would be a complete non-runner, because whatever ways the timetable works, he cannot co-timetable across years”. She said the “structures are so... rigid” and that she had “encountered quite a lot of conservatism” to working outside these structures.

The Principal of the Gaelcholáiste believes that for weaker students, cross-age teaching “may knock their confidence”. Moreover, the MFL teacher at the Gaelcholáiste stated that the “reluctance people would have with streaming is how the lower groups might get on”, as it would be “difficult for our first years to come in to an environment with older kids... especially if you had a scenario with one first year, and then the rest were fourth, fifth, sixth, or something”. However, he believes this would be “to an extent, the responsibility of the teacher”. As noted in Chapter Three, Gamoran and Berends (1987) highlight that one of the main arguments against ability grouping is that it can negatively affect some students’ self-esteem, self-concept, as well as their attitudes towards their school and their schoolwork. Nonetheless, Ireson and Hallam advise that “much depends on the ethos of the school and how grouping arrangements are explained to pupils” (2001: 11). One of the main benefits of cross-age teaching would be to empower students: they would be able to decide for themselves what level they would like to achieve in a language. They could even stop learning their MFL during their A1 level studies (e.g. they do not like the language) and start learning a new MFL. As such, they would not have to continue with the same language for all five to six years. Students could also decide to finish learning an MFL at a certain level (e.g. B1) in a year of their choice (e.g. Fifth Year). They could then focus their time and energy on other subjects. Even developing some fluency in an MFL will accrue (meta)linguistic and intercultural benefits. Additionally, students could commence learning a new MFL after they have finished their current MFL studies at a certain level; this could be done for pleasure, as opposed to just studying a language for additional points. The MFL teacher at the Gaelcholáiste also raised the question as to whether there would be “enough teachers in the school”, and if management would be provided with the proper resources to embrace such a strategy. Nevertheless, the MFL teacher remained optimistic and believes it is worthwhile trialling such a system, as “if we keep doing the same thing, and you're expecting different results...” [it is not going to happen].

MFL teacher 2 in the all-boys second-level school advised that there would be some obstacles to address in order for the strategy to work successfully at school level, stating that, as students do not start learning MFLs generally until second level, most first year students would have the same level. As such, setting could not generally commence at the start of First Year. Given the structures of the current education system, he questioned then if cross-age teaching could be adopted. A potential

solution in this case would be for all first year students with little or no knowledge of the MFL they study to do a common course. In Second Year, they could then join the cross-age classes.

Several components of strategy 1, the proposed introduction of harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR through cross-age teaching, have been explored through both quantitative and qualitative research methods involving key stakeholders in the second-level education system in Ireland.

Overall, there is strong support amongst students, teachers, senior school management and other stakeholders for the initiative. 75% of students and 100% of teachers surveyed either strongly agree or agree that it is worth giving it a trial. A majority of students believe that cross-age teaching could make it easier for them to learn their MFL. In addition, all MFL teachers believe that cross-age teaching would make it easier for them to teach their MFL. The findings also indicate that cross-age teaching could make MFL learning more enjoyable for students, it could increase student motivation in MFL learning, and it could improve student fluency in their MFL.

While the senior school management that participated in the research indicated that the introduction of cross-age teaching has great potential, they advise that the initiative would need to be piloted first. In addition, they believe that there would be significant timetabling issues to overcome if classes are to be aligned across several school years. Other issues by those involved in the research were raised. The schooling system in Ireland would need to overcome a mentality that is generally rigid in terms of keeping certain school structures in place, i.e. grouping students by school year. In addition, the impact on the self-esteem of some students in the lower sets would need to be properly addressed. In summary, cross-age teaching is widely supported by the surveyed stakeholders but certain challenges need to be overcome in order for the initiative to be successfully implemented.

Summary of findings: Strategy 1

- Significant support amongst stakeholders for trialing cross-age teaching and learning.
- The majority of students (60%) and teachers (100%) believe that cross-age teaching and learning could play a positive role in inculcating motivation in students in terms of learning MFLs.
- A majority of students believe that cross-age teaching could make it easier for them to learn their MFL.
- Under this strategy, students could progress at a much better pace.
- This strategy could make classes more enjoyable to teach.
- The vast majority of stakeholders – in particular students (62%) and teachers (100%) – believe that cross-age teaching and learning could potentially increase the number of plurilingual students at post-primary level.

Impediments to its introduction:

- Strategy would incur significant timetabling issues.
- It may be difficult to implement in schools with a small student cohort.
- Current school structures are rigid. Proposed changes to the education system are often met with “a lot of conservatism”.
- Strategy may negatively affect some students’ self-esteem, self-concept, as well as their attitudes towards their school and their schoolwork.
- There may not be enough teachers in schools to implement the strategy successfully.
- Strategy would require resources.
- Strategy may not work with first year students as most of them will not have done an MFL before.
- Strategy would require significant continuous professional development for teachers.

Table 5.9: Summary of findings: Strategy 1

5.4 Results concerning strategy 2: Replacing the current State MFL exams with CEFR international exams

From the research in the four participating second-level schools, it was learned that only 29% of teachers believe that the MFL curricular content is adequate for students to become fluent in the MFL they study. Moreover, 0% of teachers agree that the focus on the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate MFL examinations motivates students to become fluent in the MFL they study. Indeed, 57% disagreed that it motivates students (43% neither agreed nor disagreed). As such, the findings from educators suggest that both the post-primary MFL curricular content and examinations are inadequate for students to become fluent in the MFL they study.

MFL students and their MFL teachers in the four second-level schools, as well as other stakeholders, were invited to provide their responses to a series of questions relating to the second interrelated strategy the researcher proposes, that of replacing the current State MFL exams (Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate) with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) exams. In the questionnaire with sixth year second-level students, they were asked if they would be “in favour of doing an international CEFR exam instead of the Junior Cycle / Leaving Cert. exams”. In response, 22% of respondents strongly agreed and 46% agreed. 20% of students neither agreed nor disagreed. Only 12% of students disagreed, and no students strongly disagreed. This finding is encouraging. Almost seven in every ten students (68%) were in favour of doing CEFR international exams instead of the traditional State examinations, with very few students opposed (12% disagreed). No student strongly disagreed with the proposal. In terms of the MFL teacher questionnaire, there were a total of 7 respondents. When they were asked if they would be “in favour of students doing an international CEFR exam instead of the Junior Cycle / Leaving Cert. exams”, 86% strongly agreed and 14% agreed. There is therefore 100% support amongst the sample

of MFL teachers. These findings from both students and teachers demonstrate a strong willingness to trial this proposed examination model.

The researcher discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the potential adoption of CEFR international exams in place of the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations with a number of the MFL teachers as well as with the senior management of some of the schools that had participated in the quantitative research. The Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland, Ms Ruddock, was also interviewed. The Principal of the Gaelcholáiste advised that Transition Year students in his school already participate in the TEG (*Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge*) exams (official CEFR exams for the Irish language) and that “it works well”, suggesting that doing CEFR MFL exams “could be embraced”. The MFL teacher in the Gaelcholáiste also spoke positively about the experiences of the Transition Year students in his school doing the CEFR TEG international exams. In terms of students doing the international MFL exams, he affirmed that “it's an interesting idea, and the TEG... I always thought... is a brilliant motivation for the fourth years”. He stated that such an examination system is “instantly recognizable [and] opens doors to colleges, I suppose, to courses abroad, and that kind of thing. Yeah, I think it's a very good idea”.

The Deputy Principal of the all-boys post-primary school also favourably considers the adoption of CEFR international exams and said, “I definitely see the merit in it”. He advised that in their school some of their Transition Year (an optional fourth year in the second-level education system in Ireland) and fifth year students do the CEFR French international exams run by the Alliance Française (e.g. DELF – *Diplôme d'Études en Langue Française*). He believes that students doing these international exams find them very beneficial, stating:

I think it's really great to see because it's, you know, it's an addition. It's an add on. It's something that they are, they've chosen to do themselves and so therefore are, you know, they have that sort of, that motivation. It's intrinsic.

MFL teacher 1 in the all-boys post-primary school advised that she finds the French CEFR international exams (DELF) that some of the fourth and fifth year students (including one sixth year student) do are “very relevant”, stating:

conversations, the roleplays and everything are very practical and they're exactly what you would use when you go to France, whereas I just find our exams are not... Students find that they're able to write, but when they go to actually say something, they just don't have that fluency.

When asked if she would foresee any issues in terms of teaching to prepare students for the CEFR international exams instead of the national exams, she stated, “no, much easier. Much easier”. She believes that such a system would be “far more beneficial for them [the students]”.

MFL teacher 2 in the all-boys second-level school said he would very much welcome the introduction of CEFR international exams in place of the current State examinations. He advises that, by doing CEFR exams, students would be “collecting these certificates so you know you have something to work towards every year or two to actually gain something. You're not just waiting three years and then doing something, and waiting another three years, and then getting something else”. When asked if such a system would make it easier to motivate students, he replied “absolutely”. When asked if it would be better to award points for entry to third-level institutions based on each student’s highest CEFR grade (e.g. a student gets X points for passing A2 and Y points for B1), he replied that it “would be far better”. In terms of the CEFR international exams that some of the students in his school do (i.e. *DELF* exam that some transition year and fifth year students undertake), the MFL teacher stated that the “majority of the guys that have done it have done excellent. They've gotten in the 80s, 90s”. The MFL teacher outlined the argument that the school uses to encourage the students to do the CEFR French international examinations, stating:

The way we try to sell it to them is that this is more widely recognized. If you go work abroad and you have the Leaving Cert on your CV, that people are going to go, "What the hell is the Leaving Cert? What does that mean, you have Leaving Cert French?" Whereas, when you have the DELF, you can put down that you're A1, A2, B1, B2 and an employer would know exactly what your level is then. So that's the way we try and sell it to them.

When asked if he would find classes easier to teach by preparing the students for the CEFR international exams, he stated “Possibly. Yeah, because... it's the same as having any textbook you have, you have aims within it”.

The MFL teacher in the co-educational post-primary school (English medium) believes that the adoption of the CEFR international exams “would up levels and up motivation and up the understanding [of the MFL]”. Her school is considering introducing CEFR exams for Spanish. She believes there is “definitely merit in trying to implement something like that”.

The Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), Ms Ruddock, contends that “there's a very strong argument in the strategy [Foreign Languages Strategy] for raising awareness of the CEFR, and of introducing, of aligning more teaching and learning with the CEFR”. Moreover, she believes introducing CEFR international exams would be beneficial, “particularly because... in terms of mobility, and in terms of transparency... when we travel abroad, it's very clear what level we're at”. An additional benefit, she outlines, would be when students complete their highest CEFR level at second level, they could continue to the next level in college or elsewhere.

Some study participants outlined a number of potential issues in relation to the introduction of CEFR international exams in place of the traditional Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate MFL examinations.

The MFL teacher in the Gaelcholáiste explains that students may offer some resistance to the new examination system, as a greater emphasis would be placed on the oral component: “I suppose initially they might balk, maybe, a little bit, at it”. He states that, “what really does tend to scare them [the students] is that they might have to do an oral exam”. Nonetheless, he says that he does not think “it would be altering the culture that much... I don't think it'd be too drastic or too radical or anything”. When asked if he thought it would be difficult to prepare students for both the State exams and CEFR exams, he said that it would be.

Moreover, the Director of PPLI, Ms Ruddock, advises that “the reality about the CEFR is that it was actually developed and constructed as a teaching methodology, rather than as an exam. And so, there is no external benchmarking agency”, stating that there is “huge disagreement among different countries as to what levels their exams are, and whether or not they correspond with the appropriate levels. So, I think it's not clear enough what the levels are”. As such, a B1 standard in one language could be easier or more difficult than in another. This would therefore impact on the actual standard and integrity of the examination system for matriculation points for entry to third-level education.

The findings from students, teachers and other stakeholders indicate that the adoption of the CEFR international exams offers a viable pathway forward to develop the plurilingual competences of MFL second-level students in Ireland. Nonetheless, as noted in Chapter Three, Hughes believes that whatever test or testing system is created for positive additional language learning, it should be one that “consistently provides an accurate measure of precisely the abilities in which we are interested” (2003: 8). As noted by the Council of Europe (COE, 2001: 177), all tests should be viable, reliable, and feasible. As such, should the second strategy be adopted by the Irish education system, it would be very important to ensure that the CEFR exams across all MFLs accurately measure the students’ CEFR competences.

As part of the strategy to replace the Junior Cycle and Learning Certificate examinations with CEFR international exams, the researcher explored the feasibility of adopting the European Language Portfolio (ELP). As noted in Chapter Three, the ELP allows students to reflect on their language learning and intercultural experiences. The ELP has three components: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier. By officially employing the ELP in the Irish education system, students could document their own learning, make necessary assessments, and self-motivate. Essentially, the ELP could act as a support to bring students step-by-step to the point where they have achieved their desired CEFR level.

In the research with the four post-primary schools, the students were asked if they were familiar with the European Language Portfolio. Only 5% strongly agreed and 11% agreed. 7% neither agreed nor disagreed, with 41% disagreeing and 36% strongly disagreeing. Moreover, only 2% of students strongly agreed and 11% agreed that they use the ELP as part of their MFL studies. 12% neither agreed nor disagreed, while 34% disagreed and 41% strongly disagreed. However, of those students who use the European Language Portfolio as part of the MFL studies, 12% strongly agreed and 47% agreed that the portfolio had been beneficial in their MFL studies. 29% indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed, 6% disagreed, and 6% strongly disagreed with the statement. These findings indicate that the ELP is neither well known nor widely used by students in second-level schools in Ireland. Nonetheless, of those students who use it, 59% either strongly agreed or agreed that the ELP has been beneficial in their MFL studies.

As for the MFL teachers, 43% strongly agreed and 14% agreed that they are familiar with the European Language Portfolio. 14% disagreed and 29% strongly disagreed. However, only 29% of teachers strongly agreed that their MFL students use the ELP. 29% neither agreed nor disagreed, 13% disagreed, and 29% strongly disagreed. Of those teachers who indicated that they use the ELP in their classes, 67% strongly agreed and 33% agreed that they find the portfolio beneficial for their students' MFL learning.

The findings indicate that the European Language Portfolio is not being widely used in both MFL teaching and learning. A lack of familiarity with the ELP may explain why it is being underused as an MFL educational support. Not enough time is possibly an additional reason. One MFL teacher noted that there is "[n]ot enough time" (MFL Teacher 1 in English-medium co-educational school) to cover all the components of the course. As only 14% of teachers agreed (none strongly agreed) that they receive enough MFL continuous professional development (CPD), a lack of training in using the ELP may be a third factor. Nonetheless, of those who use it, 100% of MFL teachers either strongly agreed or agreed that they find the ELP beneficial for their students' MFL learning.

Numerous aspects of the second strategy, that of replacing the current State MFL examinations with CEFR international exams, have been considered. The research findings indicate that there is widespread support amongst stakeholders for this proposed initiative. Indeed, 68% of surveyed sixth year students and 100% of MFL teachers are "in favour of doing an international CEFR exam instead of the Junior Cycle / Leaving Cert. exams." The senior management of the second-level schools that participated in the research as well as the Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) are very supportive of the strategy.

Nonetheless, prior to implementing the strategy, certain issues would need to be addressed. It was noted that some students may express a certain reluctance to take the CEFR exams given that these exams place a strong emphasis on the oral component of the MFL. As such, developing a culture that encourages speaking the MFL would be very important. An additional issue that was raised is that there is no consensus amongst different European countries as to what the CEFR levels are, e.g. what a B1 standard is in one language may be of a lower or higher standard compared to another language. The CEFR levels would therefore need to be thoroughly benchmarked. Notwithstanding these two important issues, no significant barriers to implementing the strategy were identified by participants. There was widespread consensus amongst the participants that the implementation of CEFR exams could empower and motivate students to progress their language skills, and as a result, could positively foster greater plurilingual competences in second-level students in Ireland.

Summary of findings: Strategy 2

- A majority of students (68%) and teachers (100%) are in favour of students doing an international CEFR exam instead of the Junior Cycle / Leaving Cert. exams.
- CEFR international exams (DELF and TEG) are already successfully taking place in two of the participating schools.
- Respondents believe that the CEFR international exams could be beneficial in terms of student MFL learning.
- Participants advise that the CEFR exams could be more relevant to student needs, and that the exams have the potential to increase student motivation in their MFL studies.

Impediments to its introduction:

- Students may offer some resistance, in particular, due to the oral focus of CEFR international exams.
- The CEFR exams have no external benchmarking agency. There can be significant disagreement among different countries as to what levels their CEFR exams are, e.g. what a B1 standard is in one language may be of a lower or higher standard compared to another language.
- It would be difficult to teach and prepare students for both the State exams in Ireland and CEFR international exams. As such, even at the initial stages of the introduction of CEFR exams, it may prove too difficult to prepare students adequately for both types of examinations.
- While the European Language Portfolio (ELP) could support students as they prepare for their CEFR international exams, it is neither well known nor widely used in second-level schools at present. Nonetheless, of those students and teachers who use it, 59% of students and 100% of teachers either strongly agreed or agreed that the ELP has been beneficial in students' MFL learning.
- Participants have identified 3 current implements to integrating the ELP in MFL programmes: a lack of familiarity with the ELP, not enough time to implement the ELP in MFL teaching and learning, and insufficient continuous professional development on incorporating the ELP and maximising its potential in the MFL classroom.

Table 5.10: Summary of findings: Strategy 2

5.5 Results concerning strategy 3: Implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning in post-primary schools

The results from this strategy concerning the feasibility of adopting Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) are discussed within the Irish education system in this Section (5.5) and within the wider context of the European Schools system in Section 5.6. In the research conducted in the four post-primary schools, the sixth year students were asked if they “believe there are enough MFL class periods/time in the week for me to become fluent in the MFL I study”. Only 6% of students strongly agreed and 31% agreed. In total, just over a third of students believe there are enough MFL class periods/time in the week to become fluent in their MFL. 20% neither agreed nor disagreed, 28% disagreed and 15% strongly disagreed. Their MFL teachers also answered the same question. In response, only 17% of MFL teachers agreed that “there are enough MFL class periods/time in the week for students to become fluent in the MFL they study”. 33% disagreed and 50% strongly disagreed. The findings from both students and teachers indicate that students are not receiving enough MFL class time on a weekly basis in order for them to become fluent in their MFL.

As noted in Chapter Three, between Junior and Senior Cycles, second-level students in Ireland receive a minimum of 380 tuition hours in their MFL. This should be a sufficient number of hours for students of French, Italian and Spanish to successfully achieve a CEFR B1 standard. Obtaining this level in the German language would likely require more MFL hours (see table 5.11). As also explained in Chapter Three, employing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) could be beneficial to help support students in their MFL learning and fluency development. In fact, as students would be exposed more to their MFL through CLIL on a weekly basis, this may facilitate some students achieving a higher CEFR standard in their MFL, such as a B2.1 or B2.2 level. Similarly, if a student is struggling with achieving a B1 standard, CLIL could be advantageous in developing and reinforcing students’ MFL competences at that level. CLIL could therefore aid in students achieving a minimum standard of B1 level.

CEFR Level	French	German	Italian	Spanish
A1	60 – 100	80 – 200	50 - 60	60
A2	160 – 200	200 – 350	100 – 120	180
B1	360 – 400	350 – 650	240 - 300	300
B2	560 – 650	600 – 800	320 – 400	480
C1	810 – 950	800 – 1000	450 – 500	660
C2	1060 - 1200	1000+	600 – 650	840

Table 5.11: Recommended language tuition hours to achieve CEFR levels

Source: Alliance Française (2021); Goethe Institut (2018); Accademia Italiana di Lingua (2021); Instituto Cervantes (2017)

MFL students, their MFL teachers, as well as other stakeholders were invited to answer a series of questions on this third proposed strategy: the adoption of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in second-level schools in Ireland. At the start of the CLIL section in both the student and teacher questionnaires, participants read three short paragraphs explaining CLIL and the proposed model. In the interviews, a short explanation detailing the proposed CLIL strategy was given before questions were asked. When asked in the questionnaire if they believe adopting CLIL as part of the second-level education system is “worth giving a trial”, the students responded as follows: 15% strongly agreed and 43% agreed. 18% neither agreed nor disagreed, while 19% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed. In terms of the responses to the same question in the MFL teacher questionnaire, 72% of strongly agreed, while 14% agreed and 14% disagreed. Leaving aside those who neither agreed nor disagreed, 71% of students and 86% of teachers either strongly agreed or agreed with the proposal. This indicates a strong level of support to trial CLIL in the post-primary education system in Ireland.

