Article

Spanish Teachers’ Beliefs about Plurilingualism: A Case Study in a Monolingual Context

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Abstract: In Spain, the learning of foreign languages has become one of the most interesting educational challenges in recent decades. Regulatory changes have been proposed to align with the Council of Europe’s language policy, which aims to promote plurilingualism and pluriculturalism among European Union citizens. Although the development of plurilingual competence in students has become a key goal, there is little evidence regarding the beliefs of current teachers, especially in monolingual contexts, where multilingualism is mainly developed through instruction. This study involved 307 teachers who taught languages or subjects in a foreign language. The results reveal beliefs about the promotion of plurilingualism, the objectives of language learning, the importance of plurilingual competence, and its characterization that at times do not align with the European language policy and its approach to plurilingualism, though there is agreement on other issues. Among the variables analyzed, two variables—academic training and the number of languages known—were found to significantly influence the beliefs revealed.

Keywords: beliefs; plurilingualism; teachers

1. Introduction

The Council of Europe’s language policy has contributed significantly to changes in language teaching which have been implemented over the last three decades, with the dissemination of various recommendations and the establishment of various programs aimed at promoting plurilingualism and pluriculturalism among European Union citizens. The aim is to improve communication as well as understanding between people, international cooperation, and mobility and possibilities in the employment field. As early as 1995, the European Commission established a fourth general objective of mastering three community languages, suggesting that the learning of a first foreign language should begin at the pre-school level, that it should be systematically continued in primary education, and that the second foreign language should be taught in secondary education. It even proposed that the first foreign language should become the language of instruction for certain subjects in secondary education, which is the first reference to the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach, which would be used throughout Europe in the following years and has been the subject of extensive research (Pérez Cañado 2012, 2023; Goris et al. 2019). More recently, Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1 (Council of Europe 2022) reiterates the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for a democratic culture. It not only recommends “implementing whole-school policies and practices that welcome and value linguistic and cultural diversity, promote language learning and the development of plurilingual repertoires” (p. 9), but it also asks teachers “to focus on pedagogies that foster inclusive plurilingual and intercultural education” (p. 9).

Consequently, these guidelines in language policy have led to changes in the language policies of different countries. In Spain, the teaching and learning of foreign languages has
become one of the most interesting educational challenges in recent decades, with proposals of different regulatory changes, both quantitative (extended timetables and the number of years and languages taught) as well as qualitative (a renewal of the curricular purpose in the area and of the methodological approaches used). The ultimate goal is the development of plurilingualism, with plurilingual competence having been introduced as one of the key competencies that students should develop throughout compulsory education. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, hereinafter the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001, 2018), plurilingual competence is the ability to use—in different ways and forms of communication—the different languages that a person knows. In fact, as an individual broadens his or her linguistic experience, “he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact” (2018: 157). These transformations in language learning require, in turn, changes in teacher training that, at times, do not occur with the desired speed nor in the appropriate form (De la Maya Retamar and Luengo González 2015). Therefore, the present article aims to determine language teachers’ beliefs about the process of developing plurilingualism, a very sparsely studied issue, especially in monolingual contexts. Thus, we determine a starting point to implement new teaching strategies in class which favor that necessary interconnection among languages. In the next sections, we will focus on the concept of plurilingualism, the educational practices favoring it, and previous studies on teachers’ beliefs about this issue. In this way, we can determine our theoretical framework, which will let us assess the assumptions of the teachers taking part in this study.

1.1. Plurilingualism and Plurilingual Pedagogy

As several authors (Kemp 2009; Jessner 2008) point out, defining the term multilingualism is an arduous task, not only because of the complexity of the phenomenon to which it alludes but also because of the paradoxes in this field of study, especially relating to teaching and learning (Coste et al. 2009). Thus, the number of languages involved, the social or individual use to which it refers, and when a person can be called multilingual—conditioned by a monolingual vision of multilingualism and the native speaker model—all impact how different researchers use this term. In addition, this issue is evident in the simultaneous use of the terms multilingualism and plurilingualism, the latter being widely used in the French-speaking research tradition and whose use has been promoted by the Council of Europe, mainly through its approach to language teaching in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001). While multilingualism is defined as “the knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society” (p. 4), thus emphasizing the aspect of the social use of language and proposing a definition that underlies a conception of languages as separate entities, plurilingualism emphasizes the relationship and interaction between the languages that an individual knows. However, as some authors point out, in English, the term multilingualism encompasses the two dimensions—individual and territorial—(Coste 2010) or the two atomistic and holistic visions (Cenoz 2013), and it is the latter meaning of this term which we will use as a synonym for plurilingualism in our text.