Only three in ten sixth year students (29%) either strongly agreed (6%) or agreed (23%) that they find it “easy to learn” their MFL. Indeed, the process of learning an MFL is not easy for many learners (Dörnyei, 2012). Students were asked if they believe adopting CLIL would “make MFLs easier for me to learn”; 12% strongly agreed, while 44% agreed. 21% neither agreed nor disagreed, 16% disagreed, with 7% strongly disagreeing. The MFL teachers were asked if they believe the introduction of CLIL would make it easier for them to teach their MFL. 29% strongly agreed, 57% agreed, while 14% neither agreed nor disagreed. It would appear from these findings that the adoption of CLIL could make MFLs easier for students to learn and for teachers to teach.

The qualitative data provided by students, teachers and other stakeholders provides an important insight into the positive disposition amongst both students and teachers towards the adoption of CLIL. These findings may also help to explain why students and teachers believe that the adoption of CLIL would make it easier for students to learn their MFL. When the students were asked, “[i]n your opinion, how are MFLs best learned,” several respondents indicated by “speaking the [target] language”. One student noted, “by being immersed in the language and spending a lot of time listening, speaking and reading it” (student in all-boys post-primary school). Another student wrote, “by conducting classes completely through the MFL” (student in all-girls post-primary school). A further student stated, by “teaching the class fully through the language” (female student in the Gaelcholáiste). There were many other student comments of a similar nature. These responses indicate that students make a correlation between actively using the target language and developing fluency in that language. Given that CLIL as a methodology provides, to varying degrees, immersion

through the target language, it is therefore understandable that students would favour the approach.

Moreover, MFL Teacher 2 in the all-boys post-primary school advises that from his experience of working in a bilingual school in Spain, CLIL worked very well for students. He said, "I think CLIL would be a good thing to introduce because I've seen it in ... I was in Spain". Furthermore, the Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), Ms Karen Ruddock, also offers an understanding as to why CLIL has the potential to work very well in the Irish education system. She advises that there are CLIL projects currently taking place with second-level students on a trial basis in different parts of Ireland. Ms Ruddock notes that the students are "really enjoying the experience, and... I think it's more interesting for the students when the content is authentic, and it's real, and it's meaningful".

In the student questionnaire, 56% of students indicated that they enjoy (18% strongly agreed and 38% agreed) learning their MFL at school. When asked to what extent sixth year students believe the adoption of CLIL would "make language learning more enjoyable", the students replied as follows: 5% strongly agreed and 30% agreed. 35% neither agreed nor disagreed, 18% disagreed and 12% strongly disagreed. Moreover, 57% of MFL teachers strongly agreed, with 29% agreeing and a further 14% neither agreeing nor disagreeing that the introduction of CLIL would make language learning more enjoyable for students. The highest proportion amongst students were those who neither agreed nor disagreed (35%). This may indicate that, while the majority of students see the benefit of adopting CLIL, over a third of them are not sure if CLIL would make language learning more enjoyable. It is also possible that as the concept of CLIL may be new to many of them, they cannot adequately answer this question. Some may also think that learning another subject through an MFL could be quite difficult for them.

Almost two-thirds of students (65%) either strongly agreed (16%) or agreed (49%) that they are "motivated to learn the MFL" they study. Coleman *et al.* (2007) advise that motivational levels of MFL students generally deteriorate as students progress through second-level education. As such, 65% of students being motivated in their MFL studies in Sixth Year is a positive finding. When asked if they believe adopting CLIL "would motivate me more in learning my MFL", 12% of students strongly agreed and 39% agreed. 30% neither agreed nor disagreed, 13% disagreed, with 6% strongly disagreeing. In addition, 57% of MFL teachers strongly agreed, with 29% agreeing and 14% neither agreeing nor disagreeing that the introduction of CLIL would motivate students more in learning the MFL they study. As such, a majority of students (51%) and MFL teachers (86%) agree that CLIL could motivate students. These findings are supported by Coyle *et al.* (2010), who advise that the CLIL

approach can improve student motivation. They highlight that where students voluntarily participate through the additional language, it “can enhance overall motivation towards the subject itself” (2010: 11). The challenge would be to encourage students to voluntarily participate. This would require a clear plan outlining all the benefits and taking on board any concerns. An incentive may also entice participation. In the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations, students who do these exams through the Irish language are awarded up to an additional 10% in their marks (criteria apply). As students would only be doing part of their course through the MFL under this strategy, 10% would not be feasible. However, perhaps some grading benefit could be afforded, possibly through assignment work.

Only 9% of students agreed (none strongly agreed) that they would consider themselves “fluent in the MFL” they study. As noted in Chapter Three, the role CLIL can play in developing MFL fluency can be significant. Given that students learn the key concepts of the content subject through their MFL, the learners benefit by engaging more actively in the content (Dalton-Puffer, 2008) and this can positively impact on fluency. In addition, CLIL reinforces language acquisition and learning in a relatively natural way (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Lyster, 2007). CLIL activities “create natural learning situations, they imitate real-life situations in classroom settings” (Stratieva-Ivanova & Todorova, 2018: 10). As a methodology, the primary objective of CLIL is not necessarily to learn the mechanics of a language, but instead to use language as a vehicle to learn content. CLIL therefore provides a real purpose and incentive for using one’s MFL. For students, language becomes a means of learning content as opposed to being an object of study. CLIL also “increases the motivation for learning as it presents the information in a consistent manner and in a real context of use” (Stratieva-Ivanova & Todorova, 2018: 10). CLIL is therefore instrumental in developing students’ communicative competences in their MFL.

In the questionnaire, the students were asked if they believe introducing CLIL “would improve my fluency in the MFL I study”. 27% of the students strongly agreed and 47% agreed (74%) that introducing CLIL would improve their fluency in their MFL. 19% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, 6% disagreed, and only 1% strongly disagreed. 57% of MFL teachers strongly agreed, 29% agreed and 14% neither agreed nor disagreed that the introduction of CLIL would improve students’ fluency in the MFL they study. This data indicates that CLIL could be very beneficial to improving students’ fluency levels in their MFL (with 74% of students and 86% of teachers in agreement).

Just under a third of students (29%) either strongly agreed (11%) or agreed (18%) that they only study their MFL as it is a requirement for entry to many third-level courses. 18% neither agreed nor

disagreed, 40% disagreed and 13% strongly disagreed. In addition, 50% of students either strongly agreed (19%) or agreed (31%) that the MFL they study will help them in their future careers. 25% of students neither agreed nor disagreed, 13% disagreed, and 12% strongly disagreed. The findings therefore indicate that many students see a correlation between their MFL studies and their future careers. One student noted, “[i]t is becoming a more desirable trait for employers if you know a foreign language. I think many students and parents are motivated by this.” MFL Teacher 2 in the all-boys post-primary school noted that many students see the value of MFLs for their futures. They say that, “Oh actually, I'm glad I chose this [MFL] because it's good for this job or this area”.

Moreover, 84% of students indicated (45% strongly agreed and 39% agreed) that they “believe the MFL I study is a valuable lifelong skill”. In response to the question if students believe introducing CLIL “would encourage me to see MFL learning as a lifelong skill”, 15% strongly agreed, 41% agreed, 28% neither agreed nor disagreed, with 12% disagreeing and 4% strongly disagreeing. When those who neither agreed nor disagreed are removed, 79% of students indicated that they believe that the adoption of CLIL would encourage them to see MFL learning as a lifelong skill. In the teacher questionnaire, 57% of respondents strongly agreed, 29% agreed and 14% neither agreed nor disagreed that the adoption of CLIL would encourage students to see MFL learning as a lifelong skill.

The students were also asked if adopting CLIL “could potentially increase the number of plurilingual students at post-primary level”. In response, 18% strongly agreed, 47% agreed, 20% neither agreed nor disagreed, 12% disagreed, and 3% strongly disagreed. 29% of MFL teachers strongly agreed and 71% agreed that the introduction of CLIL could increase the number of plurilingual second-level students. These findings clearly indicate that the vast majority of students (65%) and teachers (100%) believe that implementing CLIL could potentially increase the number of plurilingual second-level students.

In the case where respondents were in favour of the introduction of CLIL (they had either strongly agreed or agreed to the question on giving it a trial), they were asked to indicate which year in the second-level education system (1st, 2nd, 3rd, Transition Year, 5th or 6th) they believe would be the best one to introduce it. 51% of students stated that they believe it would be best to introduce CLIL to students in First Year, 9% indicated that Second Year would be best, 4% thought Third Year would be the most opportune, while the final 36% of students had the opinion that Transition Year would be the best year to introduce CLIL to students. No students chose either Fifth Year or Sixth Year. The MFL teachers replied to the same question. One teacher was not in favour of its introduction. As

such, there were only 6 respondents to this question. 67% indicated that they believe CLIL should start in First Year while 33% think it should commence in Transition Year.

The final question on introducing CLIL related to what percentage of class time “should be spent teaching through the MFL”. In order to answer this question, students had to firstly be in favour of introducing CLIL into the second-level education system. 16% of students believe that 5% to 10% of class time should be spent teaching through the MFL. 24% stated that it should be 11% to 20% of class time, 33% advised that between 21% and 30% of class time should be spent teaching through the MFL. 19% of respondents indicated that up to 50% of class time should be spent teaching through the MFL, while 4% think that it should be up to 75%. The final 4% believe that the MFL should be taught for “almost all the class”. The MFL teachers replied to the same question. One teacher was not in favour of its introduction. As such, there were only 6 respondents to this question. 17% of MFL teachers believe that the MFL should be spoken between 11% and 20% of class time. Another 17% think that up to 50% of class time should be spent using the MFL. The remaining 66% of teacher respondents stated that they believe the MFL should be spoken for “almost all the class”.

In terms of which academic year would be best to introduce CLIL, the most popular choices were First Year (51% of students and 67% of teachers) and Transition Year (36% of students and 33% of teachers). With regard to commencing CLIL in First Year, while it would be very limited as most students would only be commencing their MFL studies during this year, some of the teacher participants believe that it would be useful in terms of getting students used to CLIL and experiencing the MFL beyond the MFL classroom.

As for the percentage of class time that would involve CLIL initially, the sixth year students indicated that they would support shorter periods of CLIL time, the most popular options being: 24% choosing between 11% and 20% of class time through the MFL, and 33% indicating a preference for between 21% and 30%. A further 19% are in favour of CLIL being used for up to 50% of class time. By contrast, while 17% of MFL teachers would support CLIL being used between 11% and 20% of class time, and a further 17% indicating they would favour CLIL up to 50% of class time, the majority of the surveyed teachers (66%) support CLIL being used for “almost all the class.” The students clearly favour a reduced amount of class time through their MFL, compared to their MFL teachers.

The researcher further explored the potential adoption of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) during his interviews with a number of the MFL teachers and the senior management of some

of the participating schools in the research project. The researcher also interviewed the Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland.

The Principal of the Gaelcholáiste advised that, as his school is an Irish-medium school, he knows that immersion works. As such, he believes that Content and Language Integrated Learning through MFLs could be explored. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) states that Irish-medium schools “exemplify good practice in teaching and learning subjects through a student’s second language, a model of CLIL which could be extended to the learning of other languages at all levels of education and training” (2017a: 16). The Principal of the Gaelcholáiste believes that it would be possible to give CLIL a trial with the subject CSPE (Civic, Social and Political Education), but not with SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education). The reason he offers that CSPE is preferable for CLIL is because CSPE is largely a content-based subject. By contrast, SPHE requires students to be able to fully participate in important matters relating to life skills; being inhibited by linguistic competences in a foreign language would not be ideal.

Moreover, the Deputy Principal of the all-boys post-primary school said that such a CLIL initiative “will have a huge amount of merit. I think it would be a fantastic thing to... I suppose that's how you learn languages really, isn't it?” The level of support CLIL received from both school leaders may be due to the fact that adopting CLIL is “more likely to require a modification, as opposed to a major change, in daily classroom practice” (Mehisto *et al.*, 2008: 27).

MFL teacher 1 in the all-boys post-primary school believes that adopting CLIL would be “absolutely” beneficial for students. MFL teacher 2 in the all-boys second-level school is of the opinion that the introduction of CLIL “would depend on a teacher having a skill set. It would obviously have to be a French teacher doing it. But I don't see any reason why we couldn't do something like that”.

Discussing his own experience of working in Spain and how well the system of CLIL works there, he stated:

I think CLIL would be a good thing to introduce because I've seen it in ... I was in Spain for a couple of years in a primary school there and it was a bilingual primary school, and it was that kind of thing... These are just kids, primary school kids and they have an unbelievable level of English and it's because they're going to this school and they're used to that system.

The MFL teacher in the co-educational post-primary school (English medium) advises that she “could see buy-in” from schools. In fact, she states that she does not “see half as much problems in trying to implement something [like] that”.

The Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) is a strong proponent of adopting Content and Language Integrated Learning in schools in Ireland, stating that PPLI has CLIL projects in operation in some second-level schools in Ireland at present. She advises that the feedback from students and teachers is very positive, in particular, because the students have the opportunity to use their MFL in an authentic way. This finding is supported by the European Commission which states that CLIL “can provide effective opportunities for pupils to use their new language skills now, rather than learn them now for use later” (2004: 19).

However, a couple of issues with adopting CLIL as part of the second-level education system were highlighted by some participants. The Principal of the Gaelcholáiste noted there would be an “issue with getting teacher combination” (MFL teacher and content subject). The Deputy Principal of the all-boys post-primary school concurred, stating that “the obvious barrier is down to staff”, as schools would need to have the staff to teach additional subjects through the MFLs. The same concern was raised by MFL teacher 1 in the all-boys post-primary school, who questioned if it would be possible to have a number of MFL teachers who could also teach a number of content subjects. She stated that “I think it'd be impossible to get somebody who did have French and then had those other subjects as well. I think that would be very difficult”. The MFL teacher in the co-educational post-primary school (English medium) echoed the same issue, that the “lack of people who would be qualified in both the language and the subject” would be problematic.

Moreover, the MFL teacher at the Gaelcholáiste advises that he “could see teachers resisting a little, maybe a lot, I suppose”. The reason he offers is because “you're asking them (MFL teachers) to reach out into different classes, or start teaching maybe subjects they're not as strong in, or they might see it as extra work, and would the pay be coming with it, and all that stuff?” He believes for CLIL to be successfully implemented, “you'll need your in-service days, and things like that, to help you along with it”. These findings are supported by Harrop who notes that the reality is “[t]eachers' abilities are key in this area, but the lack of specific training is an all too frequent hurdle” (2012: 64). She notes that many teachers lack the strategies to make the content language understandable through the interlanguage for all learners and, as a consequence, they may not necessarily develop all learners' abilities. Moreover, Harrop advises that where the content teacher is lacking in MFL proficiency, this can result in the learners making the same language mistakes (Harrop, 2012: 64). Indeed, Harrop argues that to address the issues in CLIL, there should be “more integrated and socially inclusive whole-school language policies” (2012: 67). Therefore, establishing the right CLIL model, as part of a well-developed language policy and planning document, is crucial in order to achieve a plurilingual second-level education system.

Various elements of the third proposed strategy, that of implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning as a core tenet of MFL teaching and learning, have been examined. Both the quantitative and qualitative data indicate strong support amongst stakeholders for its adoption. Indeed, some 58% of surveyed sixth year students and 86% of MFL teachers believe that introducing CLIL is “worth giving a trial.” 56% of students believe that CLIL would “make MFLs easier... to learn” and 86% of MFL teachers believe that CLIL would make it easier for them to teach their MFL. While only 35% of students indicate that CLIL would make language learning more enjoyable, some 51% of students indicate that the introduction of CLIL would motivate them more in the learning of their MFL. Moreover, 74% of surveyed students and 86% of MFL teachers believe that CLIL would improve student fluency in their MFL. A clear majority of students (65%) and teachers (100%) believe that implementing CLIL could potentially increase the number of plurilingual second-level students.

While the proposed introduction of CLIL is welcomed by the participants, significant issues have been raised that would need to be addressed before widespread implementation of any CLIL strategy. The issue of not having enough teachers available who are qualified to teach a content subject, and are also qualified/sufficiently competent in the MFL for CLIL classes to take place, was raised as a very real obstacle. Nonetheless, in the scenario where the teacher has the necessary linguistic competences, but is not qualified in a content subject, CLIL could be trialled with subjects that do not require specific qualifications, such as CSPE. Moreover, the fact that CLIL would likely create an additional workload for MFL and content teachers would need to be considered in the development of a CLIL strategy for schools. Finally, CLIL teachers would require considerable ongoing continuous professional development training. While all these issues are significant, there is cause for optimism that CLIL could be successfully implemented in the second-level education system in Ireland. Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) is piloting several second-level CLIL projects in different parts of the country, all of which are reporting positive outcomes.

Summary of findings: Strategy 3

- Strong support from stakeholders, especially amongst students (58%) and teachers (86%), for giving CLIL a trial.
- 74% of surveyed students and 86% of MFL teachers believe that CLIL could improve student fluency in their MFL.
- A clear majority of students (65%) and teachers (100%) believe that implementing CLIL could potentially increase the number of plurilingual second-level students.
- First Year is the preferred school year to introduce students to CLIL (according to students (51%) and teachers (67%)).
- Of those in favour of the introduction of CLIL, the preferred percentage of CLIL class time to be taught through the MFL is as follows: 33% of students chose between 21% and 30% of CLIL class time, and 66% of teacher respondents stated that they believe the MFL should be used for “almost all the class”.
- It may be best to commence CLIL with subjects such as CSPE or PE.
- Irish-medium schools already exemplify good practice in the CLIL approach.
- Pilot CLIL projects are already taking place in Ireland and the initial feedback from those participating in the programmes is very positive.
- Extra bonus marks for exams may act as an incentive to entice student participation in CLIL programmes.

Impediments to its introduction:

- There are not enough MFL teachers to meet the current staffing needs of schools. The introduction of CLIL would pose considerable staffing challenges. For this reason, CLIL could not be implemented nationwide in the short to medium term.
- Many current MFL teachers would not be qualified to teach a content subject in addition to their MFL.
- MFL teachers may not have the proficiency levels required to teach a content subject through the MFL.
- There may be resistance amongst MFL teachers to introducing CLIL as it would require substantial extra work.
- Teachers would require significant ongoing continuous professional development.
- Significant research would be required to develop the right CLIL model/s for second-level schools in Ireland.
- An optimal CLIL programme would need to be developed as part of a robust whole-school language policy and planning strategy.

Table 5.12: Summary of findings: Strategy 3

5.6 The European Schools system as an aspirational model for Ireland

The European Schools system is an existing model in place across the European Union that fulfils the ambition of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002). The Secretary General of the European Schools system, Mr Giancarlo Marcheggiano, highlights that the European Schools system is a proven model that meets, if not exceeds, the aim of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002). He advises that “we have language 1 (L1), we have language 2 (L2) and we have language 3 (L3). And those three are compulsory subjects”.

Mr Marcheggiano notes that the European Schools (ES) students do not only study these languages as part of the school curriculum, indeed, he maintains that all ES students leave second-level education with a high degree of fluency in their L2 and L3. The Director of European School Brussels III, Ms Micheline Sciberras, believes that the students certainly achieve the required CEFR standards in L1, L2 and L3. She states, “achieve them, definitely. I think the great majority exceed... I can give you the exact percentage after but close to 99% success rate in the Baccaalaureate⁵”. The Director of European School Brussels II, Ms Kamila Malik, also concurs and states that “they’re achieving” the required L2 and L3 standards.

Given that the European Schools system is an educational model that achieves the ambitions of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002), and employs various components of the three proposed strategies that this thesis explores, the researcher carried out a series of interviews with members of the senior management team in the European Schools system: the Secretary General, the Deputy Secretary General, the Head of the Pedagogical Development Unit as well as two Directors of the European Schools. The aim of this research was twofold: firstly, to determine what structures, procedures and culture are in place in the European Schools system that largely ensure that its students leave second-level education being fluent in their L2 and L3. And, secondly, to explore the feasibility of the Irish education system adopting components that successfully develop plurilingualism in the European Schools system.

5.6.1 European Schools language policy

A language policy is a very important pillar of the European Schools system. The Secretary General, Mr Marcheggiano, believes that a language policy is “extremely important” in developing plurilingual students. The Head of the ES Pedagogical Development Committee (PDU), Mr László Munkácsy, advises that the ES Language Policy is at the heart of the success of the ES system, as the policy contains the various facets of how languages are taught, learned and assessed in the system. The Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, believes that “with something as important as languages, it is crucial that any national system has a language policy”. However, she cautions that the confines of a language policy should not be limited and notes that, while a language policy “needs to address how to offer our students the possibility of engaging, of learning, of developing their linguistic skills”, it should go beyond this and “address the preservation, the appreciation and the celebration of our mother tongue”.

⁵ The European Baccaalaureate examinations are the final second-level examinations in the European Schools system, the equivalent of the Leaving Certificate examinations in Ireland.

Moreover, Ms Sciberras emphasises that a language policy should clearly define stakeholder roles, stating that without a language policy the system:

can become counterproductive because I think you're meant to be doing something, you think I'm meant to be doing something. And neither of us does anything. Or else we both do and it's not beneficial for the child at the end of the day and that is our focus.