Research on multilingualism, its benefits, and multilingual education has been very extensive over the past two decades. Thus, different authors have theorized about the process of acquiring a third language and additional languages in a general way (Aronin and Laoire 2003; Hufeisen 1998; Hufeisen and Marx 2007; De Bot and Jaensch 2015; Herdina and Jessner 2002) or even about how this process is developed in the cases of secondary and university students (Bono 2008; Lasagabaster 1998; Cenoz 2001, 2003a). Although each proposed model reflects on particular aspects of this process, Herdina and Jessner (2002) suggest a dynamic model of multilingualism that shows how the multilingual individual develops a global system, in which the different linguistic systems do not operate in isolation but simultaneously. Plurilingual competence, which cannot be interpreted as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as “the existence of a
complex or even composite competence on which the social actor may draw”, is understood in the same sense (Coste et al. 2009, p. 11). In other words, multilingualism entails qualitative changes in the speaker’s linguistic system, which is enriched and adapted to contextual and psychological needs, resulting in a change in the quality of the multilingual speaker’s linguistic system.

Likewise, the benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism have been associated with metalinguistic and metacognitive advantages (Cenoz 2003b) and with having the largest available linguistic repertoire (Cenoz 2010; De Angelis 2007). Thus, Hufeisen and Marx (2007) point out that, in the learning of a third language, there are specific factors related to language learning which were not present in the acquisition of an L2. The student is no longer a novice language learner; as he or she is familiar with that specific learning process, the student has developed techniques and strategies to cope with it, has learned intuitively about his or her own learning style, and has at his or her disposal specific linguistic knowledge and a range of skills that L2 learners do not have (Jessner 2008). However, as Haukås (2016) points out, research shows that multilingualism per se does not enhance language learning, but rather, the fact that learners are aware of and use their linguistic repertoire and previously developed learning strategies does. Furthermore, this is where the teacher and the approach followed in the classroom become key aspects, because if the teachers do not believe in the benefits of plurilingualism when learning languages, they will not focus on the importance of highlighting and improving that linguistic repertoire. For this reason, research like this current article is needed to understand teachers’ beliefs and the way in which they carry out their teaching process.

Education systems must ensure the development of multilingual and multicultural competence by their students, and this implies promoting an awareness in them of why and how they learn languages, as well as the development of skills that allow them to transfer the skills developed in language learning and perceive relationships between different languages and cultures (Council of Europe 2006). There is no single definition of multilingual education, but there is a consensus on the criteria for the establishment of a curriculum whose objective is plurilingual education: to utilize the full potential of learners’ linguistic and cultural repertoires, to put in place language interaction activities, to give a central place to the reflexivity and increased autonomy of pupils with respect to language learning, and to integrate different languages in the process (Galante et al. 2022; Piccardo 2020; Beacco et al. 2016). Likewise, there are approaches that implement multilingual education, such as CLIL, integrated language didactics, language awareness, or intercomprehension.

1.2. Teachers’ Beliefs about Plurilingualism

What teachers know, believe, and think, i.e., the cognitive dimension of teaching, constitutes the object of the study of teacher cognition. This is an area that has been widely studied and recognized as having an impact on teachers’ professional lives (Borg 2003), shedding light on the development of effective pedagogy and the enhancement of student learning, the understanding of classroom instruction at the micro-level, and the contribution to teacher learning (Li 2017).

As Pajares (1992) explains, all teachers hold beliefs about their work, students, subject matter, roles, and responsibilities. Research highlights the relationships between these beliefs, developed through their own experience as students; their education as teachers; and their teaching, learning, and classroom practice (Borg 2003; Maggioni and Parkinson 2008; Neokleous et al. 2022). Particularly relevant is the fact that teachers’ experience as language learners can have more influence on their teaching practice than pedagogical principles learned during teacher training (Gutierrez Eugenio 2014).