The Director of Brussels II, Ms Malik, explains that an additional benefit to a language policy is that all the information concerning languages is in one place, and as such, a language policy “will bring order” to the language development process for stakeholders.

The European Schools model provides a strong argument for implementing a language policy and planning document in order to truly develop plurilingual second-level students. As noted in Chapter Two, schools in Ireland are not required to have a language policy. The European Schools language policy clearly delineates the roles and expectations of stakeholders. It explains how languages are taught, learned and assessed in their system. It brings order by providing a source document of all relevant details in one place. Indeed, where such a document is lacking, the approach can be haphazard, as noted by Ms Sciberras above. A structured path to developing plurilingual students, through a language policy, is, as the Secretary General notes, “extremely important”.

5.6.2 Importance of the dominant language

Possessing a solid understanding of one’s own dominant language is a prerequisite to learning additional languages in the European Schools system. The Secretary General, Mr Marcheggiano, advises that the ES Language Policy “recommends that the pupils should be educated in their dominant language first and then learn from the knowledge [of that language]... all the other languages”. The Director of Brussels II, Ms Malik, explains that “[i]f we don't know our mother tongue very deeply, we cannot build... we cannot build any other foreign language”. As well as having a strong basis in one’s L1, the Deputy Secretary General, Mr Beckmann, states that in order to do L3, the student has to also have an advanced level in their L2. In the context of Ireland, this would oblige students to develop a strong understanding of the mechanics of their L1 and to also have an advanced level in their L2, which would be the Irish language for most students (McCárthaigh, 2019).

The findings from the research carried out in the four post-primary schools indicate that having a solid foundation in one’s L2 can impact positively on students in terms of learning their L3. Of the 21 students who attended the all-Irish speaking post-primary school (Gaelcholáiste), 19% strongly agreed and 24% agreed that attending a Gaelcholáiste made it easier for them to learn the MFL they study. 19% neither agreed nor disagreed, 29% disagreed, and 9% strongly disagreed with the

statement. Moreover, the experience of learning one's L2 can positively impact on one's learning of their L3. In the research in the four participating second-level schools in Ireland, 95% of students studied Irish at school while 5% did not. Of those who studied Irish at school, 41% believe that their experience of learning the Irish language positively influenced their interest in learning the MFL they studied, 9% believe that it negatively influenced their interest, while 50% indicated that their experience of learning the Irish language neither positively nor negatively influenced their interest in the MFL they studied.

5.6.3 Fostering plurilingualism from primary school

The Deputy Secretary General of the European Schools, Mr Beckmann, highlights the fact that, as ES students start learning their L2 in primary school, it gives them a significant advantage at second level. Mr Beckmann advises that by learning an L2 from a very young age, children "get used to other languages, from the beginning". The Director of Brussels II, Ms Malik, concurs and states that the learning of an additional language from a young age is one of the benefits of the ES system. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the European Schools system does not act in sharp contrast to the Irish education system in this regard. In Ireland, only 8.1% of primary school pupils are taught through the Irish language (Gaeloideachas, 2019); as such, Irish is the second language (L2) for the vast majority of pupils at primary school level. Learning one's L3 officially commences in First Year of post-primary. As such, both education systems start the learning of L2 at primary level and L3 at the start of second-level education. The key difference is outcome. The European Schools model has a very successful model, where there is "close to 99% success rate in the Baccalaureate" in terms of students meeting, even exceeding, the required CEFR levels for L2 and L3 (Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras).

In the research in the four participating second-level schools in Ireland, 84% of students advised that they first started learning their MFL at post-primary level, while 16% started in primary school. In the case where students only started learning their MFL at post-primary level, 86% said it would have been more beneficial to have started learning their MFL as part of their studies in primary school, while 14% said it would not.

Moreover, the research findings from the four participating second-level schools in Ireland support the position that having a relatively strong standard in one's L2 (e.g. having attended an all-Irish speaking primary school) can positively impact on students' learning of their L3 at second level. Of all the student participants, only 19 students (22%) had attended an all-Irish speaking primary school, while 68 students (78%) had not. Of those who attended an all-Irish speaking primary school, when

asked if having attended an all-Irish speaking primary school made it easier to learn their MFL in second level, 26% strongly agreed, 26% agreed, 16% neither agreed nor disagreed, while 21% disagreed and 11% strongly disagreed.

5.6.4 Curriculum and assessment

Effective curricula and syllabi are a central tenet to the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs in the European Schools system. With the exception of L1, all language curricula and syllabi (L2, L3, L4 and L5) are aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The Head of the Pedagogical Development Unit, Mr Munkácsy, highlights that all European Schools students are assessed in line with the syllabi and that “[a]ll syllabuses have attainment descriptors, which clearly give the teacher and the pupils, the guidelines where you should be, where the pupil should be in different competences”.

The European Schools system has an interesting model of assessment in the upper secondary (S6 and S7). The European Baccalaureate is the final certificate awarded by the European Schools system to students based on the subjects they have taken in years 6 and 7. This certificate is calculated based on an “A mark” and a “B mark”. The “A mark” is a “preliminary mark, which is awarded for work in class, oral participation, and the results of tests taken throughout year 7 and which accounts for 50% of the final mark” (Offices of the Secretary General of the European Schools, 2014: 3). The “B mark”, also weighed at 50%, is the result of the summative examinations at the end of year 7. Students do 5 written examinations (35% of the final mark) as well as three oral examinations (15% of the final mark). Both the “A mark” and the “B mark” are combined to determine the final European Baccalaureate result. In order to be awarded a European Baccalaureate, students are required to have achieved an average grade of 60% (OSG, 2014: 3).

This research project has also explored the possibility of students documenting their MFL progress with the help of the European Language Portfolio (ELP). In the Irish education system, a similar model of an “A mark” could be adopted where a grade is awarded for students’ work in class, their work on their ELP (documented in the student’s L1), their in-class oral participation, as well as the results of their formative assessments.

5.6.5 Content and Language Integrated Learning

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a core component of developing students’ L2 competences in the European Schools system. While the ES language policy stipulates that CLIL has to be employed across all schools, individual schools have a degree of flexibility on how it is

practised. In the CLIL classes, as the students do not have one common native language generally, classes are held fully through the students' L2.

When considering CLIL as an option to develop plurilingualism amongst students, the choice of which CLIL subjects to employ is an important consideration. The Director of Brussels II, Ms Malik, notes that it may be possible to do a subject such as Ethics through the MFL. However, she adds that in Ethics class, students "should have the possibility to say what you want to say, not what you could say". As such, where CLIL is adopted, it is important that its introduction does not unnecessarily negatively impede students from being able to engage in the subject.

In the CLIL classes in the European Schools system, the teachers adapt the speed at which they speak the additional language in line with the level of the class. The Director of Brussels II, Ms Malik, notes that teachers "cannot forget that it's the foreign language for them [the students]" and, as such, they "should underline some specific vocabulary to introduce this vocabulary". The Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, concurs, and adds that, while "you need to gauge that level", you also need to "stretch them" by speaking at a more natural pace so that the class is "more challenging".

In the European Schools system, the vast majority of students are able to follow their CLIL subjects through their L2. The ES students do not do any subjects through their L3. The Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, advises that, as the students have already completed five years of L2 at primary level, as well as two years in secondary (S1 and S2), they generally experience little difficulty following the CLIL subjects through the L2. The Director of Brussels II, Ms Malik, adds that the students have "had so many years of L2 that really when they go to History and Geography, etc., it's not a problem... the level of L2 is really very high". In addition, the Secretary General states that "we hardly experience a situation where the kids are not able to cope" in CLIL classes. He adds that "of course, teaching the subject, there are new words that need to be learned and those words are explained to the pupils".

Nonetheless, the European Schools system has strong bridging supports in place for students who are struggling to follow their MFL classes and/or their CLIL subjects through their MFL. These supports may also be particularly appropriate for new students to the school. Where required, the Secretary General advises that "we offer extra courses in order to help the pupil to catch up with the level of the rest of the class". This bridging support system can take the form of crash courses where a student would be freed from some other subjects in order to focus on his/her MFL skills. This could be done for a semester, and in the next semester, the student would follow their normal subject timetable. Another possibility is that a couple of extra MFL lessons could be added to that student's

timetable to provide additional support. Peer learning is also employed where a weaker student is seated beside a strong student who has the same dominant language. In this case, the strong student can translate as appropriate and help the weaker student.

In fact, MFL support can be provided at any stage throughout a student's schooling in the European Schools system. The Director of Brussels II, Ms Malik, advises that tracking of students' progress from primary through secondary is an additional key component to the plurilingual development of students. She believes that tracking is often missing in national systems, but, where possible, this should be addressed so that student progress is monitored, and interventions can be made where necessary.

According to the Secretary General of the European Schools, classes being held only through the L2 of the student is the "real secret of the European Schools. Why? Because there is no option. The teacher can only speak 100% the language of the course". The European Schools system contrasts greatly with Ireland in this respect. In the research carried out in the four post-primary schools in Ireland, in response to the statement, "I teach the vast majority of each language class through the MFL of that class", 29% of teachers disagreed, 42% agreed and 29% strongly agreed. In response to the same question, the students were not as generous as their teachers about the amount of class time taught through the MFL. 20% strongly disagreed that their MFL classes are taught for the full duration through the MFL, 38% disagreed, 21% neither agreed nor disagreed, 18% agreed and 3% strongly agreed. The fact that MFL classes are not generally taught through the L2 is a key difference between how additional languages are taught in Ireland and how they are taught in the European Schools system. Indeed, if, as the Secretary General suggests, this is the "real secret" to the success of the European Schools, the education system in Ireland ought to make every effort to ensure the MFL is spoken as much as possible in MFL classes.

The reason why the MFL may not be spoken to the extent it should be in MFL classrooms in Ireland may be due to a lack of MFL teacher competences and/or confidence in their MFL skills. In the research in the four post-primary schools in Ireland, only 29% of teachers strongly agreed that they feel confident teaching through their MFL. 57% agreed and 14% neither agreed nor disagreed with the same statement. While still a positive finding, it nonetheless demonstrates that a clear majority of MFL teachers do not feel completely confident teaching a full class through their MFL.

In addition, the research from this project indicates that the language of communication between the MFL student and his or her classmates and teacher is oftentimes not through the MFL. Some 14%

of teachers strongly disagreed that their students always verbally communicate with them and their fellow classmates through the MFL of the class, 58% disagreed, and 14% neither agreed nor disagreed. In fact, only 14% of teachers agreed that it takes place. This data indicates that the MFL is not widely used in interactions between MFL teachers and students as well as between students and students.

The Secretary General explains that “the second secret [to the success of the European Schools system], the second weapon is that normally we use native teachers in that language”. The Director of Brussels II, Ms Malik, affirms that a native speaker is always the preferred teacher option. Nonetheless, she advises that the ES system has excellent non-native language teachers. In the case where a teacher is not a native speaker of the language they will teach through, the minimum requirement is that the teacher is fully fluent in that language and that he/she is qualified. The Secretary General states that the CEFR level the teachers require “depends on what you teach. If you teach language, so, foreign language, you need to have a C2 level. If you teach another subject, like mathematics or science, then we agree with the level of C1”. However, while qualifications are important, a lot of emphasis is placed on how well the teacher candidate can speak the language at the initial interview for the teaching position.

As noted in Chapter Three, teacher quality is “the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement” (King Rice, 2003: v). Given that the requirement to become an MFL teacher in Ireland is CEFR B2.2 level, this is considerably lower than the standard needed in the European Schools system. If foreign language classes and CLIL classes are to be held through the MFL, based on the findings above, MFL teachers in Ireland would likely require greater training in their MFL. The European Schools system demonstrates that this may be a very worthwhile investment.

In addition to the need to improve the oral competences of teachers, substantial work would be required to develop cross-curricular activities. In fact, in this research project, 14% of teachers strongly disagreed that in their schools there are sufficient cross-curricular activities involving the MFL they teach, while 17% disagreed, 17% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 49% agreed. It would appear that the basic cross-curricular foundations upon which CLIL could build in Irish second-level schools are in need of development.

5.6.6 Culture of high expectations

Having high expectations of students is central to the ethos of the European Schools system. By way of example, in terms of CLIL classes, the Secretary General states that “pupils are expected to have

the necessary competence in the language in order to follow the curriculum in that subject". Indeed, the Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, notes that the students "live up to your expectations very often". Ms Sciberras states that expectations on students to achieve high linguistic competences in their MFL are such that "a good number of students at the end of S5, those students let's say who had their L3 English, very often opt to change that ... their L2 ... into English". Essentially, this means that although students only commence their L3 in secondary, their level of that L3 is so high that it could be considered their L2 (which they start in early primary school). Ms Sciberras advises that "there's also high parental expectations". She states that the students "have high expectations of themselves. We have high expectations of them. The parents also".

Part of achieving the expected standards in one's MFL is believing in oneself and one's abilities in learning additional languages. In the research in the four post-primary schools in Ireland, only 16% of students strongly agreed that they believe that they are "good at learning languages", 33% agreed, 34% neither agreed nor disagreed, 13% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed. As such, less than half of the students believe they are good at learning languages. In addition, only 5% of students strongly agreed that their "parent(s) take(s) an active interest" in their MFL studies. 31% agreed, 25% neither agreed nor disagreed, 29% disagreed, and 10% strongly disagreed with the statement. As such, in the context of second-level schooling in Ireland, work would need to be done to help students develop greater self-efficacy with regards to additional language learning. In addition, as highlighted in Chapter Three, parents/guardians should be encouraged to play a greater role in developing the MFL competences of their children.

5.6.7 Teacher training

Regular training plays a significant role in the upskilling of teachers in the European Schools system. At school level, there are training days, training afternoons and training periods which experts (both in-school and out-of-school) lead. In addition, teachers are encouraged to lead training sessions and exchange practices. Schools are encouraged to have pedagogical days. Topics for training sessions can come from the teachers. There is also induction training for new teachers. Moreover, ES teachers are encouraged to get involved in peer observations (teachers observing each other's teaching and practices and learning from one another in the process). Training is also provided to teachers to encourage them to engage in self-evaluation. There is also a mentoring system for new teachers. When a new curriculum is introduced, there is training provided to the coordinators and teachers. School training is an obligatory part of being a teacher in the ES system. For school directors and deputy directors in both primary and secondary, each year there are joint management training days.

By contrast, in the research in the four post-primary schools in Ireland, MFL teachers reported receiving very infrequent continuous professional development (CPD). 14% of teachers reported receiving MFL CPD training every two to three months, 43% stated every six months, 29% advised the training is provided once a year, with a further 14% noting that it takes place only when there are curricular changes. In addition, only 14% of teachers agreed that they believe that they receive sufficient CPD training relating to the teaching, learning and assessment of the MFL they teach. 0% strongly agreed, 43% neither agreed nor disagreed, 14% disagreed, and 29% strongly disagreed that they receive enough MFL CPD. When asked what would be the “ideal frequency of continuous professional development training sessions relating to the teaching and learning of MFLs”, 14% of MFL teachers believe it should take place every month. A further 43% think it should occur every two to three months, 29% advise that it should be every six months, and 14% indicate that it should take place once a year.

5.6.8 Effectuating change

As noted in the Introduction Chapter, effectuating changes to the Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle MFL curricula and examination models is a very long process. Although a new MFL programme at Junior Cycle was introduced in the academic year 2017-2018, this is the first change at Junior Cycle since 1989. Similarly, the Senior Cycle MFL curricula and examination structures remain the same today as those introduced in the academic year 1995-1996. It is to be welcomed that a Senior Cycle review has been taking place by the NCCA (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) since 2016. The aim of this review is to shape a new curriculum, including that for MFLs, that “genuinely meets the needs of all learners for years to come.” (NCCA, 2020). While an interim report has been published (NCCA, 2019), at present there is no advisory report, and as such, it is not yet known how the curricula and assessments of MFLs will likely change in the years to come at Senior Cycle.

In contrast to the Irish education system, the European Schools system has official procedures in place that allow stakeholders to propose and implement changes and adjustments, particularly in terms of curricula, assessment, and policies. The Offices of the Secretary General of the European Schools (OSG), the body charged with managing the European-wide education system, facilitates change in an important way. The Secretary General, Mr Marcheggiano, advises that where change does occur, the process for such change is “rather bottom-up than top-down”. As such, one of the key roles of the OSG is to actively work with and listen to the feedback of stakeholders on the ground. The Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, sums up the European Schools change-effecting structures:

in many countries, you have a good number of educators employed within a Department of Education or a Ministry of Education, or whatever it's called in different countries. They formulate the policies, they formulate the regulations and send them to the schools... With this system, you have... a pretty lean head office that is effective in coordinating, not demanding.

Stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, and directors) elect representatives who are tasked with representing the respective group's views, attending meetings, participating in working groups, and making decisions on proposed changes. The students are represented by CoSup (*Conseil Supérieur*). The parents' association, *InterParents*, also has their own representative. The teachers have their own interschool representatives from their *Inter-Schools Teaching Staff Committee*. There are different representative groups for the seconded teachers and the locally recruited teachers. The directors have a directors' representative. The Accredited European Schools (AES) also have their own representatives for students, parents, teachers, and directors.

In terms of the actual process of effectuating changes to policies and curricula, the Head of the Pedagogical Development Unit, Mr Munkácsy, outlines the steps. Firstly, he advises that the Offices of the Secretary General are in "constant communication" with the inspectors, directors and other stakeholders. Mr Munkácsy explains that proposed changes to the system normally come from the bottom-up, from a stakeholder or group of stakeholders. For a proposed change to be considered, it will have generally been requested on several occasions by stakeholders.

If the Board of Governors (governing body of the European Schools) agrees to officially explore a raised issue or proposal, it establishes a working group (e.g. a Pedagogical Reform Working Group) with a mandate to commence work. Depending on the remit of the working group, each group of stakeholders nominates a member to the working group. If the working group deals with educational support, the size of the group is generally around ten members. The Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, believes that in a working group "every stakeholder feels and is active in the contribution for the formulation of regulation and policy". The working group is set a period of time to come up with a proposal. The members draft a document and then consult widely with the groups they represent.

When a working group has a finalised proposal ready, the Offices of the Secretary General (OSG) are notified. If the proposal relates to a pedagogical reform, it is then put on the agenda for the Joint Teaching Committee (JTC). The JTC is a preparatory committee that examines "proposals concerning the organisation and curricula of the schools" (OSG, 2020). It is comprised of school directors, inspectors, as well as representatives of teachers, parents and students. Other members of the JTC

include a representative of the European Commission and the European Patent Office. All members of the JTC are provided with the proposal in advance in electronic form and, at the meeting, they will make a decision on accepting the proposal, rejecting the proposal or requesting that modifications be made. As such, Mr Munkácsy notes that “all decisions are made with the participation of the stakeholders”. For this reason, he emphasises that the European Schools system is “really a stakeholder-oriented system”. However, Mr Munkácsy explains that the Board of Governors makes the final decision on whether to accept, reject or send back the proposal for further work.

5.6.9 Implementing change

The Secretary General, Mr Marcheggiano, states that even radical changes are possible in an education system. However, he argues that implementing them successfully is essential. He advises that the key to success is to give “time to the people to understand and to digest and maybe implement the change step-by-step and not everything at once”. Indeed, he notes that some of the changes in the past, that were regarded as “radical” at the time, are now “a reality in the school system”.

Mr Marcheggiano states that the “reality is that people have fears”. While he acknowledges that it is very important to address these concerns, he advises that “[w]hat you have to do is, for sure, be sure that the implementation is a successful one”. To do this, he notes that providing clear explanations, building consensus and offering staff training are core to the process. He makes a couple of additional succinct points. Firstly, the professionals should make the decisions. If parents are resistant to a change that the school knows will be to the benefit of the students, he states “I think that’s the responsibility of the professional to take the decision and say, “well, that’s the decision”, and then make sure that it is implemented correctly”. Secondly, he advises that it is not always possible to have all stakeholders’ support, before adding that, “[y]ou never have 100% against so you have to work on the ones who are on board and then try to increase the number of... convinced ones, to convince the other ones”.

The Head of the Pedagogical Development Unit (PDU), Mr Munkácsy, advises that normally when a change is introduced, it is monitored to ensure that it is successfully implemented, and if there are issues, they are dealt with in a timely manner. This may be done by starting with a pilot project in one school. By adopting a pilot approach, it is easier to make amendments so that a successful working model is in place for all other schools to employ.

Simply adopting changes is not sufficient in the European Schools system; the changes have to become a reality in the daily lives of students and teachers in the schools. One of the primary responsibilities of the school directors is that they ensure the successful implementation of changes. The Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, highlights that the changes need to be experienced in the classroom:

The most important element for me is the actual teaching and learning that goes on in the classroom. Because sometimes we can get stuck in meetings. And I always like to remind myself that the difference needs to be felt in the classroom. And the student needs to feel the difference in quality... the jump in quality.

In addition to the role the school directors play, the Administrative Board (the equivalent of a Board of Management in Irish schools) of each individual school has a responsibility to ensure that all policies and changes (e.g. from the Joint Teaching Committee) are successfully implemented at the respective school.

The European Schools inspection system provides an additional layer of support to ensure that standards are maintained and changes have been correctly implemented. The Deputy Secretary General, Mr Andreas Beckmann, advises that the inspection system evaluates the implementation of policies and procedures at school level. They check “whether the individual school applies the rules and the policies as it should”. The Secretary General, Mr Marcheggiano, adds that there are two types of school inspections in the European Schools system – a whole school inspection and an implementation inspection. After the whole-school inspection takes place, a comprehensive report with a series of recommendations is written. An implementation inspection takes place two years later to check that the recommendations from the whole-school inspection have been implemented correctly. The cycle then starts again two years later with a new whole-school inspection. Essentially, each European School is officially inspected every two years.

5.6.10 Adapting the European Schools model

The European Schools system is a model that successfully works. It meets, if not exceeds, the ambitions of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002). As such, the researcher asked each of the interviewees in the European Schools system if they believe the European Schools model could be successfully adapted to an average state-run school.

The Secretary General of the European Schools, Mr Marcheggiano, believes that the European Schools model could be adapted to work in an average state-run second-level school. However, he advises that this is “not an easy process” because “in order to have a European School, you need to

have also a European atmosphere [mixture of European nationalities]. And in a normal national school, this is definitely missing". In addition, in the European Schools system, the students need to, at a minimum, receive tuition through their dominant language (L1). In the European Schools system, the only subject that has to be taught through the L1 is the dominant language of the student. The Secretary General highlights the above two criteria because a European School has to be comprised of a combination of students from different European countries who receive L1 tuition through their dominant language.

Nonetheless, the Secretary General affirms that the European Schools system could work in Ireland, adding that in the case where a school has a relatively large group of students whose dominant language is, for example, Romanian, "what you could do, using the European Schools model, is to offer them the tuition in Romanian, that will remain their dominant language, and then offer the rest of the curriculum through English which would become their second language". The Secretary General continues that, as the students would be attending school in Ireland, and:

the pupils are living in a country speaking the language that they are learning, you can stimulate them more and offer more subjects through English. So, you can reduce the number of subjects which are taught in Romanian maybe to L1 and mathematics. And then all the others through English.

Moreover, Mr Marcheggiano advises that Ireland could more easily adopt the European Schools model as "you have an excellent opportunity because you have Irish and English". Students in Ireland are required, for the most part, to study both official languages – Irish and English. Students could choose to do the European Schools L1 programme through English or Irish. It is therefore possible to establish an Irish-language section and an English-language section. Some content subjects (non-language subjects) could be taught through Irish while others through English. Given second-level students' poor competences in the Irish language (CSO, 2016: 66), such a model of Irish and English may not work in practice at national level, at least initially. In addition to the option of teaching through the Irish language, content subjects could also be taught through the MFL of students. The Secretary General confirms that the schooling system in Ireland already meets the European Schools criteria for accreditation.

The Deputy Secretary General, Mr Beckmann, states that he is not sure that adapting an average state-run school to meet the criteria of the European Schools system would be "easy" because he thinks "it is quite complex". He notes that if one only has small numbers of students doing a language it can be "quite costly". However, "if you have enough pupils, it is a wonderful system". He further states that if the school is small, "it will not work". As such, he advises that "you have to have a critical mass of pupils".

The Head of the Pedagogical Development Unit, Mr Munkácsy, believes the European Schools model could be adapted to work in an average state-run school:

I think, yes. And why I'm saying this is because I can see that more and more... schools ask for accreditation, which means that they want to use our curriculum and our language regime. And they see that this is a distinguishing feature from other international schools... I know that more and more countries are asking for accreditation, which means that it seems to be working.

The Director of Brussels II, Ms Malik, believes that the European Schools model could in part be adapted to an average state-run school. The reason it could not be fully adapted is “because in the normal national school you will never have this multicultural environment”. As such, she adds that “some elements, you can take, you can borrow, you can also implement in the national system”.

The Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, believes that the average state-run school could “definitely” be adapted to the European Schools model, stating that this is already taking place with the “dramatic increase of the accredited schools in the past recent years. It is becoming pretty clear that many countries are recognizing the great asset of the European Schools system”. She continues:

Yes, definitely, it is a system that can be implemented at a national level. It will take organization, it will take discussion, it would obviously take a paradigm shift I think, also in teaching and learning methods. But it is something which is proven to be... successful and works.

During the interviews with the senior management of the European Schools system, a recurring message was communicated: there is no need to reinvent the wheel, so to speak, especially as regards developing a successful language policy for second-level schools in Ireland. The Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, states:

We have so much wealth of experience in language policies and other systems, so literally collecting other language policies from other systems and seeing what applies to us, what doesn't apply to us. And having our own eclectic approach in developing the Irish language policy hopefully.

As such, Ireland should learn from other successful educational models that truly foster plurilingual second-level students.

5.6.11 European Schools system advice for Ireland

Each interviewee in the European Schools system was requested to offer any advice they may have for Ireland in terms of developing greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students. The Secretary General, Mr Marcheggiano, believes that “you need a very strong political decision” to make a significant impact on the numbers of plurilingual second-level students. He also believes it would be beneficial to use native speakers as the MFL teachers for the students, suggesting that “this will make immediately a dramatic change”.

In addition, Mr Marcheggiano advises that it is important to start the learning of an MFL at an early age. By doing this, he advises, students “become more open to learning other languages”. The Deputy Secretary General, Mr Beckmann, concurs, recommending that, if possible, to start learning the MFL as early as possible in the education system. Mr Beckmann also suggests that some subjects could be taught through the MFL.

The Head of the Pedagogical Development Unit, Mr Munkácsy, advises to plan carefully, to “really be cautious and look to the future, what impact it would have on pupils and teachers and on the whole system”. He also states that there is “always strong resistance when a change is being implemented”. However, he believes that “you should listen to the resistance but once the principles are clarified, you should go ahead”. Furthermore, Mr Munkácsy states that there are two big mistakes that can be made. The first one is to stand still and not move forward because certain people are “repeatedly... concerned”. The other error is to implement the change too quickly. As such, he believes that implementing a change is a careful balancing act; one should proceed with caution, but at the same time, not be afraid to act.

The Director of Brussels II, Ms Malik, emphasises the importance of being “open”, suggesting that one should be:

open to the diversities, to observe also the other colleagues, and to use the experience. Because if you are closed in one bubble, so it's difficult to progress. If you can see the differences, so you can sit down and reflect, "Maybe I'm doing something wrong", and it would be good to improve.

The Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, advises to “start small”, saying she is “very much in favour of starting on a pilot project. Taking a school, a cluster of schools”. By starting small, she believes it is easier to identify issues and to fix them at the early stages. In turn, a better working model is available to be adopted across the entire system. Ms Sciberras also cautions against “having large numbers of people in meetings to formulate a policy because very often you get stuck in discussion”. As such, she advises to “start a small pilot project working group drafting an initial policy. And then enlarging and, yes, going to a national level if it's something which proves to be very, very beneficial”.

In essence, Ireland can learn a considerable amount from other education systems such as the European Schools. In so doing, the country should examine what has led to that system’s success, the errors they have made along the way, as well as the current struggles they experience. The objective should be to create a bespoke model that meets the needs of the Irish education system. When this model has been created, it should be piloted. The model should then be regularly reviewed and

calibrated until a truly successful one is deemed by stakeholders to have been achieved. This model can then be replicated, as appropriate, throughout the country.

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated that there is considerable support amongst stakeholders for the three proposed strategies. The first strategy, that of harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR through cross-age teaching, and the second strategy, that of replacing the current State MFL exams with CEFR international exams, could both be implemented in the medium term. As for the third strategy, the adoption of Content and Language Integrated Learning, to operate at scale, given the existing impediments discussed in this chapter, this strategy would likely be a longer-term ambition. The findings from this research project also indicate that stakeholders believe that the proposed strategies are largely achievable, and most importantly, have the potential to foster greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students.

Ultimately, to make the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement a reality, it is unnecessary for Ireland to start from the beginning. The country should look outwards and examine successful plurilingual educational models, such as the European Schools system. While much can and should be learned from the European Schools model, perhaps what it offers most is that it demonstrates that fostering a plurilingual second-level education system is indeed achievable. The findings from this chapter certainly indicate that while there are obstacles ahead, there are solid foundations in place, as well as considerable support amongst stakeholders, to realise the ambitions of the Barcelona Summit Agreement through the Irish second-level education system.

Chapter Six

Recommendations and Conclusion

Ireland's education system has indeed progressed significantly since its inception in 1831. With the advent of 'free' universal second-level education in 1967 (Coolahan, 1981: 195) and 'free' third-level undergraduate education in 1996 (DES, 2009: 4), Ireland laid the necessary foundations to help prepare future generations for success on the world stage. Having emerged from centuries of colonial rule to become an independent state, Ireland now dares to aim to become the best education system in Europe by 2026 (Government of Ireland, 2018).

Notwithstanding the substantial achievements attained in the Irish education system over the best part of the last two centuries, in terms of developing a plurilingual populace, there have been significant issues. At an EU Heads of State meeting in Barcelona in 2002, Ireland signed up to the 'mother tongue plus two other languages' (MT+2) ambition. However, some two decades later, Ireland has not delivered on this commitment in any significant measure. Indeed, as noted throughout this thesis, in no real sense of the term can Ireland lay claim to having a truly plurilingual populace (EC, 2016: 3); it remains a significant challenge for the nation.

As highlighted throughout this thesis, the education system is the ideal setting to develop plurilingualism. Despite criticisms, there is evidence for the existence of a critical period, beyond which point, one's aptitude for language learning diminishes (Johnson & Newport, 1989; Birdsong & Molis, 2001; Muñoz, 2006; Vanhove, 2013; Hartshorne *et al.*, 2018). Given that this period (childhood and adolescence) largely coincides with that of the school-going years, schools indeed offer an opportune environment for inculcating plurilingualism.

Students in the second-level education system in Ireland are generally not achieving their plurilingual potential. Indeed, given the 380 MFL tuition hours students receive throughout their second-level studies, they are significantly underperforming (see Appendix M). While different languages require varying suggested hours of MFL tuition to achieve each CEFR level, as noted in Chapter Three, with 380 hours of MFL tuition, it should be possible for MFL learners of French, Italian and Spanish to achieve a CEFR B1 standard (German may require more hours). The vast majority of students are simply not achieving this standard (see Appendix M). Even the grades that students do attain may not accurately reflect their true MFL competences. The DES Leaving Certificate Chief Examiner Reports (2016) for French, German, Italian and Spanish find that while students have done well in

their exams, they express concern that many students are achieving their MFL grades through rote learning. This highlights the urgent need to reform the education system to foster genuine plurilingual competences.

While the education system is indeed a powerful conduit to develop additional language competences, the primary aim of this thesis has been to specifically examine how the post-primary education system can best achieve this goal. Psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung, offers an insightful starting point in this worthy endeavour. He once wrote, “[w]e cannot change anything unless we accept it” (2014: 240). These are very wise words. In essence, if one truly wishes to develop a plurilingual second-level education system, one ought to candidly accept the reality of how things are. The fact is that while significant time and resources are dedicated to MFL teaching, learning and assessment at post-primary level in Ireland, the return on investment could be greatly ameliorated.

Although significant issues exist, progress is being made. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) should be commended for its forward-thinking *Languages Connect* (2017) strategy. In many respects, the document may be considered Ireland’s first national modern foreign languages policy (Earls, 2019). Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), the organisation charged with the implementation of the *Languages Connect* strategy at post-primary level, deserves praise for the impressive work they have undertaken to date.

This thesis contends that it is essentially unnecessary for Ireland to start from the beginning in any pursuit to develop an education system that fosters greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students. Ireland should endeavour to learn from other countries and other educational models which have successful and proven plurilingual educational operations in place. The European Schools system is an accomplished, existing educational model across the European Union that markedly fulfils the ambition of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002). Moreover, the European Schools system operates several elements of the three proposed strategies this thesis has aimed to explore. For these reasons, the European Schools system has been considered throughout this project.

The overarching aim of this thesis has been to examine the extent to which the second-level education system in Ireland can make the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement a reality in the coming years. Substantial research in Ireland and abroad has taken place. As a result, the research questions can be answered, and a number of recommendations and conclusions can be made.

6.1 Overview of the research

In order to significantly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students, and thus help make the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement a reality, this thesis has proposed the implementation of three strategies:

1. Harmonising post-primary MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR);
2. Replacing the current State MFL exams (Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate) with CEFR international exams;
3. Implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

As the three strategies cannot be considered in a vacuum and need to be understood within a larger context of post-primary schooling in Ireland, this doctoral thesis set out three principle research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of key stakeholders of modern foreign language (MFL) teaching, learning and assessment in post-primary schools in Ireland?
2. To what extent would the three proposed strategies that aim to advance the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs at post-primary level in Ireland be feasible within the current education system?
3. What are the implications of the responses to a) the above questions, as well as b) the qualitative research carried out beyond Irish shores, for future language-in-education policies and practices in the Irish post-primary education system?

In order to answer the research questions, a multi-site case-study research project in four post-primary schools was employed. Research took place with the following three cohorts: sixth year MFL students, their MFL teachers as well as their school principals or deputy principals in each of the following four types of schools:

- one single-sex boys' second-level school (English-medium),
- one single-sex girls' second-level school (English-medium),
- one co-educational second-level school (English-medium),
- one co-educational second-level school / Gaelcholáiste (Irish-medium).

These four types of second-level schools were chosen due to the fact that they represent the four most common types of post-primary schools in Ireland. Across all four schools, in total, 87 MFL sixth year student questionnaires as well as 7 MFL teacher questionnaires were completed. In addition, 4 MFL teachers, 1 principal and 1 deputy principal participated in separate interviews. The researcher

carried out a mixed-methods research project, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. By utilising a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, “researchers can bring out the best of both paradigms, thereby combining quantitative and qualitative research strengths” (Dörnyei, 2007: 45). The strengths of one method aimed to compensate for the weaknesses of the other. Due to the mixed-methods epistemological orientation of the research, triangulation was employed as the means of a) integrating both the quantitative and qualitative data, as well as b) a method to validate the data.

In addition to the research at post-primary level, the researcher conducted an interview with the Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland. Qualitative research, by way of interviews, also took place in the European Schools system in Brussels with the Secretary General, the Deputy Secretary General, the Head of the Pedagogical Development Unit as well as with two directors of the European Schools.

The main methodological philosophy employed in this thesis was that of Grounded Theory. As highlighted in Chapter Four, the aim of Grounded Theory is “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 2). From the data with MFL sixth year students, their MFL teachers, as well as other stakeholders in the education system in Ireland and abroad, the researcher formulated a theory to explain current issues in the education system and to set forth a potential blueprint to improve current practices.

6.2 Outcome of the three strategies

In the Introduction Chapter, the author advised that the strategies proposed in this thesis to make the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement (2002) a reality through the second-level education system in Ireland were considered based on each strategy meeting certain criteria. Below is a list of these criteria as well as an explanation of what is meant by each term.

- *Feasible*: it should be possible for the Irish education system to implement the strategies.
- *Support*: the strategies should have a reasonable chance of obtaining support by stakeholders in the Irish education system.
- *Achievable*: the strategies should be achievable within the Irish education system.
- *Cost-Neutral*: the strategies should be relatively cost-neutral to implement within the Irish post-primary education system.
- *Measurable*: it should be possible to clearly measure the success of the strategies.

- *Deliver results*: the strategies should have real potential to greatly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students.

Having completed the research project, an examination of the extent to which each of the criteria has been met in the three strategies this thesis has explored is discussed below.

6.2.1 Strategy 1: Harmonising post-primary MFL Classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The first strategy this thesis considered is that of harmonising post-primary MFL classes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The extent to which each of the criteria is met is discussed below:

Feasible	✓	It is possible to harmonise second-level MFL classes in line with the CEFR. Nonetheless, implementing this strategy would result in a significant departure in how timetabling works in schools. Given the timetabling flexibility required, it may prove more challenging to implement this strategy in smaller schools; the larger the school, the more this strategy may be possible. Moreover, the research has indicated that there would be psychological barriers to overcome, e.g. the mentality that it has always been done a certain way.
Support	✓	The research in this thesis has demonstrated that there is significant support for this strategy amongst both MFL students and teachers. 75% of students and 100% of teachers surveyed either strongly agree or agree that the strategy is worth giving a trial. School managers recognise the benefits of cross-age teaching, but advise that there are possible issues with timetabling across different years.
Achievable	✓	The central challenge this strategy faces is it being considered a form of 'ability grouping'. As highlighted in Chapter Three, this strategy proposes a more accurate term, that of 'attainment grouping', as students are only being grouped temporarily based on their grades at a given time. Provided that timetabling issues are addressed as well as any perceptual issues, the feedback from stakeholders indicates that this strategy is very achievable.
Cost-neutral	✓	As students are simply grouped differently, it is envisaged that this strategy is cost neutral. However, teachers would require

		continuous professional development to successfully implement the strategy. This may form part of teachers' mandated CPD hours.
Measurable	✓	This strategy is measurable through CEFR exams. Indeed, the true measure of success would be if students are doing better in the CEFR-aligned MFL classes, and if they are progressing through the CEFR levels at a better than expected speed.
Deliver Results	✓	If students are set by their CEFR level and do better in their MFL competences, which could be verified through CEFR international exams, then this strategy can certainly deliver results in terms of greatly increasing the numbers of plurilingual second-level students. In addition, by empowering students to work towards their desired CEFR level, this reform would give students (and their parents) greater control over their pedagogical goals in line with their educational priorities.

Table 6.1: Strategy 1: Review of meeting project criteria

6.2.2 Strategy 2: Replacing the current State MFL exams with CEFR international exams

The second interrelated strategy this thesis investigated is replacing the current State MFL exams (Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate) with Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) international exams. The aim is that students would leave second-level education with at least one internationally recognised CEFR exam certifying their MFL level. In relation to this assessment strategy, the extent to which each of the criteria is realised is considered below:

Feasible	✓	It is possible for students to do a CEFR international exam instead of the traditional State second-level examinations.
Support	✓	There is considerable support amongst stakeholders for this strategy. 68% of surveyed sixth year students and 100% of MFL teachers are in favour. The senior management of second-level schools who participated in the research as well as the Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) are very supportive of this potential reform. The main issue with this strategy that was raised over the course of the research is that some students may be particularly reluctant to embrace it given the oral assessment component of each exam. A further issue was raised surrounding the lack of harmonisation of CEFR standards from one language to

		<p>the next; what a B2 standard is in one MFL may not be a B2 standard in another. Notwithstanding these issues, there was general consensus amongst stakeholders that the implementation of CEFR exams could empower and motivate students to make significant progress in their MFL competences.</p>
Achievable	✓	<p>This strategy is certainly achievable. It could operate throughout the student's second-level schooling. It would not be necessary to take an official CEFR international exam for each level; in this case, CEFR-like in-house exams should be sufficient. However, where State examinations would normally take place, students could do CEFR international exams in their MFL(s). The organisations responsible for administering the CEFR exams could send the exams to the schools where students could do the exams during the official State examinations. If students prefer to take the CEFR exam earlier, this too would be possible, but in this case, the student would need to organise the taking of a separate CEFR exam at the CEFR organisation's examination centre.</p>
Cost-neutral	?	<p>As this strategy would require external examination bodies to create and correct the exams, this initiative may not be cost-neutral. However, such costs may be largely offset by no longer requiring the State Examinations Commission (the assessment and certification body for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations) to create and correct the MFL exams. Moreover, many of the current examination structures and practices could remain in place and therefore significantly reduce extra costs. Superintendents are already appointed by the State Examinations Commission (SEC), so there would be no additional cost for supervising the exams. Students are already tested orally for the Leaving Certificate, so the cost of doing an oral exam may not be much different. Given the tens of thousands of students who would need to take an oral exam, it may be best to continue with the current system whereby external teachers (to the student's school) are appointed by the SEC to administer the oral exams.</p>

		However, an additional expense would be facilitating oral exams for the Junior Cycle examinations (currently there is no mandatory oral examination at this level). In addition, under this strategy, teachers would require significant continuous professional development training.
Measurable	✓	By the very nature of students taking CEFR exams, the progress is measurable.
Deliver Results	✓	Students would be tested in all four competences. By comparison to the current assessment models, this would place an increased emphasis on developing oral competences. This focus alone would help improve students speaking abilities. Students would be able to progress at a more expedient pace than they currently do in MFL learning. In terms of matriculation/Leaving Certificate points, there would be an incentive to achieve the highest possible CEFR grade in their final CEFR exam. The CEFR exams would be largely assessed by external bodies and benchmarked against international standards. This means that students would have an international qualification, and could progress to their next CEFR level at a later date. For these reasons, this strategy has significant potential to increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students.