Despite the “multilingual turn” (May 2014) and the importance of the analysis of teachers’ beliefs, there has been no interest in exploring this area until this past decade. The research carried out has focused on particular aspects and has been conducted in different contexts, which has partly determined the results obtained. Thus, the role of prior
language knowledge in learning and its influence on teaching practices has been analyzed. Specifically, De Angelis (2011) analyzes teachers’ views about using mother tongues in the classroom, with a sample of teachers of different secondary disciplines—languages, science, literature, or physical education—from Italy, Austria, or the UK, surveyed by means of a questionnaire. These views are conditioned not only by the training received in their university program but, as has already been shown, by their personal experiences as learners and teachers (Neokleous et al. 2022). The results of De Angelis’s (2011) study show that most teachers perceive multilingualism positively, but only when it is not directly related to linguistic interactions, which are not considered a benefit. In the same way, most of the teacher participants do not refer to their students’ home language or culture in class, as is the case in the study by Neokleous et al. (2022), where pre- or in-service Norwegian teachers of English, surveyed by means of a questionnaire and interviews, adhere to an English-only approach, fearing that the use of the mother tongue would be detrimental to the acquisition of the foreign language. In addition, the fact is that teachers sometimes “struggle to shift from monolingual ideologies and pedagogical practices, as advocated for in the promotion of multilingualism and inclusive pedagogy” (Tishakov and Tsagari 2022, p. 141). This is also the situation described by Lundberg (2019), who acknowledges that although teachers have a favorable view of multilingualism and multilingual students, there are skeptical opinions about it, based on monolingual and traditional ideologies. In a context closer to ours, Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022) investigates Andalusian teachers’ ideologies towards migrant students’ bilingualism and home language maintenance and finds through semi-structured interviews that, at a surface level, language teachers show a positive attitude towards the bilingualism of their students, although in practice, these beliefs are contradictory. However, teachers who do not teach languages (regular teachers) associate bilingualism with problems and, in general, neither one nor the other are aware of the importance of maintaining and using the students’ home language. In the context of L3 acquisition, Haukås (2016), in her study on Norwegian language teachers’ beliefs about multilingualism and the use of a multilingual pedagogical approach, agrees with the research already presented that teachers view multilingualism as a potentially positive asset, although in the case of students, this positive view is not so clear. In practice, although teachers appeal to students’ prior linguistic knowledge, they “rarely focus on the transfer of learning strategies” (p. 1).

Other studies have also analyzed the extent to which language teachers, content teachers, and in-service teachers believe that languages embody multilingualism in programs developed in different educational systems in various European areas that involve the use of three languages. In some cases, such programs include an institutionally recognized minority language, such as those developed in the region of the Basque Country (Spain) or in Friesland (The Netherlands) (Gartziarena and Villabona 2022; Arocena Egaña et al. 2015). Through questionnaires or interviews, the researchers conclude that teachers associate multilingualism with natural, positive, and enriching characteristics (Gartziarena and Villabona 2022), but as Arocena Egaña et al. (2015) point out, the beliefs are still largely monolingual and seem to only gradually change to more multilingual views.

In terms of research techniques, researchers have approached teachers’ beliefs in different ways and used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data analysis. The questionnaire is perhaps the most widely used instrument, having been validated, such as a trilingual questionnaire for assessing teachers’ beliefs about multilingualism (Gutierrez Eugenio 2014). On other occasions, the quantitative analysis is complemented by semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions that allow for more in-depth responses to the questions posed, or these methods constitute the main tool for obtaining data. Another tool that is used to explore the belief system of teachers is the use of biographical and reflective texts such as life stories (Pérez-Peitx and Sánchez-Quintana 2019), which have also been used to analyze the evolution of beliefs over time (Carrasco Perea and Sánchez Quintan 2013).
1.3. Research Context and Questions

This study on teachers’ beliefs about plurilingualism was carried out in the region of Extremadura, within the framework of a research project developed at the University of Extremadura, which seeks to analyze the development of plurilingualism at different levels, such as affective, linguistic, and disciplinary (IB20074). In Spain, as education responsibilities are decentralized, each community establishes its own legislation, so this may vary from one region to another. Extremadura is a region characterized by its monolingualism: Spanish is the only language spoken. There is only one exception to this generality, as there is a small area in the northwest of Extremadura where “fala”, a Romance language belonging to the Galician–Portuguese group, is a co-official language for approximately 6000 inhabitants. Since the year 2000, the regional government has implemented various actions aimed at promoting the plurilingualism of its citizens. In the educational context, this has resulted in starting the study of foreign languages at the age of three, that is, in the first course of pre-primary education; the expansion of the number of foreign languages learnt; and the establishment of specific programs for students—such as exchanges, immersion, the use of the European Language Portfolio—and teachers—such as training courses.