Table 6.2: Strategy 2: Review of meeting project criteria

6.2.3 Strategy 3: Implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning

The third correlated strategy this thesis explored is the introduction of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in second-level schools in Ireland. In terms of this strategy, the extent to which each of the criteria is fulfilled is examined below:

Feasible	?	It is possible to introduce CLIL as part of the second-level education system in Ireland. However, the research has determined that there may not be enough teachers with sufficient proficiency in their MFL to introduce CLIL on a national level at present. In addition, sourcing enough teachers with MFL/content subject (e.g. geography, history, etc.) combinations to deliver a CLIL programme at scale would likely prove very challenging.
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Support	✓	The research has found that there is significant support amongst both MFL students and teachers for the introduction of CLIL. 58% of surveyed MFL sixth year students and 86% of MFL teachers believe that introducing CLIL is “worth giving a trial”. Indeed, some 51% of students indicate that the introduction of CLIL would motivate them more in the learning of their MFL. Moreover, 74% of surveyed students and 86% of MFL teachers believe that CLIL would improve student fluency in their MFL. Notwithstanding the concerns relating to MFL teacher supply, school leaders are generally very supportive of the initiative.
Achievable	?	Introducing CLIL is certainly achievable in post-primary schools in Ireland. Nonetheless, a lot would depend on teacher proficiency standards in their MFL. It may only be possible to introduce partial CLIL in some subjects such as CSPE and SPHE (teachers do not require a degree in these subjects) given the potential shortage of MFL teachers who are also qualified to teach curricular content subjects.
Cost-neutral	?	Assigning an MFL teacher to teach his/her MFL class and also a CSPE or SPHE class would likely be cost-neutral to schools, as schools already have to provide these classes. However, teachers would require continuous professional development (CPD) to successfully implement the strategy. Such CPD training would be relatively cost-neutral given public service pay agreements, where teachers are obliged to partake in additional professional training. Developing a wider CLIL strategy would likely incur significant costs in terms of employing more teachers who are qualified to teach MFLs as well as standard content subjects.
Measurable	✓	It would be possible to measure the success of CLIL through the testing of students in their MFL competences. If students are able to engage through their MFL in a content subject, this would be measurable across all four language competences over a given period.
Deliver Results	✓	If students are able to participate in a content subject through their MFL, this would certainly be measurable in terms of testing.

		Moreover, if by doing CLIL, students are able to achieve higher CEFR levels in their MFL exams, this strategy has the potential to increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students.
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Table 6.3: Strategy 3: Review of meeting project criteria

6.3 Overcome impediments to progress

This research project has provided empirical evidence that there is significant support for the three proposed strategies amongst MFL students, MFL teachers and other stakeholders. Nonetheless, there currently exists significant impediments to developing plurilingual second-level students within the Irish education system that should not be underestimated and ought to be mitigated as much as possible. These issues relate to the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs, and have been highlighted throughout this thesis. It is important that each of these is adequately addressed if Ireland wishes to truly develop a plurilingual populace.

6.3.1 Explain importance of becoming plurilingual and develop strong L1 and L2 foundations

Inculcating in learners the importance of becoming plurilingual is essential to any future strategy. The Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), Ms Karen Ruddock, advises that “there's been a lack of awareness in Ireland... about the importance and the value of language learning”. As such, she states that the “challenge for us is to understand how to deliver that message, that language learning is actually very important. And that it's not just important for enterprise, it's also important in terms of developing skills”.

In addition to cultivating a true appreciation for becoming plurilingual, students should possess a solid understanding of their own dominant language (L1). This is a prerequisite to learning additional languages in the European Schools system. The Secretary General, Mr Marcheggiano, advises that the ES Language Policy “recommends that the pupils should be educated in their dominant language first and then learn from the knowledge [of that language]... all the other languages”. The Director of Brussels II, Ms Malik, explains that “if we don't know our mother tongue very deeply, we cannot build... we cannot build any other foreign language”. Moreover, as well as having a strong basis in one's L1, the Deputy Secretary General, Mr Beckmann, states that in order to do L3, the student has to also have an advanced level in their L2. In the context of Ireland, this would oblige students to develop a strong understanding of the mechanics of their L1 and to also have an advanced level in

their L2, which would be the Irish language for most second-level students in Ireland (McCárthaigh, 2019), before they embark on their L3 studies.

6.3.2 Develop a culture of high expectations and self-efficacy

The Irish education system should develop a culture of high expectations in the learning of MFLs as well as inculcating a strong sense of self-efficacy within students. As explained in Chapter Three, school culture and ethos are instrumental in fostering positive attitudes and behaviours. Setting high expectations is a central tenet of the European Schools system. When speaking about CLIL classes, the Secretary General of the European Schools highlights that “pupils are expected to have the necessary competence in the language in order to follow the curriculum in that subject”. Moreover, the Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, advises that the students “live up to your expectations very often”. The benefits are clear: in the European Schools system, having high expectations of students results in many students achieving as high a level in their L3 as they do in their L2 (which they have been studying for a lot longer).

Parental expectations of their children are also important. Ms Sciberras notes that in the European Schools system “there's also high parental expectations”. She summarizes the culture of expectations in their schooling system by saying that the students “have high expectations of themselves. We have high expectations of them. The parents also”. While setting high expectations of students can be advantageous, it is nonetheless important to obtain a healthy balance. In research carried out in UK schools (2019), Malmberg and Martin found that “too much pushing can lead students to feel demotivated or less confident” (2019). As such, they advise that in the long term, “a reasonable balance between pressure and reassurance seems desirable, otherwise exhaustion and disaffection could take over – which can eventually lead to lower academic performance” (2019).

Self-efficacy, the belief in one’s own abilities, is an important component in the learning of MFLs. In this research project, only 16% of students strongly agreed that they believe that they are “good at learning languages,” with 33% agreeing, 34% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 17% either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. If students do not believe they are capable of learning an additional language well, they are clearly at a disadvantage. Fostering self-efficacy in students in the Irish education system is a challenge that needs to be addressed.

6.3.3 Strengthen MFL oral competences

A significant lack of focus on the oral component of MFL teaching, learning and assessment in the Irish education has been raised as a key obstacle to developing plurilingualism amongst post-primary students. Little notes that “[i]f learning the language is not underpinned the whole time by using it, it

becomes impossible to develop anything that gets you anywhere at all in the short term, never mind the medium and long term” (2014). Indeed, for true optimal additional language learning to take place, students need to be regularly speaking the MFL they study.

While the importance of being able to speak the MFL one studies is self-evident, in practice, there has traditionally been no requirement for students to do a Junior Certificate oral exam (DES, 2017a). This demonstrates that oral competence has not been a priority for the Junior Cycle students. In the new Junior Cycle examinations, there is no oral examination component. There is an oral classroom-based assessment (CBA); however, this is prepared over a three-week period in class and students may do it as part of a group. As for the Leaving Certificate, there is a requirement to do a fifteen-minute oral exam. However, this does not take place until a few weeks before the student is due to leave second-level education. As such, there is no necessity, until almost the very end of one’s second-level education, to actually demonstrate oral competence in the MFL.

In terms of developing oral competences, an important place to start would be for both students and teachers to use the MFL a lot more in the classroom. In the quantitative research conducted for this project, only 3% of MFL students strongly agreed and 18% agreed that their MFL classes are taught through the MFL for the full duration. This is in marked contrast to 29% of MFL teachers strongly agreeing and 42% agreeing that they use the MFL for the vast majority of class time. Nonetheless, in terms of going forward, it is certainly promising that 86% of teachers (29% strongly agreed and 57% agreed) indicated that they “feel confident teaching through the MFL”.

6.3.4 Place greater focus on the individual student and implement the European Language Portfolio

In Chapter Three, a lack of focus on the individual student in terms of MFL learning was raised. Essentially, there is one model to meet the needs of all students. In the traditional Junior and Senior Cycles, each school has the same curriculum, each student has the same official exams (common level, ordinary level or higher level), each student has the same official exam dates, and so on. This thesis considers that for optimal MFL learning to take place, a more individualised approach that considers the uniqueness of each learner is required. In particular, the education system in Ireland should:

- a) Adapt (as appropriate) teaching and learning to the individual needs of learners;
- b) Develop language awareness in students;
- c) Instil good language learner characteristics in students;
- d) Encourage students to become autonomous learners.

This thesis has also advocated for the introduction of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) as it would likely be beneficial in encouraging students to document and take responsibility for their learning. If employed correctly, it has the potential to make the language learning process more personal, foster reflection and support individual student needs.

Moreover, the findings from the research indicate that an official tracking system of students' progress across all four language skills should be implemented. In such a system, student progress is not only monitored throughout the year but also year-on-year. This system could flag to students, teachers and parents when MFL concerns arise. Through this system, issues could be identified early and appropriate interventions could be made as needed.

6.3.5 Cultivate a greater role for parents/guardians

The role parents/guardians can play in their child's education is immeasurable. Parents are constitutionally regarded as being the "primary and natural educator of the child" (Constitution of Ireland, 1937: Art 42:1). Moreover, the *Action Plan for Education 2016 – 2019* reaffirms the Department of Education and Skills' position that parents/guardians are "key stakeholders in the teaching and learning process" of their children (DES, 2016a: 40). The *Languages Connect* (2017) strategy takes a strong position that parents/guardians need to exercise commitment to develop their children's MFL competences. The document advises parents/guardians to encourage and motivate their children in their MFL studies (DES, 2017a: 18). This thesis asserts that parents ought to play a much greater role in developing the MFL competences of their children. In the research undertaken with MFL students, only 31% of respondents agreed and 5% strongly agreed that their "parent(s) take(s) an active interest in the MFL" they study.

This thesis has taken the position that it is unreasonable to place the entire responsibility on schools to develop plurilingualism. Parents/guardians are crucial to their children's educational success. This thesis has examined how parents/guardians in the European Schools system play a pivotal role. Parents are involved in their children's language choices as well as any language support needs. The European Schools system also has an active parents' association. The parents/guardians elect a representative, and this person represents parents/guardians on working groups, decision-making bodies (e.g. Joint Teaching Committee), and so on. Parents/guardians can therefore be very influential in terms of highlighting issues as well as proposing and implementing changes to the language teaching, learning and assessment practices in schools.

6.3.6 Disincentivise rote learning

This thesis has identified rote learning as a serious endemic practice in the second-level education system in Ireland that acts as a considerable obstacle to genuinely developing plurilingual students. Burns (2018) states that “Leaving Certificate students rely heavily on rote learning and memory recall to get through their exams”. Rote learning runs contrary to developing proficiency in an additional language (Takač, 2008: 61; Prinsloo, Vorster & Sibaya, 2004: 245).

The European Schools system operates an education system that significantly reduces the possibility of, and need for, rote learning. As noted in Chapter Five, the European Baccalaureate (equivalent to the Leaving Certificate examination system in Ireland) grade, is calculated based on an “A mark” and a “B mark”. The “A mark” is a “preliminary mark, which is awarded for work in class, oral participation, and the results of tests taken throughout year 7 and which accounts for 50% of the final mark” (OSG, 2014: 3). The “B mark”, also weighed at 50%, is the result of the summative examinations at the end of year 7. By not having the entire mark based on one summative examination, as is the case Leaving Certificate examinations, students are incentivised to work consistently throughout the course of their MFL studies. Reforming the Leaving Certificate system to integrate such a system in Ireland is worthy of further investigation.

6.3.7 Create bridging support system

The Irish education system should consider implementing a bridging support system for MFLs. As noted in Chapter Five, the European Schools system employs bridging support structures for students who are either struggling to follow their MFL classes and/or their CLIL subjects through their MFL. The Secretary General of the European Schools explains its main function. He states that “we offer extra courses in order to help the pupil to catch up with the level of the rest of the class”. While such a bridging system could be most beneficial to developing students’ MFL competences, it could prove costly in terms of MFL teacher allocation. In addition, finding time during a busy student timetable for these classes to take place could be a challenge. Nonetheless, in this case, it should be possible to facilitate such a class one day a week after school. The European Schools system also encourages peer learning where a weaker student is seated beside a stronger student. In this way, the stronger student can support the weaker student as appropriate in different ways, e.g. translation, additional explanations, and so on. The principal benefit of a bridging system is that it allows for early intervention. In this case, students may only require limited support so that they can catch up with the level of their class. It could prove to be a very worthy investment.

6.3.8 Establish education committee to effectuate changes

Regrettably, under present structures, there are rare occasions for stakeholders to simply discuss problems and propose changes that could be of significant benefit to MFL students and their teachers. Effectuating change is a very slow process in the Irish education system. MFL curricula and examinations are clear examples of this. Prior to the academic year 2017–2018, the same Junior Cycle MFL curricula and Junior Certificate examination structures had been in place since 1989. Moreover, at Senior Cycle, students today continue to follow the same MFL curricula and Leaving Certificate examination structures that were first introduced in the academic year 1995–1996.

Given the above, this thesis advocates for the creation of a body, similar to that of the Joint Teaching Committee (JTC) of the European Schools, where ideas could be openly discussed, concerns could be raised, proposals could be made, and most importantly, where real action could be taken in an efficient and timely manner with the aim of improving the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs in the Irish post-primary education system.

This committee, to be separate to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), should be comprised of representatives of all stakeholders – students, teachers, parents, principals, inspectors, Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), the State Examinations Commission, etc. Moreover, some experts in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and those doing research in additional language learning could also either attend individual meetings to make presentations or serve on the committee for a certain period of time. As Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) has the specialism in modern foreign language teaching and learning, and has been tasked with the implementation of the *Languages Connect* strategy (2017), it would be advisable to consider placing such a committee under their remit.

In terms of taking action, when there is significant momentum for change on a given issue, the committee should establish a working group, to include representatives of appropriate stakeholder groups and external experts. When the working group has a proposal to make, it should then be presented to the Joint Teaching Committee. The committee's participants may then accept or reject the proposal, or may request that further work be carried out before the document is reconsidered at a subsequent meeting.

6.3.9 Reform the inspection system

At present in the Irish education system, there is no scheduled inspection system where each school has to receive a whole-school inspection every few years. Ireland should consider adopting an

inspection system similar to that of the European Schools system. The ES inspection system ensures that standards are maintained and changes have been correctly implemented. There are two types of school inspections in their system – a whole school inspection and an implementation inspection. After the whole-school inspection takes place, a comprehensive report with a series of recommendations is written. An implementation inspection takes place two years later to check that the recommendations from the whole-school inspection have been implemented correctly. The cycle then starts again two years later with a new whole-school inspection. Essentially, each European School is officially inspected every two years.

6.3.10 Mandate language policy and planning at school level

As highlighted throughout this thesis, to develop greatly increased numbers of plurilingual second-level students as part of an education system, a coordinated strategy is required. Devising a language policy (LP) is essential to this process. The role of language planning should then be support the implementation of the language policy. Shohamy highlights how powerful language policies can be on a countrywide level. He states that “[i]n a large number of nation-states, LP implicitly or explicitly is the main mechanism for manipulating and imposing language behaviours, as it relates to decisions about languages and their uses in education and society” (2006: 47). Indeed, at school level, Ferguson advises that the education system is “probably the most crucial, sometimes indeed bearing the entire burden of LP implementation” (2006: 33).

While *Languages Connect* (2017) may be considered Ireland’s national MFL policy document (Earls, 2019), there is currently no requirement on schools to develop their own language policy. If the Irish education system truly desires to foster plurilingualism, a general national language policy for schools should be created. In addition, each school should have to devise their own language policy and planning document, one that meets the needs of their school and is guided by the national language policy for schools.

The European Schools system offers a pertinent example of how a language policy can be most effective. The European Schools system’s language policy (OSG, 2019), ‘Language Policy of the European Schools’, essentially acts as a language policy and planning document. The aim of its language policy is to “provide a source of information on the ways in which the European Schools put principles into practice” (OSG, 2019: 4).

In terms of how beneficial a language policy at school level can be, the research undertaken in the European Schools system is conclusive. The Secretary General, Mr Marcheggiano, believes that a

language policy is “extremely important” in developing plurilingual students. The Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, states that “with something as important as languages, it is crucial that any national system has a language policy”. Similarly, the Head of the ES Pedagogical Development Committee (PDU), Mr László Munkácsy, contends that the ES Language Policy is central to the success of the European Schools system.

While schools should be required to have a language policy and planning (LPP) document, it is important that stakeholders at school level are also involved in its creation, implementation and review. Devolution of power to schools in terms of creating a language policy can result in real emancipatory potential (Corson, 1999). To help ensure an optimal LPP document, staff should be adequately trained in how to develop it, implement it, and review it. Ongoing support, even post-LPP implementation, should be provided. Finally, an LPP document should be reviewed regularly at school level, the aim being to help ensure that it remains a living document of relevance that serves the needs of students and teachers.

6.3.11 Address issues concerning MFL initial teacher education and continuous professional development

In education, teacher quality is “the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement” (King Rice, 2003: v). Consequently, this thesis contends that in order to develop a truly plurilingual student populace, it is essential that both a) initial teacher training, as well as b) continuous professional development (CPD), be of optimal standard in order to support teachers at each stage of their career. In practice, initial teacher education simply “cannot furnish ‘finished products’” (Teaching Council, 2011: 16); teachers require continuous professional development throughout their teaching career.

In the Irish education system, to become an MFL teacher, the required CEFR level is B2.2. However, as noted in the research in the European Schools system, MFL teachers are required to have at a minimum a CEFR C1 level. If the Irish education system wishes to have MFL teachers speaking as much as possible through the MFL in class, as well as doing some content subjects in part through the MFL (CLIL classes), then serious consideration should be given to incentivising MFL teachers, through ongoing continuous professional development, to achieve a higher CEFR level in their MFL.

As noted in Chapter Five, continuous professional development is a central tenet of the upskilling of teachers in the European Schools system. The ES system has training days, training afternoons and training periods in which experts in various fields (both in-school and out-of-school) lead. Individual

teachers are also encouraged to lead training sessions and exchange practices. Schools are encouraged to have pedagogical days. Teachers are given a strong input into the choice of training they would like to do. There is also induction training for new teachers. In addition, the European Schools system encourages its teachers to participate in peer observations. Teachers are also invited to engage in self-evaluation of their practices. The system also offers mentoring for new teachers. CPD is a mandatory component of being a teacher in the ES system. By contrast, in the Irish post-primary education system, practices can vary considerably at many levels – at school-system level, at individual-school level, and even at individual-departmental level within schools.

While this thesis does not advocate for a one-size-fits-all continuous professional development model for schools, there are nonetheless considerable concerns amongst stakeholders in the Irish education system that there is insufficient MFL CPD being provided. In the empirical research underpinning this thesis, 14% of MFL teachers advised that they receive CPD training once every two to three months, with 43% stating it was once every six months, 29% indicating it was once a year, and 14% saying they only receive CPD sessions when there are curricular changes. When asked if they believe they receive enough CPD training, only 14% agreed, with 43% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and a further 43% either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. The current levels of CPD training for staff are insufficient for optimal language teaching and learning. If Ireland wishes to develop a truly plurilingual populace, regular MFL CPD training that meets the needs of teachers – such as linguistic, pedagogical, motivation, and confidence to teach through the MFL – should be provided.

This thesis recommends that senior school management in the Irish second-level education system also receive tailor-made CPD training relating to the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs. In the European Schools system, school directors and deputy directors (school principals and deputy principals) receive annual training days on issues relating to curriculum and assessment. They are also very involved in proposed changes to courses, curricula and assessments. They vote in favour of or against changes at the Joint Teaching Committee. As such, they are not external to the language-development processes at school level; indeed, they very much play an active role.

6.3.12 Increase number of class-contact hours to become plurilingual

Given that MFL students receive a minimum of 380 MFL tuition hours during the Junior and Senior Cycle programmes, this thesis contends that it is reasonable to expect students to achieve approximately a CEFR B1 standard by the time they leave second-level education. However, if the desired plurilingual outcome is that students are independent users of their MFL, they should attain

a B2 CEFR level (COE, 2001: 5). In order to accomplish such a standard, receiving in the region of 500 to 600 MFL tuition hours over the course of one's second-level education would be required. Nonetheless, it may not be necessary to significantly increase the number of MFL tuition hours should the second-level education system also introduce Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The adoption of CLIL would complement the work done in MFL classes and would provide students with greater exposure to, and affordances for using, their MFL.

In terms of the European Schools (ES) system, L2 classes are complemented with CLIL classes. It should be noted that the ES students also study their L2 throughout their primary schooling. The research conducted with the Secretary General of the European Schools as well as with other senior managers in the European Schools system indicates that the model of reinforcing and developing L2 learning by way of CLIL classes works very successfully. The required L2 standard students have to achieve is CEFR C1 in the European Baccalaureate examinations. The Director of European School Brussels III, Ms Micheline Sciberras, believes that the students certainly achieve the required CEFR standards in their L2. She stated, "achieve them, definitely. I think the great majority exceed... I can give you the exact percentage after but close to 99% success rate in the Baccalaureate".

6.3.13 Tackle MFL attrition rates to Leaving Certificate examinations

This thesis has raised concern regarding the significant decrease in the percentage of students who continue to do an MFL as part of their Senior Cycle studies. Almost 90% of students study an MFL at Junior Cycle, yet this percentage falls to almost 70% at Senior Cycle (DES, 2017a). While students may choose to discontinue their MFL studies at Senior Cycle for a myriad of reasons, motivation in language learning has been identified as a key issue in this thesis. Several elements affect motivation. However, one in particular has been highlighted. If students believe that the MFL they study lacks relevance to their lives, this can greatly discourage them from continuing with their MFL studies. Students therefore need to understand the importance and benefits of additional language learning.

Keeping students motivated is a considerable task for teachers. Indeed, as Scheidecker and Freeman note, "[m]otivation is, without question, the most complex and challenging issue facing teachers today" (1999: 116). In Chapter Three, it was highlighted that motivation rarely comes from one source, rather it is derived from a combination of all four types of motivation: intrinsic, extrinsic, integrative, and instrumental. This thesis does not propose making the learning of an MFL mandatory until the end of one's second-level education; it does, however, advise that ways to increase the numbers of students taking an MFL throughout their post-primary schooling be examined. One such way is highlighted in *Languages Connect*. The document proposes "providing bonus points in Higher

Level Leaving Certificate foreign language subjects in cases where students apply for higher education courses in language-related areas” (DES, 2017a: 10). Regrettably, to date, such proposed mechanisms have not been realised by stakeholders.

6.3.14 Develop MFLs in early childhood

In Ireland, the curricular teaching of modern foreign languages does not officially commence until post-primary level (DES, 2017a). As noted earlier in this thesis, despite criticisms, there is evidence for the existence of a critical period, beyond which point, one’s aptitude for language learning diminishes (Johnson & Newport, 1989; Birdsong & Molis, 2001; Muñoz, 2006; Vanhove, 2013; Hartshorne *et al.*, 2018). These research findings conclude that childhood and adolescence are opportune periods for MFL learning. There is therefore a ‘window of opportunity’ that should be exploited. As such, the teaching and learning of MFLs in Ireland should take place in primary school and be developed at second level.

The findings from the European Schools system supports the position that the learning of MFLs should begin at primary-school level. The Deputy Secretary General of the European Schools, Mr Beckmann, notes that as the European Schools students start learning their L2 in primary school, it gives them a significant advantage at second level. By learning an L2 from a very young age, he states that children “get used to other languages, from the beginning”.

As noted in the Introduction Chapter, the vast majority of students learn Irish as their L2 at primary level (McCárthaigh, 2019) in Ireland. Introducing an MFL at primary level would therefore be most students’ L3. It is to be welcomed that serious consideration is being given to introducing MFLs at preschool level and commencing the studying of MFLs as part of the primary-school curriculum (O’Brien, 2020). While learning an MFL in primary school should be a priority, it is important to appreciate that one of the key ambitions of the new primary-school curriculum, which is still being phased in, is to promote bilingualism of the Irish and English languages.

6.3.15 Learn from other education systems and establish pilot projects

When aiming to address issues relating to the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs at post-primary level in Ireland, it is oftentimes unnecessary to start from the beginning. In essence, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Ireland should embrace a culture of learning from other successful education systems. However, when doing so, the learning should be twofold: firstly, Ireland should determine how the proposed changes developed from the concept stage to a final draft proposal for

consideration; and secondly, how those approved changes progressed to be successfully implemented in the education system.

No matter how passionate one may be about effectuating changes to how MFLs are taught, learned and assessed, it cannot be assumed that such changes will be welcomed on the ground. Indeed, it may be best to proceed with caution. Nicolò Machiavelli (1515) highlights the very real human hurdles to overcome:

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new (Machiavelli, 2010: 21).

This thesis has considered the European Schools system as a proven model that works, not only in terms of its policies and practices, but also in how those very policies and practices have become a reality in the classroom. Creating an education system that has met, and perhaps exceeds, the vision of the Barcelona Summit agreement (2002) is no small feat. The European Schools is an impressive model that demonstrates that creating a plurilingual second-level populace is indeed possible.

To truly develop a plurilingual second-level populace, one should not be discouraged from taking bold steps forward. The findings from this thesis clearly indicate a significant appetite for change amongst all key stakeholders. Where there is such support, substantial changes are possible. Indeed, the Secretary General of the European Schools, Mr Marcheggiano, advises that even radical changes are possible in an education system. However, how those changes are executed is very important. Mr Marcheggiano offers some advice in this regard. He states that “you need a very strong political decision” to make a significant impact on the numbers of plurilingual second-level students. Ultimately, he believes that the key to success is to give “time to the people to understand and to digest and maybe implement the change step-by-step and not everything at once”.

Establishing pilot projects is recommended when considering the implementation of changes on a national level. The Director of Brussels III, Ms Sciberras, advises to “start small”. She states that she is “very much in favour of starting on a pilot project. Taking a school, a cluster of schools”. By starting small, it is easier to identify issues and to fix them at the early stages. Moreover, when implementing changes across the education system, the Head of the Pedagogical Development Unit of the European Schools system, Mr Munkácsy, advises that it is very important to monitor the process and address any issues as they develop. Effectuating changes is a collaborative process amongst all stakeholders. The principal of each school as well as its board of management should be responsible

for the successful implementation of agreed changes. The inspection system should then act as a further support to help ensure that the changes have been adopted and implemented correctly.

Figure 6.1 below illustrates a potential timeframe for the implementation of the recommendations outlined in this chapter. The process is divided into three parts – what can be achieved in the shorter-term, the medium-term, and then the longer-term. Those contained within the shorter-term are essentially cost-neutral. Many of the recommendations in the medium-term range will incur costs, while most of the recommendations in the longer-term will require a significant financial investment. Although it may be argued that some of the recommendations contained in the medium-term category could be placed in the shorter-term (e.g. disincentivise rote learning) or longer-term (e.g. address issues concerning MFL teacher education and continuous professional development), the author believes that they are more adequately and realistically addressed in a more medium-term timeframe. Those included in the longer-term category are largely placed in this extended timeframe as the author believes that they would likely best succeed if the recommendations in the shorter-term and medium-term have firstly been successfully implemented. As for the recommendation to “learn from other systems and establish pilot projects”, the process of learning from other education systems can clearly start without delay, but establishing solid pilot projects to adequately address the significant plurilingual issues that exist in the Irish education system would likely take quite some time.

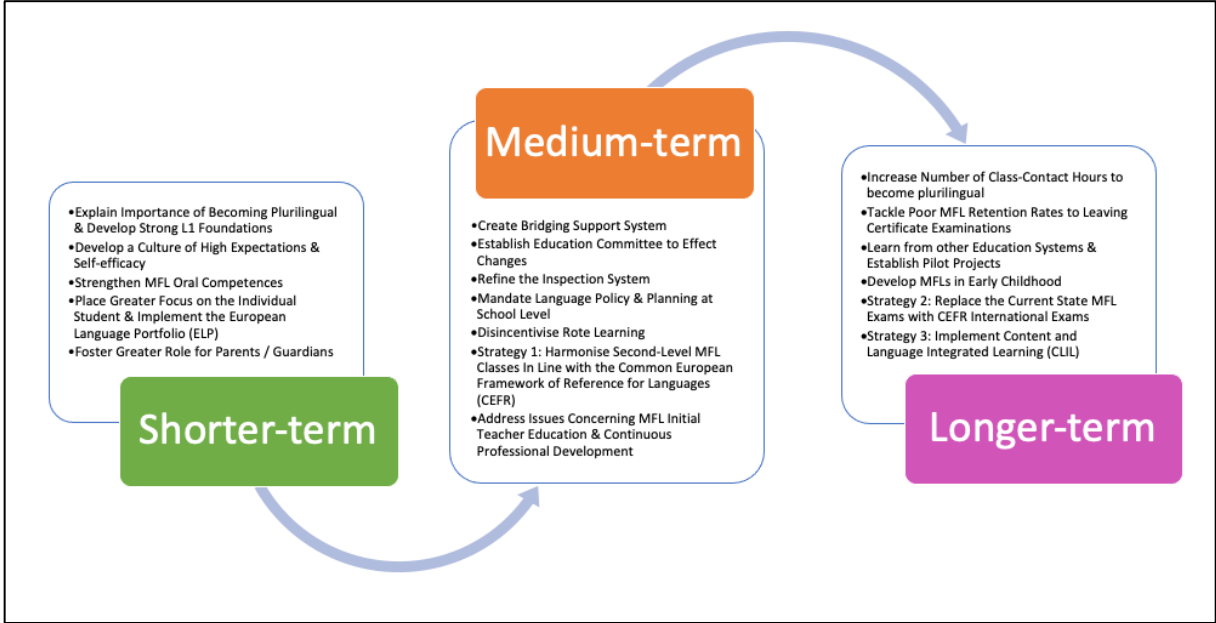


Figure 6.1: Potential timeframe for the implementation of recommendations

6.4 Limitations and areas for further inquiry

An obvious limitation of this research project is that the multi-site case study only involved four post-primary schools in Ireland. As such, it could be argued that the findings are not generalizable at national level. Nonetheless, Eisner (1991: 199) advises that a lot can be learned from a particular case study or a small number of case studies. In this research project, the main methodological philosophy employed was Grounded Theory. As highlighted in Chapter Four, Yin (2009: 15) argues that a theory can indeed be developed from a case study. As the schools that partook in the research follow the same curricula, prepare their students for the same State examinations, and adhere to the same policies, legislation, requirements and standards as all post-primary schools throughout the country, generalisations can be made. Erickson (1986) also affirms that as case studies can be examples of wider practice, what is learned from one case study can be transferred to similar settings. Moreover, Flyvbjerg (2006) enumerates the experiments of Bohr, Darwin, Einstein, Freud, Galileo, and Newton as examples of human and natural science being advanced based on a single case.

There were other limitations in this research project. While the parental perspective was actively sought, the National Parents Council Post Primary declined to participate. Equally, the Inspectorate in the Department of Education and Skills advised that their policies preclude them from participating in research. The stated position of the DES Inspectorate indicates a concerning level of disengagement with efforts to improve practice; it also exemplifies a policy that impedes transparency. It was also not possible to carry out interviews with sixth year students. The insights from these cohorts of people, by way of an interview, would have been helpful in answering the research questions more comprehensively.

In addition, no students, teachers or parents participated in the research from the European Schools system. It would have been most beneficial to learn their perspectives and discover how they experience the European Schools system and its language policy and planning.

In terms of future research, integrating classroom observations would be most advantageous in order to ascertain if the reported practices from the research are observed in reality. It would also be very beneficial to establish a research partnership with a school/s piloting the initiatives in order to fully explore the challenges and benefits. This could help fine-tune the model and pre-empt issues in advance of the potential wider implementation of the strategies.

This thesis recognises the very valuable participation of two senior school leaders (one principal and one deputy principal in separate schools) who contributed in many respects to the findings of this project. Nonetheless, the researcher believes that further national research with principals and deputy principals of second-level schools is required. The researcher noted that while both students and teachers were willing to participate in the research, it proved more difficult to have the principals and deputy principals partake. This may have been for a myriad of reasons. Nonetheless, the researcher was advised by some of the teacher participants that their principals believe that they may not be knowledgeable enough about MFLs in the education system to participate. This contrasts markedly with the European Schools system where all requested managers participated and were in a position to speak at length on various aspects of language teaching, learning and assessment. As school leaders in Ireland are an essential vehicle for effectuating changes in any school, if they require support on how languages should be best taught, learned, assessed, timetabled, or any other related issues, this should be examined.

Finally, further research that places more in-depth foci on the student profile as well as on school culture and ethos should be conducted at different types of second-level schools. This could facilitate greater comparisons and contrasts between these schools. The extent to which student profile data and / or school culture and ethos have an impact on this doctoral research area could be very insightful.

6.5 Concluding remarks

The author of this thesis has had the privilege of working for over two decades in the education system in Ireland as both a second-level MFL teacher and as a Director of an Accredited European School. In truth, the strategies proposed in this thesis had evolved as a result of countless conversations over the years with colleagues, students, school managers, parents, and from experiencing first-hand other educational models in practice, such as the European Schools system.

From the outset, the aim of this research project has always been to stay grounded in reality, and to work within existing structures and provisions, to find realistic ways to make the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement a reality. The author acknowledges the excellent work that MFL teachers do on a daily basis in schools, much of which often goes unrecognised. The researcher also appreciates that teaching at post-primary level can be challenging, and managing change in schools can be just as difficult.

While some participants in this research project have referred to the proposed strategies as “revolutionary”, what has actually been proposed is to simply use the existing educational structures in different ways, essentially thinking and working outside the box. What is perhaps “revolutionary” in Ireland is that the proposed strategies appear to actually address many of the issues MFL students and teachers experience daily, and at the same time also provide them with a realistic and achievable pathway forward to develop truly plurilingual students.

Charles Kettering (1959) once wrote, “[t]he world hates change, yet it is the only thing that has brought progress”. The first part of this quotation may indeed be true for some, but for the vast majority of participants in this research project, it was not the case. The reality is that most of the surveyed stakeholders in the second-level education system in Ireland believe that the current education system is not fit for purpose in terms of the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs. Indeed, in the student and teacher MFL questionnaires, 70% of sixth year MFL students and 86% of MFL teachers believe that in order for students to “become fluent in the MFL they study, the current education system needs to change considerably” (see Appendices A and B). The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative research indicate that there is significant support amongst stakeholders for embracing new ways of teaching, learning and assessing MFLs.

This thesis does not lay claim to having all the answers to make the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement a reality. However, what this research project has achieved, if a business term may be used, is to demonstrate ‘proof of concept’ for the three strategies as well as providing guidance on how other challenges could be addressed. As such, this thesis presents a blueprint for the next stage, that of establishing a pilot project or a series of pilot projects. The key to the success of such pilot projects would be to involve stakeholders in a truly meaningful way and to learn from other educational models.

To conclude, in simple terms, yes, the Irish education system has the potential to make the vision of the Barcelona Summit Agreement a reality... and even better, it has the support of key stakeholders as well as a valid blueprint to do so.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire: Modern Foreign Language Sixth Year Students studying the traditional Leaving Certificate syllabus at Post-Primary Schools in Ireland

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please read the introductory notes below:

In 2002, the **EU Heads of State and Government (Barcelona Summit)** set a long-term objective for all EU citizens to be able to speak **two languages in addition to their mother tongue**. The aim of this questionnaire is to obtain your responses to a series of questions pertaining to the following two areas:

- 1) **your experiences** as a Sixth Year modern foreign language (MFL) student at post-primary school in the Republic of Ireland.
- 2) **your feedback** to some proposed changes to the MFL teaching and learning process at post-primary level which aim to help make the aspiration of the Barcelona Summit a reality.

Before you start this questionnaire please note the following three terms as they will be used in a number of questions:

Modern Foreign Language (MFL): Please note that in this questionnaire MFL only refers to **French, German, Italian and Spanish** (not Irish, English Learning Support or any other language) **in your post-primary school (no other school or institution)**

Fluency: ability to communicate easily and effectively

Post-Primary education: e.g. secondary school

Section A: Your profile

1. Please confirm you are a **Sixth Year student** studying the **traditional Leaving Certificate** (not LCA):

Yes	No
-----	----

2. What is your **gender**?

Male	
Female	
Other	

3. What do you consider your **mother tongue / first language** to be?

English	
Irish	
Other – please state	

4. Please tick 1) the **modern foreign language(s) you study** and 2) the **level** you study each MFL at your post-primary school:

Please note: O.L. = ordinary level, H.L. = higher level

Tick Language	Tick Level (one level only for each MFL)	
	French	O.L.
German	O.L.	H.L.
Italian	O.L.	H.L.
Spanish	O.L.	H.L.

Please note: if you study more than one modern foreign language, please answer all questions below based on the modern foreign language you are strongest at in your post-primary school.

5. Did you **first start learning** this modern foreign language at post-primary / secondary school?

Yes	No
-----	----

6. If you answered '**yes**', do you believe it would have been more **beneficial to have started** learning your modern foreign language (MFL) as part of your studies at **primary school**?

Yes	No
-----	----

7. How many **years at post-primary school** have you been studying this modern foreign language?

Please **do not include** 6th year as one of the years.

--

Section B: Your Modern Foreign Language Competences

Please note: MFL = Modern Foreign Language

8. As a sixth year student, how would you **rate** your modern foreign language (MFL) **competences** in the following MFL skills:

- a) Reading

Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good	Excellent
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- b) Writing

Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good	Excellent
-----------	------	------	-----------	-----------

- c) Speaking

Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good	Excellent
-----------	------	------	-----------	-----------

- d) Listening

Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good	Excellent
-----------	------	------	-----------	-----------

Please **rate** to what extent you **agree or disagree** with the following statements:

9. I would consider myself **fluent** in the MFL I am studying.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

10. I would feel **confident communicating with native speakers of my MFL on everyday topics** such as ordering a meal, booking a ticket, asking for directions, talking about my hobbies and interests, going to the doctor, making an appointment, etc.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

11. If you **DO NOT consider yourself fluent** in the MFL you are studying, please answer the following question:

I would **very much like to be fluent** in the MFL I am studying.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

Section C: My experiences of MFL learning

Me & Learning my MFL

12. I believe I am **good at learning languages**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

13. I **enjoy learning** the MFL I study at school.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

14. I believe the MFL I am studying is **easy to learn**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

15. I have been **taught how modern foreign languages are best learned**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

16. In **your opinion**, **how** are MFLs **best learned**?

--

The Spoken Language

17. My **MFL classes are taught for the full duration of the class through the MFL** (e.g. French class is taught only through French – not through English or Irish).

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

My Motivation & Parental Support

18. I am **motivated to learn** the MFL I study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

19. My **parent(s) take(s) an active interest** in the MFL I study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

If you wish to explain your reasons, please do so here: (optional)

--

Irish Language & MFL

20. Do you **learn Irish** at school?

Yes	No
-----	----

21. **If 'yes'**, please answer:
My experience of learning the **Irish language has:**
Please tick **one box** only.

positively influenced my interest in learning the MFL I study.	
negatively influenced my interest in learning the MFL I study.	
neither positively nor negatively influenced my interest in the MFL I study.	

All-Irish speaking Primary School

22. Did you attend an **all-Irish speaking primary school**?

Yes	No
-----	----

23. **If 'yes'**, please answer:
Having attended an **all-Irish speaking primary school, it has made it easier** for me to learn the MFL I study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

All-Irish speaking Post-Primary School

24. Are you attending an **all-Irish speaking post-primary school / Irish Steam (Sraith Gaeilge)**?

Yes	No
-----	----

25. **If 'yes'**, please answer:
Attending an **all-Irish speaking post-primary school / Irish Steam (Sraith Gaeilge) has made it easier** for me to learn the MFL I study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

Greater Fluency – Irish or MFL

Please **only answer** the following question **if a) you study Irish in school and b) the Irish language is NOT your first language / mother tongue.**

26. I believe **I can speak at least one MFL (I study at school) better than** I can speak **Irish**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

If you wish to explain your reasons, please do so here: (optional)

Class Time & Class Size

27. I believe there are **enough MFL class periods / time** in the week for me to **become fluent** in the MFL I study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

European Language Portfolio

28. I am **familiar** with the **European Language Portfolio**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I fully agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	---------------

29. I **use** the **European Language Portfolio** in my MFL studies.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

30. Please answer this question **only if you use the European Language Portfolio**.
I find the *European Language Portfolio* **beneficial** in my MFL studies.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

MFL & My Future

31. I believe the MFL I study will **help me in my future career**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

32. I believe the MFL I study is a **valuable lifelong skill**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

33. I believe **English is the only language I need for my future**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

34. I **only study my MFL** as it is a **requirement for entry to many third level institutions** (e.g. universities).

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

MFL Learning

35. I have been **informed of the advantages** of being a **fluent speaker** of the MFL I study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

36. I get **frustrated by the current system** of MFL teaching & learning in Ireland.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

37. I believe for students to **become fluent** in the MFL they study, the **current education system needs to change considerably**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

If you wish to explain your reasons, please do so here: (optional)

Barcelona Summit Objective (2002)

In 2002, the **EU Heads of State and Government (Barcelona Summit)** set a long-term aim for all EU citizens to be able to speak **two languages in addition to their mother tongue**.

Please **rate** to what extent you **agree or disagree** with the following statements:

38. Prior to this questionnaire, I **was aware of the aim (as outlined above)** of the Barcelona Summit.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

39. I **support** the aim (as outlined above) of the Barcelona Summit.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

Section D: A Pathway Forward – Improving the Status Quo

The researcher proposes **three methods** to foster greatly increased numbers of plurilingual (ability to communicate in more than one language) post-primary students. Your opinions on these three methods would be greatly appreciated.

Method #1: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

Please read the following introductory passage:

In 2001, the Council for Europe introduced the **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)**. Under this system, the learning of an additional language was broken down into **six distinct levels (beginners to proficiency)**.