Even though the promotion of plurilingualism has become a major European, national, and regional objective, there is no research that analyzes teachers’ beliefs on this issue in this particular context, in which plurilingualism is basically developed through the introduction of languages into the school curriculum, that is, through formal education, and in which there is no significant presence of multilingual students in the classrooms. We consider it crucial to analyze these beliefs because, as Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022) points out, they are important for various reasons: these assumptions influence teachers’ teaching practices and affect students’ learning and the language policies implemented by teachers at the school. Also, they are critical for developing students’ own linguistic repertoires. In fact, this is another objective of the research project at the University of Extremadura, which is under development.

Although many studies have examined teachers’ beliefs about multilingualism, including those referenced in this article, they often focus on different contexts to the Spanish one—Norway, Sweden, Italy, Austria, or the UK, among others—and circumstances—the role of prior language knowledge in learning languages, for example. If we focus on the Spanish monolingual context, there is only one study, developed by Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022), on the preservation of the primary language among immigrant students in a monolingual Spanish region like Andalusia. However, it contrasts with the scope of our study, as it is quite a different region, covering a very specific aspect.

Thus, our research questions are the following:

**RQ1.** What do teachers in Extremadura believe about the promotion of plurilingualism?

**RQ2.** What are the beliefs of teachers in Extremadura regarding languages?

**RQ3.** What are teachers’ understandings of plurilingual competence and its development based on their expressed beliefs?

**RQ4.** Do the sociodemographic variables of the respondents influence their opinions about plurilingualism in the context of education?

2. Materials and Methods

This study is part of a large study that investigated teachers and students’ beliefs about plurilingualism. This piece of research, focused only on in-service teachers, was carried out during the 2022–2023 academic year. The research design used is cross-sectional, descriptive, and non-correlational. The sampling carried out was not probabilistic.

2.1. Participants

The final sample of the present research was composed of 307 active teachers (n = 307), whose work experience is related to the development of plurilingualism, either because
they are teachers of foreign languages or because they are involved in specific programs implemented for this purpose in the region of Extremadura, a monolingual community in southwestern Spain. Of this sample, some teach a foreign language (n = 239), which presents a sampling error of 5.99% at the 95% confidence level. The rest of the participants (n = 68) use a foreign language as the language of instruction in the bilingual education programs implemented in the region since 2004.

Regarding the language taught by the respondents, there are quite unequally sized groups. Whereas 193 respondents teach foreign languages—English (n = 154), Portuguese (n = 17), French (n = 18), German (n = 2), and Italian (n = 2)—4 respondents teach Spanish as a mother tongue. Also, some teachers (n = 109) use a foreign language to teach non-linguistic disciplines. This was the main reason why this variable was not included in the current study, even though this inequality reflects the reality of the Extremadura situation, where the vast majority of foreign language teachers are English teachers.

In terms of gender, the sample is distributed in the following way: 230 women (74.9%) and 74 men (24.1%). Participants aged between 45 and 54 years are the most numerous (34.85%), followed by the age range of 35–44 years (32.24%). The rest, i.e., those who are under 35 and over 55, represent very similar percentages of around 16% for the former and 17% for the latter.

Regarding their academic background, most of the sample is made up of language teachers (74%), mostly of English (59.6%), although 16.5% are trained to teach non-linguistic disciplines, especially in the secondary stage. The number of foreign languages (FLs) that the participants know ranges from 1 FL (39.7%) to 6 FLs (1.6%), although the highest percentages, in addition to the one already presented for 1 FL, are 2 FLs (32.9%) and 3 FLs (16.3%). Regarding their training in plurilingualism, just over half of the respondents (51.5%) said that they have received some type of training.

In relation to their current professional situation, half of the respondents are teaching in the secondary stage (51.7%), while 24.1% of them teach in the primary stage. The rest of the participants teach in official language schools, adult education, or universities, or they teach in more than one of the aforementioned stages simultaneously. Likewise, 158 participants (51.5%) have had or have some type of experience in plurilingualism programs.

2.2. Research Instrument

The data collection was carried out using an online questionnaire that was composed of two parts: sociodemographic data and the “Foreign language teachers’ beliefs about plurilingualism” scale. The purpose of the former was to gather information on sociolinguistic, academic, and professional characteristics, such as gender, age, academic studies prior to entering the teaching profession, and background in language teaching and in bilingual programs. The latter, including the earlier scale, was developed within the framework of the same project. This questionnaire was the subject of a prior validation process with teachers who were in training (Fernández Portero and Morera Bañas, under revision).

First, an expert validation was carried out, and then a statistical analysis was performed to determine its reliability and validity. Cronbach’s alpha was used to measure the reliability of the scale, with the result (0.93) showing optimal reliability (Nunnally and Berstein 1994). Next, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed with varimax orthogonal rotation and principal component analysis (PCA), with the result of the KMO test being 0.81, and the result of the Bartlett test (p < 0.01) being significant. Kaiser’s (1960) rule of eigenvalues greater than one and Cattell’s (1966) sedimentation graph suggest the presence of 4 factors on the scale: beliefs about plurilingualism, plurilingual educational practices, training in plurilingualism, and the development of plurilingualism in Extremadura. These factors comprise a total of 30 items, which are assessed using a five-point Likert scale.

2.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was sent online to the academic management of all primary and secondary schools in the region, with the request that they disseminate it among language
teachers and those who participated in bilingual sections teaching their subjects in a foreign language. At the same time, the questionnaire was disseminated on social networks by groups of teachers to try to reach as many teachers as possible. Finally, on a more individual basis, participants were encouraged to share the questionnaire with colleagues who met the sample selection criteria, using the snowball sampling technique.

Prior to sending the questionnaires, this study was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Extremadura, using an informed consent form that all participants signed before collaborating in the study.

Participants completed the questionnaire in Spanish between January and April 2023, being informed of the objectives of the research and of the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation.

Once the questionnaires were completed, the data were processed. Teachers were asked to rate 30 items on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) Likert scale. The study variables belonged to the first part of the study, where respondents were asked about certain sociodemographic aspects, as well as their academic training and work experience. The data were coded according to the options given for each answer and then statistically analyzed using the IBM SPSS v.23 statistical package.

3. Results

Below, we present the statistical description relating to the items that constitute dimension 1 (beliefs about plurilingualism), which explores teachers’ beliefs in relation to issues that theoretically underpin the concept of plurilingualism. The items reported in Table 1 correspond to the statements presented in the questionnaire, which participants completed in Spanish, although we have translated them into English for a better understanding.

Table 1. Statistical description of dimension 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>RQ</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>m</th>
<th>sd</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The education system should focus on the mastery of a foreign language rather than promoting plurilingual teaching.</td>
<td>1 and 4</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.891</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Some languages are more important than others.</td>
<td>2 and 4</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.848</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Plurilingual competence implies that students achieve a high level in all the languages learnt.</td>
<td>3 and 4</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.911</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Languages should be learnt without establishing relationships between them.</td>
<td>3 and 4</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.719</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. It is necessary to ensure that at least two foreign languages are taught in compulsory education.</td>
<td>1 and 4</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.802</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The simultaneous use of different languages in communication is not recommended.</td>
<td>3 and 4</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.722</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. It is not worth learning a language that few people speak.</td>
<td>2 and 4</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.788</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The learning strategies developed in the acquisition of one language cannot be extrapolated to others.</td>
<td>3 and 4</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.708</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To be able to expand on the results, Table 2 presents the response frequencies, expressed in percentages, of the different items in relation to the Likert scale presented in the questionnaire.
Table 2. Ratings in dimension 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>1 Strongly Disagree (%)</th>
<th>2 Moderately Disagree (%)</th>
<th>3 Neither Agree nor Disagree (%)</th>
<th>4 Moderately Agree (%)</th>
<th>5 Strongly Agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>45.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the analysis of the items that make up this dimension, we chose to present the results of items that maintain a certain conceptual unity, and which are related to the research questions stated, including RQ1, 2, and 3. To answer RQ4, when examining the differences between the various responses according to the variables analyzed (age, number of languages known, university academic training, specific training in plurilingualism, and years of teaching experience), we carried out inferential analyses.

3.1. RQ1: Beliefs about Promoting Plurilingualism

We first present the results of items 1 and 5, which allow us to answer our first research question, which asks about the beliefs of teachers in Extremadura regarding the promotion of plurilingualism.