40. I am **familiar** with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

The following section proposes that **students** would no longer be divided by the year they are in and ordinary and higher levels but rather would be **divided by their language level** (as defined by the CEFR).

An example of this could be: a 2nd year student, a 3rd year student and a 5th year student could be in intermediate level (B1 CEFR) for their modern foreign language class. When students successfully complete the level they would then proceed to upper-intermediate (B2 CEFR). The above model would mean that students could leave second-level education with an internationally recognised language level. In theory, students could continue to the next CEFR level when they leave school (if they so wish).

Leaving aside any potential timetabling issues or requirements for entry to third-level institutions (e.g. universities), please **rate** to what extent you **agree or disagree** with the following statements:

41. I believe such a system is **worth giving a trial**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

42. I believe such a system would make MFLs **easier for me to learn**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

43. I believe such a system would make language learning **more enjoyable** for me.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

44. I believe such a system would **motivate me more** in learning my MFL.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

45. I believe such a system would **improve my fluency** in the MFL I study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

46. I believe such a system would **encourage** me to see MFL learning as a **lifelong skill**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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47. I believe such a system could potentially **increase the number of plurilingual** (*fluent in more than one language*) **students at post primary level / school**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

Method #2: Replacing the current State MFL exams (Junior Cycle & Leaving Cert.) with CEFR international exams

Please read the following introductory passage:

There are **international bodies** (officially recognised by **France, Germany, Italy** and **Spain**) that are charged with certifying students' modern foreign language (MFL) competences based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

These **organisations test your language competences based on your CEFR level** in the four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). If you pass the exam, you receive a certificate stating that you have successfully obtained the required language level. This certificate is valid for life. When you finish school (or later in life) you may continue to the next language level.

Leaving aside any logistics (timetabling, location, etc.), please answer the following question:

48. I would be **in favour** of doing **an international CEFR exam instead of the Junior Cycle / Leaving Cert.** exams. (Just like the current system for the Leaving Certificate, points for entry to third level institutions (e.g. universities) would be awarded based on your language level and how well you do in the exam).

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

Method #3: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

Please read the following introductory passage:

The following section proposes the **implementation of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)** at post-primary level.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) refers to situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with two main aims, namely the learning of the content of a subject (e.g. maths, CSPE, geography, etc.) and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language.

*In this proposal, students would **have the option** to study part of an English based subject (e.g. maths, CSPE, geography, etc.) through the MFL they are studying. An example could be that students could opt to do 10% of their maths course through the MFL they study. Part of modern foreign language classes could be used to help prepare students with the vocabulary needed for CLIL classes. Leaving aside class logistics or a potential shortage of teachers with the required subject combinations (modern foreign language and e.g. maths, CSPE, geography, etc.) please **rate** to what extent you **agree or disagree** with the following statements:*

49. I believe such a system is **worth giving a trial**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

50. I believe such a system would make MFLs **easier for me to learn**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

51. I believe such a system would make language learning **more enjoyable** for me.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

52. I believe such a system would **motivate me more** in learning my MFL.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

53. I believe such a system would **improve** my fluency in the MFL I study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

54. I believe such a system would **encourage** me to see MFL learning as a **lifelong skill**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

55. I believe such a system could potentially **increase the number of plurilingual** (*fluent in more than one language*) **students at post primary level / school**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

56. If you are **in favour of** the introduction of **CLIL in post-primary schools**, which in your opinion would be the **best year to introduce it?**

1 st Year	TYO
2 nd Year	5 th Year
3 rd Year	6 th Year

57. If you are **in favour of** the introduction of **CLIL in post-primary schools, at the start of its introduction**, on average, **how much class time** do you think should be spent teaching **through the MFL**?

5% - 10 %	Up to 50%
11% - 20%	Up to 75%
21% - 30 %	Almost all the class

Suggestions

58. Do you have **any suggestions** on how to **greatly increase** the numbers of **plurilingual post-primary students**?

The researcher would greatly appreciate your feedback but please do not include names or comments about individuals.

Appendix B

Questionnaire: Modern Foreign Language Teachers at Post-Primary Schools in Ireland

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please read the introductory notes below:

In 2002, the **EU Heads of State and Government (Barcelona Summit)** set a long-term objective for all EU citizens to be able to speak **two languages in addition to their mother tongue**. The aim of this questionnaire is to obtain your responses to a series of questions pertaining to the following two areas:

- 3) **your experiences** as a post-primary school modern foreign language (MFL) teacher in the Republic of Ireland.
- 4) **your feedback** to some proposed changes to the MFL teaching and learning process at post-primary level which aim to help make the aspiration of the Barcelona Summit a reality.

Before you start this questionnaire please note the following two terms as they will be used in a number of questions:

Modern Foreign Language (MFL): Please note that in this questionnaire MFL only refers to **French, German, Italian and Spanish** (not Irish, English Learning Support or any other language) **in your post-primary school (no other school or institution)**

Fluency: ability to communicate easily and effectively

Section A: Your profile

1. Are you **currently** a **practising post-primary MFL teacher**?

Yes	No
-----	----

2. What is your **gender**?

Male	
Female	
Other	

3. Please tick the **modern foreign language(s) you teach** at post-primary level:

French	German
Italian	Spanish

4. Are you a **native speaker** of a modern foreign language you teach?

Yes	No
-----	----

5. Do you teach an MFL in your school where **you are the only teacher of that MFL** (e.g. you are the only teacher of Italian in your school)?

Yes	No
-----	----

6. Are you a **fully qualified teacher** of the **MFL(s) you teach**?
Pick tick **one box only**:

Yes – fully qualified in all MFLs I teach	
No – I’m a fully qualified MFL teacher but not fully qualified in all MFLs I teach	
No – not qualified in any MFLs I teach.	

7. What is the **highest educational level** you have achieved?

Primary Degree	
Post graduate teaching qualification	
Masters	
PhD / Doctorate	
Other (please state)	

8. How many **years** (including this year) have you been teaching an MFL at post-primary level?

--

9. Do you teach an MFL at **Junior Cycle & Senior Cycle**?

Junior Cycle	
Senior Cycle	

Please note: where questions below refer to modern foreign “language” (as opposed to “languages”), please note that all questions below refer to your experiences of teaching one or more of the following modern foreign languages – French, German, Italian & Spanish – at post-primary level (traditional Junior & Senior Cycles – not LCA, etc.).

Section B: Sixth Year Student Modern Foreign Language (MFL) Competences

10. Are you **currently teaching Sixth Year MFL students** preparing for the **traditional Leaving Certificate (not LCA)**?

Yes	No
-----	----

If **'yes'**, please answer the following question:

11. How would **you rate** the **overall MFL competences** of your **current Sixth Year students** under the following headings?

a) Reading

Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good	Excellent
-----------	------	------	-----------	-----------

b) Writing

Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good	Excellent
-----------	------	------	-----------	-----------

c) Speaking

Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good	Excellent
-----------	------	------	-----------	-----------

d) Listening

Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good	Excellent
-----------	------	------	-----------	-----------

Section C: My experiences of MFL Teaching & Learning

Please **rate** to what extent you **agree or disagree** with the following statements:

Language of my classroom

12. I **teach the vast majority** of each language class **through the MFL** of that class.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

13. I feel **confident teaching** through the MFL of my classes.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

14. When my **students verbally communicate** with me and fellow classmates they **always** do so **through the MFL** of the class.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

Cross-curricular activities

15. I believe there are **sufficient cross-curricular** activities involving the MFL I teach.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

Course Content & State Exams

16. I believe the current **MFL curricular content is adequate** for students to **become fluent** in the MFL they study at post-primary level.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

If you wish to explain your reasons, please do so here: (optional)

17. I believe the focus on the **Junior & Leaving Certificate MFL exams motivates** students to **become fluent** in the MFL they study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

If you wish to explain your reasons, please do so here: (optional)

Assessment

Please rate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

18. I regularly assess my students in the following MFL skills:

e) Reading

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

f) Writing

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

g) Speaking

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

h) Listening

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

MFL Programmes & Initiatives

19. My classes celebrate the European Day of Languages (26 September).

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

20. My classes regularly participate in eTwinning partnerships.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

21. My classes have regularly participated in Erasmus+ (Comenius) projects.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

Class Periods / Time & Class Size

22. I believe there are **enough MFL class periods / time** in the week for students to **become fluent** in the MFL they study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

23. What is the **average number of students** in the MFL classes you teach?
Please tick **one box** only.

1	
2	
3 – 5	
6 – 10	
11 – 15	
16 – 20	
21 – 25	
26 – 30	
31 – 35	
36 – 40	
Other: please state.	

24. I believe the **number of students** in my MFL class is **satisfactory for optimal language learning**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

If you wish to explain your reasons, please do so here: (optional)

Continuous Professional Development

25. In general, how often do you receive **continuous professional development training** relating to the teaching and learning of the MFL you teach? Please tick **one box** only.

Never	
Once per month	
Once every two to three months	
Once every six months	
Once per year	
Once every two years	
Only when there are curricular changes	
Other	Please state:

26. I believe I **receive sufficient continuous professional development training** relating to the teaching and learning of the MFL I teach.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

If you wish to explain your reasons, please do so here: (optional)

27. What do you consider to be the **ideal frequency of continuous professional development training sessions** relating to the teaching and learning of the MFL you teach? Please tick **one box** only.

Never	
Once per month	
Once every two to three months	
Once every six months	
Once per year	
Once every two years	
Only when there are curricular changes	
Other	Please state:

European Language Portfolio

28. I am **familiar** with the **European Language Portfolio**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

29. My **MFL students use** the **European Language Portfolio**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

30. Please answer this question **only if you use the European Language Portfolio**.

I find the *European Language Portfolio* **beneficial** for my students' learning of the MFL I teach.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

The status quo

31. By the **end of sixth year**, I am **generally happy with the MFL fluency levels** my students have achieved.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

If you wish to explain your reasons, please do so here: (optional)

32. I get **frustrated by the current system** of MFL teaching & learning in Ireland.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

If you wish to explain your reasons, please do so here: (optional)

33. I believe for students to **become fluent** in the MFL they study, the **current education system needs to change considerably**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

If you wish to explain your reasons, please do so here: (optional)

Barcelona Summit Objective (2002)

In 2002, the **EU Heads of State and Government (Barcelona Summit)** set a long-term aim for all EU citizens to be able to speak **two languages in addition to their mother tongue**.

Please **rate** to what extent you **agree or disagree** with the following statements:

34. Prior to this questionnaire, I **was aware of the aim (as outlined above)** of the Barcelona Summit.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
---------------------	------------	------------------------------	---------	------------------

35. I **fully support** the aim (as outlined above) of the Barcelona Summit.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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Section D: A Pathway Forward – Improving the Status Quo

The researcher proposes **three methods** to foster greatly increased numbers of plurilingual (ability to communicate in more than one language) post-primary students. Your opinions on these three methods would be greatly appreciated.

Method #1: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

Please read the following introductory passage:

In 2001, the Council for Europe introduced the **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)**. Under this system, the learning of an additional language was broken down into **six distinct levels (beginners to proficiency)**.

36. I am **familiar** with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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If you are **familiar with the CEFR**, please answer this question:

37. I would be **in favour** of its use in the **teaching, learning and assessment** of MFLs at post-primary level?

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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The following section proposes that **students** would no longer be divided by the year they are in and ordinary and higher levels but rather would be **divided by their language level** (as defined by the CEFR).

An example of this could be: a 2nd year student, a 3rd year student and a 5th year student could be in intermediate level (B1 CEFR) for their modern foreign language class. When students successfully complete the level they could then proceed to upper-intermediate (B2 CEFR). The above model would mean that students could leave second-level education with an internationally recognised language level. In theory, student could continue to the next level when they leave school (if they so wish).

Leaving aside any potential timetabling issues or requirements for entry to third-level institutions (e.g. universities), please **rate** to what extent you **agree or disagree** with the following statements:

38. I believe such a system is **worth giving a trial**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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39. I believe such a system could make language learning **easier** for students.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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40. I believe such a system could make language learning **more enjoyable** for students.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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41. I believe such a system could **motivate students more** in learning the MFL they study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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42. I believe such a system could **improve students' fluency** in the MFL they study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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43. I believe such a system could **encourage** MFL learning as a **lifelong skill**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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44. I believe such a system could make classes **easier to teach**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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45. I believe such a system could potentially **increase the number of plurilingual** (*fluent in more than one language*) **students at post primary level**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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Method #2: Replacing the current State MFL exams (Junior Cycle & Leaving Cert.) with CEFR international exams

Please read the following introductory passage:

There are **international bodies** (officially recognised by **France, Germany, Italy** and **Spain**) that are charged with certifying students' modern foreign language (MFL) competences based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

These **organisations test student language competences based on your CEFR level** in the four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). If students pass the exam, they receive a certificate stating that they have successfully obtained the required language level. This certificate is valid for life. When students finish school (or later in life) they may continue to the next language level.

Leaving aside any logistics (timetabling, location, etc.), please answer the following question:

46. I would be **in favour** of students doing **an international CEFR exam instead of the Junior Cycle / Leaving Cert. exams**. (Just like the current system for the Leaving Certificate, points for entry to third level institutions (e.g. universities) would be awarded based on each student's language level and how well they do in the exam)

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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Method #3: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

Please read the following introductory passage:

The following section proposes the **implementation of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)** at post-primary level.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) refers to situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with two main aims, namely the learning of the content of a subject (e.g. maths, CSPE, geography, etc.) and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language.

In this proposal, students would **have the option** to study part of an English based subject (e.g. maths, CSPE, geography, etc.) through the MFL they are studying. An example could be that students could opt to do 10% of their maths course through the MFL they are studying. Part of modern foreign language classes could be used to help prepare students with the vocabulary needed for CLIL classes.

Leaving aside class logistics or a potential shortage of teachers with the required subject combinations (modern foreign language and e.g. maths, CSPE, geography, etc.) please **rate** to what extent you **agree or disagree** with the following statements:

47. I believe such a system is **worth giving a trial**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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48. I believe such a system could make language learning **easier** for students.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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49. I believe such a system could make language learning **more enjoyable** for students.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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50. I believe such a system could **motivate students more** in learning the MFL they study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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51. I believe such a system could **improve students' fluency** in the modern foreign language they study.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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52. I believe such a system could **encourage** MFL learning as a **lifelong skill**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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53. I believe such a system could make classes **easier to teach**.

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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54. I believe such a system could potentially **increase the number of plurilingual** (*fluent in more than one language*) **students at post primary level.**

I strongly disagree	I disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
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55. If you are **in favour of** the introduction of **CLIL in post-primary schools**, which in your opinion would be the **best year to introduce it?**

1 st Year	TYO
2 nd Year	5 th Year
3 rd Year	6 th Year

56. If you are **in favour of** the introduction of **CLIL in post-primary schools, at the start of its introduction**, on average, **how much class time** do you think should be spent teaching **through the MFL?**

5% - 10 %	Up to 50%
11% - 20%	Up to 75%
21% - 30 %	Almost all the class

Suggestions

57. In terms of **greatly increasing the numbers of plurilingual second-level students**, in your opinion, **what should happen** at national level and at general school level to make this vision a reality?

National Level

School Level

Appendix C: Interview Schedule – MFL Teachers

1. Students receive hundreds of hours of MFL tuition between Junior and Senior Cycles, yet both national and international studies conclude that Ireland ranks poorly in terms of MFL competences compared with many of our European counterparts. To what do you attribute this finding? In terms of the education system in Ireland, in your opinion, what is negatively impacting the progress of modern foreign language teaching, learning and assessment?
2. You may recall that during the teacher questionnaire, three strategies were proposed with the aim of greatly increasing the numbers of plurilingual second-level students. In terms of each one, what are the potential challenges that could affect their implementation:
 - Harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR,
 - Replacing State MFL exams with CEFR international exams,
 - Implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning.
3. What ought to happen in relation to both a) initial teacher education, and b) continuous professional development, to significantly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students?

Appendix D: Interview Schedule – School Principals / Deputy Principals

1. Students receive hundreds of hours of MFL tuition between Junior and Senior Cycles, yet both national and international studies conclude that Ireland ranks poorly in terms of MFL competences compared with many of our European counterparts. To what do you attribute this finding? In terms of the education system in Ireland, in your opinion, what is negatively impacting the progress of modern foreign language teaching, learning and assessment?
2. You may recall from the initial information sheet, three strategies are proposed with the aim of greatly increasing the numbers of plurilingual second-level students. In terms of each one, what are the potential challenges that could affect their implementation:
 - Harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR,
 - Replacing State MFL exams with CEFR international exams,
 - Implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning.
3. What ought to happen in relation to both a) initial teacher education, and b) continuous professional development, to significantly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students?

Appendix E: Interview Schedule – Director Post-Primary Languages Ireland

1. Students receive hundreds of hours of MFL tuition between Junior and Senior Cycles, yet both national and international studies conclude that Ireland ranks poorly in terms of MFL competences compared with many of our European counterparts. To what do you attribute this finding? In terms of the education system in Ireland, in your opinion, what is negatively impacting the progress of modern foreign language teaching, learning and assessment?
2. You may recall from the initial information sheet, three strategies are proposed with the aim of greatly increasing the numbers of plurilingual second-level students. In terms of each one, what are the potential challenges that could affect their implementation:
 - Harmonising MFL classes in line with the CEFR,
 - Replacing State MFL exams with CEFR international exams,
 - Implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning.
3. What ought to happen in relation to both a) initial teacher education, and b) continuous professional development, to significantly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students?
4. As Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland, how content are you with the progress of developing Ireland as a plurilingual nation?

Appendix F: Interview Schedule – Secretary General of the European Schools

1. As Secretary General of the European Schools, what do you consider to be the three main advantages of post-primary students being plurilingual?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
2. To what extent do you believe the ESS is effective in fostering plurilingual second-level students?
3. What are the reasons for this?
4. As Secretary General of the European Schools, what do you consider your role to be in the development of plurilingual students?
5. What is the European Schools' policy on developing plurilingualism within its education system?
6. How do the Offices of the Secretary General support its directors, senior management and teaching staff in the development of plurilingual students?
7. In what ways are curricular policies and initiatives monitored by senior management in the Offices of the Secretary General?
8. In what ways are curricular policies and initiatives improved by senior management in the Offices of the Secretary General?
9. As Secretary General, how important is it for students to be divided by their appropriate language level (in alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR))?
10. As Secretary General, how important is it that the target additional language is spoken most of the time in the classroom?

11. Has the European Schools system ever considered cross-age teaching?
12. The European Schools system is a very high-profile and well-financed education system. Do you think the ES model could be adapted to work in an average state-run school? If so, how?
13. What recommendations would you give for assessing students effectively?
14. How important is a language policy and planning (LPP) document in terms of greatly increasing the numbers of plurilingual second-level students?
15. In terms of an LPP document, what recommendations would you give for its successful development?
16. In terms of an LPP document, what recommendations would you give for its successful implementation?
17. In terms of an LPP document, what recommendations would you give for its successful monitoring?
18. What structures should be put in place to ensure that improvements to any future education system can be made effectively and efficiently?
19. What three pieces of advice would you give Ireland in terms of developing a policy to significantly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
20. Do you have any further suggestions on how the Irish education system could foster greatly increased numbers of plurilingual students?

Appendix G: Interview Schedule – Deputy Secretary General of the European Schools

1. As Deputy Secretary General of the European Schools, what do you consider to be the three main advantages of post-primary students being plurilingual?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
2. To what extent do you believe the ESS is effective in fostering plurilingual second-level students?
3. What are the reasons for this?
4. As Deputy Secretary General of the European Schools, what do you consider your role to be in the development of plurilingual students?
5. How do the European Schools provide continuous professional development (CPD) training for:
 - Teachers
 - Senior school management
6. How do the European Schools deal with underperforming teachers and senior management in schools?
7. How do the European Schools ensure that standards are maintained across all the European Schools and Accredited European Schools?
8. As Deputy Secretary General, how important is it for students to be divided by their appropriate language level (in alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR))?
9. As Deputy Secretary General, how important is it that the target additional language is spoken most of the time in the classroom?
10. The European Schools system is a very high-profile and well-financed education system. Do you think the ES model could be adapted to work in an average state-run school? If so, how?

11. What recommendations would you give for assessing students effectively?
12. How important is a language policy and planning (LPP) document in terms of greatly increasing the numbers of plurilingual second-level students?
13. In terms of an LPP document, what recommendations would you give for its successful development?
14. In terms of an LPP document, what recommendations would you give for its successful implementation?
15. In terms of an LPP document, what recommendations would you give for its successful monitoring?
16. What structures should be put in place to ensure that improvements to any future education system can be made effectively and efficiently?
17. What three pieces of advice would you give Ireland in terms of developing a policy to significantly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
18. Do you have any further suggestions on how the Irish education system could foster greatly increased numbers of plurilingual students?

**Appendix H: Interview Schedule – Head of the
Pedagogical Development Unit of the European Schools**

1. As Head of the Pedagogical Development Unit of the European Schools, what do you consider to be the three main advantages of post-primary students being plurilingual?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)

2. To what extent do you believe the ESS is effective in fostering plurilingual second-level students?

3. What are the reasons for this?

4. As the Head of the PDU, what role do you and the unit play in the development of plurilingual second-level students in the European Schools system? Who are the members of the PDU?

5. How important is a language policy and planning (LPP) document in terms of greatly increasing the numbers of plurilingual second-level students?

6. Within the context of the European Schools, what stimulates the creation of a curricular policy / initiative?

7. What are the stages a policy goes through from conception to the final approved text?
 - a. How do the subcommittees work?
 - b. What is the role of the Joint Teaching Committee?

8. In what ways are the following stakeholders involved in the process?
 - a) Students
 - b) Teachers
 - c) Directors
 - d) Inspectors
 - e) Parents
 - f) Others

9. How are finalised curricular policies / initiatives implemented?
10. How are finalised curricular policies / initiatives monitored?
11. What criteria are used to agree to amend a curricular policy / initiative?
12. How are finalised curricular policies / initiatives amended, where necessary?
13. How does MFL CPD training take place in the European Schools?
14. How does assessment work in the European Schools system (European Baccalaureate)?
 - a. Years S1 – S6
 - b. S7 European Baccalaureate
 - c. Formative versus summative (in alignment with CEFR)
15. What recommendations would you give for assessing students effectively?
16. What structures should be put in place to ensure that improvements to any future education system can be made effectively and efficiently?
17. What three pieces of advice would you give Ireland in terms of developing a policy to significantly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
18. Do you have any further suggestions on how the Irish education system could foster greatly increased numbers of plurilingual students?

Appendix I: Interview Schedule – Directors of the European Schools

1. As the Director of a European School, what do you consider to be the three main advantages of post-primary students being plurilingual?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
2. To what extent do you believe the ESS is effective in fostering plurilingual second-level students?
3. What are the reasons for this?
4. As the Director of a ES, what role do you play in the development of plurilingual second-level students in your school?
5. Are all students divided based on their CEFR levels for additional language learning? How is this done? Does any cross-age teaching take place? If so, how well is it working?
6. The ESS requires students to study a number of subjects through their L2. Does this system work well in practice? Are students able to follow these courses? What CEFR level is the teacher required to have in their L2 to teach one of these subjects? Do these classes only focus on content or is there a language component to support the content? CLIL or immersion? Do students study subjects through their L3?
7. Are language exams (L2, L3, etc.) benchmarked against the CEFR? If so, how is this achieved?
8. Do students generally achieve the set CEFR target levels for their additional languages?
9. Are students generally motivated additional language learners? If so, how do you encourage this motivation?
10. To what extent is the unit of the Offices of the Secretary General and your fellow European Schools directors (a community of practice) important in the development of a plurilingual education system?

11. In what ways are the directors involved in the creation and development of curricular policies / initiatives?
12. In what ways are new plurilingual policies and curricular initiatives successfully implemented at school level?
13. In what ways are students and parents involved in the plurilingual development of the students?
14. In what ways are curricular policies and initiatives monitored at school level?
15. In what ways are curricular policies and initiatives improved at school level?
16. The European Schools system is a very high-profile and well-financed education system. Do you think the ESS model could be adapted to work in an average state-run school? If so, how?
17. What three pieces of advice would you give Ireland in terms of developing a policy to significantly increase the numbers of plurilingual second-level students?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
18. Do you have any further suggestions on how the Irish education system could foster greatly increased numbers of plurilingual students?

**Appendix J: Common Reference Levels. Global Scale of the Common European
Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)**

Proficient User	C2	Mastery: Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Effective Operational Proficiency: Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Vantage: Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Threshold: Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics, which are familiar, or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

Basic User	A2	Waystage: Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Breakthrough: Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Council of Europe (2020)

Appendix K: CEFR Recommended Hours for French, German, Italian and Spanish

French (Alliance Française)

A1	60 – 100 hours	B2	560 – 650 hours
A2	160 – 200 hours	C1	810 – 950 hours
B1	360 – 400 hours	C2	1060 - 1200 hours

(Alliance Française, 2021)

German* (Goethe Institut)

A1	80 – 200 hours	B2	600 – 800 hours
A2	200 – 350 hours	C1	800 – 1000 hours
B1	350 – 650 hours	C2	1000+ hours

* 45-minute academic hours

(Goethe Institut, 2018)

Italian (Accademia Italiana di Lingua)

A1	50 – 60 hours	B2	320 – 400 hours
A2	100 – 120 hours	C1	450 – 500 hours
B1	240 – 300 hours	C2	600 – 650 hours

(Accademia Italiana di Lingua, 2021)

Spanish (Instituto Cervantes)

A1	60 hours	B2	480 hours
A2	180 hours	C1	660 hours
B1	300 hours	C2	840 hours

(Instituto Cervantes, 2017: 4)

Appendix L: Effective MFL Assessment Methods

List and Brief Explanations

Achievement assessment	Proficiency assessment
Norm-referencing (NR)	Criterion-referencing (CR)
Mastery learning CR	Continuum CR
Continuous assessment	Fixed assessment points
Formative assessment	Summative assessment
Direct assessment	Indirect assessment
Performance assessment	Knowledge assessment
Subjective assessment	Objective assessment
Checklist rating	Performance rating
Impression	Guided judgement
Holistic assessment	Analytic assessment
Series assessment	Category assessment
Assessment by others	Self-assessment

The Council of Europe defines the above terms for MFL assessment as follows:

Achievement assessment is the assessment of the achievement of specific objectives – assessment of what has been taught. It therefore relates to the week’s/term’s work, the course book, the syllabus. Achievement assessment is oriented to the course. It represents an internal perspective.

Proficiency assessment on the other hand is assessment of what someone can do/knows in relation to the application of the subject in the real world. It represents an external perspective.

Norm-referencing is the placement of learners in rank order, their assessment and ranking in relation to their peers.

Criterion-referencing is a reaction against norm-referencing in which the learner is assessed purely in terms of his/her ability in the subject, irrespective of the ability of his/her peers.

The **mastery criterion-referencing** approach is one in which a single ‘minimum competence standard’ or ‘cut-off point’ is set to divide learners into ‘masters’ and ‘non-masters’, with no degrees of quality in the achievement of the objective being recognised.

The **continuum criterion-referencing** approach is an approach in which an individual ability is referenced to a defined continuum of all relevant degrees of ability in the area in question.

Continuous assessment is assessment by the teacher and possibly by the learner of class performances, pieces of work and projects throughout the course. The final grade thus reflects the whole course/year/semester.

Fixed point assessment is when grades are awarded and decisions made on the basis of an examination or other assessment which takes place on a particular day, usually the end of the course or before the beginning of a course. What has happened beforehand is irrelevant; it is what the person can do now that is decisive.

Formative assessment is an ongoing process of gathering information on the extent of learning, on strengths and weaknesses, which the teacher can feed back into their course planning and the actual feedback they give learners. Formative assessment is often used in a very broad sense so as to include non-quantifiable information from questionnaires and consultations.

Summative assessment sums up attainment at the end of the course with a grade. It is not necessarily proficiency assessment. Indeed a lot of summative assessment is norm referenced, fixed-point, achievement assessment.

Direct assessment is assessing what the candidate is actually doing. For example, a small group are discussing something, the assessor observes, compares with a criteria grid, matches the performances to the most appropriate categories on the grid, and gives an assessment.

Indirect assessment, on the other hand, uses a test, usually on paper, which often assesses enabling skills.

Performance assessment requires the learner to provide a sample of language in speech or writing in a direct test.

Knowledge assessment requires the learner to answer questions which can be of a range of different item types in order to provide evidence of the extent of their linguistic knowledge and control.

Subjective assessment is a judgement by an assessor. What is normally meant by this is the judgement of the quality of a performance.

Objective assessment is assessment in which subjectivity is removed. What is normally meant by this is an indirect test in which the items have only one right answer, e.g. multiple choice.

Rating on a scale: judging that a person is at a particular level or band on a scale made up of a number of such levels or bands.

Rating on a checklist: judging a person in relation to a list of points deemed to be relevant for a particular level or module.

Impression: fully subjective judgement made on the basis of experience of the learner's performance in class, without reference to specific criteria in relation to a specific assessment.

Guided judgement: judgement in which individual assessor subjectivity is reduced by complementing impression with conscious assessment in relation to specific criteria.

Holistic assessment is making a global synthetic judgement. Different aspects are weighted intuitively by the assessor.

Analytic assessment is looking at different aspects separately.

Category assessment involves a single assessment task (which may well have different phases to generate different discourse...) in which performance is judged in relation to the categories in an assessment grid: the analytic approach.

Series assessment involves a series of isolated assessment tasks (often roleplays with other learners or the teacher), which are rated with a simple holistic grade on a labelled scale of e.g. 0–3 or 1–4.

Assessment by others: judgements by the teacher or examiner.

Self-assessment: judgements about your own proficiency. The Council of Europe points out that the main benefit of self-assessment is “its use as a tool for motivation and awareness: helping learners to appreciate their strengths, recognise their weaknesses and orient their learning more effectively.”

(Council of Europe, 2001: 183 – 191)

Appendix M: Breakdown of MFL Take-up and Grades of Leaving Certificate Students

French

Year	French candidature	Total Leaving Certificate candidature*	French as % of total
2012	25,977	52,589	49.4%
2013	25,515	52,767	48.4%
2014	26,496	54,025	49.0%
2015	26,798	55,044	48.7%
2016	25,758	55,708	46.2%

Table 1: Participation in Leaving Certificate French, 2012 to 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016a: 5) [online].

*Total Leaving Certificate candidature excludes Leaving Certificate Applied candidates.

Year	Total French candidature	Number at Ordinary level	Number at Higher level	% Ordinary level	% Higher level
2012	25,977	12,257	13,720	47.2%	52.8%
2013	25,515	11,329	14,186	44.4%	55.5%
2014	26,496	11,482	15,014	43.3%	56.7%
2015	26,798	11,390	15,408	42.5%	57.5%
2016	25,758	10,505	15,253	40.8%	59.2%

Table 2: Number and Percentage of Candidates at Each Level, 2012 to 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016a: 5) [online].

Year	A	B	C	A, B, C	D	E	F	NG	E, F, NG
2012	13.7	28.1	33.6	75.5	21.5	2.9	0.2	0	3.1
2013	13.2	28.4	33.0	74.6	22.9	2.3	0.1	0	2.4
2014	12.0	27.8	34.9	74.7	23.1	2.2	0.1	0	2.3
2015	13.2	26.2	32.6	72	24.1	3.5	0.1	0	3.6
2016	13.0	28.2	32.4	73.6	23.4	2.9	0.2	0	3.1

Table 3: Percentage of candidates awarded each lettered grade in
Higher Level French, 2012 – 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016a: 7) [online].

Year	A	B	C	A, B, C	D	E	F	NG	E, F, NG
2012	1.7	24.5	39.3	65.5	27.7	5.7	1.2	0	6.9
2013	1.3	22.5	40.6	64.4	27.4	6.7	1.4	0.1	8.2
2014	1.0	17.0	42.4	60.4	31.6	6.7	1.3	0.1	8.1
2015	1.9	23.5	37.7	63.1	27.7	7.4	1.6	0.1	9.1
2016	1.1	20.1	41.3	62.5	30.0	6.2	1.3	0.1	7.6

Table 4: Percentage of candidates awarded each lettered grade in
Ordinary Level French, 2012 – 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016a: 8) [online].

German

Year	German candidature	Total Leaving Certificate candidature*	German as % of total
2012	6788	52592	12.9
2013	6644	52767	12.6
2014	6857	54025	12.7
2015	7272	55044	13.2
2016	7615	55707	13.7

Table 1: Participation in Leaving Certificate German, 2012 to 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016b: 5) [online].

*Total Leaving Certificate candidature excludes Leaving Certificate Applied candidates.

Year	Total German candidature	Number at Ordinary level	Number at Higher level	% Ordinary level	% Higher level
2012	6788	2420	4368	35.7	64.3
2013	6644	2319	4325	34.9	65.1
2014	6857	2135	4722	31.1	68.9
2015	7272	2118	5154	29.1	70.9
2016	7615	2370	5245	31.1	68.9

Table 2: Number and Percentage of Candidates at Each Level, 2012 to 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016b: 5) [online].

Year	A	B	C	A, B, C	D	E	F	NG	E, F, NG
2012	15.4	28.0	33.6	77.0	20.7	2.2	0.1	0	2.3
2013	14.9	29.3	31.9	76.1	20.8	2.8	0.3	0	3.1
2014	14.9	29.7	32.4	77.0	20.8	2.1	0.2	0	2.3
2015	14.8	26.6	33.4	74.8	22.6	2.4	0.2	0	2.6
2016	13.0	27.0	31.4	71.4	24.5	3.9	0.2	0	4.1

Table 3: Percentage of candidates awarded each lettered grade in
Higher level German, 2012 – 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016b: 7) [online].

Year	A	B	C	A, B, C	D	E	F	NG	E, F, NG
2012	3.8	34.9	37.2	75.9	18.4	4.3	1.1	0.2	5.6
2013	2.4	29.2	35.0	66.6	24.1	6.8	2.3	0.1	9.2
2014	4.1	31.9	34.7	70.7	22.0	5.1	1.8	0.3	7.2
2015	2.7	31.7	37.8	72.2	20.8	5.1	1.6	0.3	7.0
2016	2.2	28.4	41.3	71.9	21.5	4.6	1.7	0.2	6.5

Table 4: Percentage of candidates awarded each lettered grade
in Ordinary level German, 2012 – 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016b: 9) [online].

Italian

Year	Italian candidature	Total Leaving Certificate candidature*	Italian as % of total
2012	384	52589	0.7
2013	352	52767	0.7
2014	333	54025	0.6
2015	436	55045	0.8
2016	512	55707	0.9

Table 1: Participation in Leaving Certificate Italian, 2012 to 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016c: 5) [online].

*Total Leaving Certificate candidature excludes Leaving Certificate Applied candidates.

Year	Total Italian Candidature	Number at Ordinary level	Number at Higher level	% Ordinary level	% Higher level
2012	384	106	278	27.6	72.4
2013	352	94	258	26.7	73.3
2014	333	85	248	25.6	74.4
2015	436	111	325	25.5	74.5
2016	512	146	366	28.5	71.5

Table 2: Number and Percentage of Candidates at Each Level, 2012 to 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016c: 5) [online].

Year	A	B	C	A, B, C	D	E	F	NG	E, F, NG
2012	25.2	27.4	25.5	78.1	20.9	1.1	0	0	1.1
2013	26.3	36.4	26.8	84.5	14.0	1.6	0	0	1.6
2014	21.8	26.3	33.1	81.2	16	2.4	0.4	0	2.8
2015	26.1	27.2	26.8	81.5	16.9	1.5	0	0	1.5
2016	23.8	28.2	26.8	78.5	19.4	1.9	0.3	0	2.2

Table 3: Percentage of candidates awarded each lettered grade
in Higher Level Italian, 2012 – 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016c: 7) [online].

Year	A	B	C	A, B, C	D	E	F	NG	E, F, NG
2012	1.9	24.5	34.8	61.2	28.3	8.5	0.9	0.9	10.3
2013	3.2	27.6	34.1	64.9	30.8	3.2	1.1	0	4.3
2014	1.2	16.5	36.5	54.2	40.0	5.9	0	0	5.9
2015	2.7	21.6	37.8	62.1	24.3	8.1	3.6	1.8	13.5
2016	4.8	15	47.9	67.8	28.1	3.4	0.7	0	4.1

Table 4: Percentage of candidates awarded each lettered grade in
Ordinary Level Italian, 2012 – 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016c: 9) [online].

Spanish

Year	Spanish candidature	Total Leaving Certificate candidature*	Spanish as % of total
2012	4330	52588	12.1
2013	4903	52767	10.7
2014	5340	54025	10.1
2015	5793	55044	9.5
2016	6579	55708	8.4

Table 1: Participation in Leaving Certificate Spanish, 2012 to 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016d: 5) [online].

*Total Leaving Certificate candidature excludes Leaving Certificate Applied candidates.

Year	Total Spanish candidature	Number at Ordinary Level	Number at Higher Level	% Ordinary Level	% Higher Level
2012	4330	1800	2530	41.5	58.5
2013	4903	1942	2961	39.6	60.4
2014	5340	1943	3397	36.3	63.7
2015	5793	2138	3655	36.9	63.1
2016	6579	2174	4405	33.0	67.0

Table 2: Number and Percentage of Candidates at Each Level, 2012 to 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016d: 5) [online].

Year	A	B	C	A, B, C	D	E	F	NG	E, F, NG
2012	15.3	33.4	34	82.7	16.1	1.1	0.2	0.0	1.3
2013	16.5	29.0	33.9	79.4	18.7	1.8	0.1	0.0	1.9
2014	16.4	32.7	30.4	79.5	18.3	2	0.2	0.0	2.2
2015	16.5	33.1	33.5	83.1	15.6	1.2	0.1	0.0	1.3
2016	17.1	28.7	29.8	75.6	21.6	2.7	0.1	0.0	2.8

Table 3: Percentage of candidates awarded each lettered grade in
Higher Level Spanish, 2012 – 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016d: 7) [online].

Year	A	B	C	A, B, C	D	E	F	NG	E, F, NG
2012	3.1	29.8	36.3	69.2	23.6	5.8	1.3	0.1	7.2
2013	3.3	29.6	40.1	73	20.7	4.5	1.4	0.2	6.1
2014	4.7	31.7	35.5	71.9	22.1	4.3	1.4	0.2	5.9
2015	2.8	28.4	37.9	69.1	23.7	5.6	1.6	0.0	7.2
2016	3.2	28.9	38.2	70.3	23.3	5.1	1.3	0.0	6.4

Table 4: Percentage of candidates awarded each lettered grade in
Ordinary Level Spanish, 2012 – 2016

Source: State Examinations Commission (2016d: 9) [online].

Appendix N: Leaving Certificate Points System

Pre-2017 Points compared with New System Introduced in 2017

CURRENT (PRE-2017) LEAVING CERTIFICATE GRADING SCALE	NEW LEAVING CERTIFICATE GRADING SCALE	NEW POINTS AT HIGHER LEVEL	NEW POINTS AT ORDINARY LEVEL
A1	H1 / O1	100	56
A2	H2 / O2	88	46
B1			
B2	H3 / O3	77	37
B3			
C1	H4 / O4	66	28
C2			
C3	H5 / O5	56	20
D1			
D2	H6 / O6	46	12
D3			
E		33	0

Breakdown of Points for pre-2017 Leaving Certificate applicants, to be introduced in 2017

Source: Irish Universities Association (2015: 6)

Appendix O: CEFR Self-Assessment Grid

	A1	A2
LISTENING	I can recognise familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak/sign slowly and clearly.	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.
READING	I can understand familiar names, words/signs and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.
MEDIATING A TEXT	I can convey simple, predictable information given in short, simple texts like signs and notices, posters and programmes.	I can convey the main point(s) involved in short, simple texts on everyday subjects of immediate interest provided these are expressed clearly in simple language.
SPOKEN PRODUCTION	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job ¹ .
WRITTEN PRODUCTION	I can produce simple isolated phrases and sentences.	I can produce a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors like "and", "but" and "because".
SPOKEN INTERACTION	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate and help me formulate what I'm trying to express. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.
WRITTEN AND ONLINE INTERACTION	I can post short, simple greetings as statements about what I did and how I liked it and can respond to comments in a very simple way. I can react simply to other posts, images, and media. I can complete a very simple purchase, filling in forms with personal details.	I can engage in basic social interaction, expressing how I feel, what I am doing or what I need, and responding to comments with thanks, apology or answers to questions. I can complete simple transactions such as ordering goods, can follow simple instructions and can collaborate in a shared task with a supportive interlocutor.
MEDIATING CONCEPTS	I can invite other people's contributions using short, simple phrases. I can use simple words/signs and signals to show my interest in an idea and to confirm that I understand. I can express an idea very simply and ask others whether they understand me and what they think.	I can collaborate in simple, practical tasks, asking what others think, making suggestions and understanding responses, provided. I can ask for repetition or reformulation from time to time. I can make suggestions in a simple way to move the discussion forward and can ask what people think of certain ideas.
MEDIATING COMMUNICATION	I can facilitate communication by showing my welcome and interest with simple words/signs and non-verbal signals, by inviting others to contribute and indicating whether I understand. I can communicate other people's personal details and very simple, predictable information, provided other people help me with formulation.	I can contribute to communication by using simple words/signs to invite people to explain things, indicating when I understand and/or agree. I can communicate the main point of what is said in predictable, everyday situations about personal wants and needs. I can recognise when people disagree or when difficulties occur and can use simple phrases to seek compromise and agreement.

Source: Junior Cycle for Teachers (2020)