The first of the items explores the teachers' views on the convenience of the education system focusing on the mastery of a foreign language rather than promoting plurilingual education. The mean of the responses is 2.66, which implies that overall, the teachers are in an intermediate position, i.e., they do not define or are not clear about their beliefs in this regard. Likewise, the standard deviation indicates that the obtained values oscillate between moderately agree and disagree.

As can be observed in Table 2, this item is rejected by almost half of the teachers (45.6%), but there are almost 25% who strongly or somewhat agree with this option. It is also striking that almost 30% of the teachers surveyed are not clear about what the purpose of the educational system should be in relation to language learning. The results regarding this first question are to some extent consistent with the teachers’ assessment of item 5, where they are asked about the need to guarantee the learning of at least two foreign languages. This item reaches a mean of 3.89, implying that the respondents moderately agree with the statement presented. If we analyze the percentages of responses of the different values of the scale, 45.6% of those surveyed strongly agree and 20.8% moderately agree that the study of two languages should be guaranteed, while only 15% of them are against the compulsory study of two languages in the education system.

3.2. RQ2: Beliefs about Languages

In relation to the second research question, which addresses the beliefs of teachers in Extremadura regarding languages, we report the results for items 2 and 7. In their answers regarding the relative importance of languages (item 2), the teachers neither agree nor disagree with that possibility (X = 2.96), just as in the case of item 1, although in this case, the deviation is higher, showing a greater disparity in the responses of the participants. An examination of the response percentages shows us that the sample was almost equally distributed between those who did not agree with this statement (40%) and those who agreed (43.9%), that is, there is a certain polarization in the teachers’ beliefs about this issue. In addition, it seems that the importance is not determined by the number of speakers of a language, since, when asked if it is not worthwhile to speak a language with few speakers
(item 7), the mean of the responses was 2.04, with most of the respondents (almost 70%) indicating strong or moderate disagreement with this statement.

3.3. RQ3: Beliefs about Plurilingual Competence and Its Development

To examine what teachers mean by plurilingual competence (RQ3), we will analyze the responses to statements 3 and 6. The first of these states that plurilingual competence implies a high level of proficiency in all languages known by the student. The mean of the responses is 2.88, which again shows that the participants do not have a well-defined belief in this regard. Faced with this, the descriptive data in Table 2 show that, even though there is a high percentage of teachers whose opinion is neutral on the matter (37.1%), among the rest, there is no unanimous opinion, since 36.5% reject this view, compared to the 26.4% who agree with it. Analyzing the responses to statement 6, which states the inadvisability of using different languages in communication, the mean drops to 1.96, indicating that the participants disagree with this statement. An examination of the response percentages in the different categories shows much more unanimous results, in the sense that 79.8% disagree with the fact that there cannot be combinations or alternations of languages in communication, and only 8% totally or strongly agree.

Regarding the development of plurilingualism, the second part of RQ3, the statements presented relate to two key aspects: the relationship between languages (statement 4) and the transfer of learning strategies (statement 8). With reference to the first of these, which is presented negatively as stating that languages should be learned without establishing relationships between them, the mean response reaches the value of 1.70, indicating that teachers as a whole disagree with the fact that languages do not interrelate. Therefore, a high percentage of teachers (81.1%) reject this claim, and only 6.4% agree or strongly agree. In the same way, 81.4% of teachers do not agree that learning strategies developed in the learning of a language cannot be extrapolated, and a small proportion of 5.6% agree with this approach. The average value in this case is very similar to that of the previous item, 1.69, which again indicates a rejection of the negative idea that it expresses.

3.4. RQ4: Variables Influencing Beliefs about Plurilingualism in the Context of Education

When trying to expand on the results of the survey, presented globally in Table 2, RQ4 aims to investigate specific variables to determine their influence on the above beliefs. For this purpose, inferential analyses of mean comparisons were conducted, focusing on the following variables: age, the number of languages known, academic training, i.e., whether their university training is in languages or not, participation in specific training modules in plurilingualism, years of experience, and experience in programs for developing plurilingualism, such as CLIL.

As the data were not normally distributed, as shown by the Shapiro–Wilk test results presented in Table 1, they were analyzed using the Kruskal–Wallis distribution-free test for multiple comparisons and the Mann–Whitney U test for pairwise comparisons.

Table 3 presents the results of the Mann–Whitney U test for all the items, focusing on the variables of academic background, training in plurilingualism, and experience in plurilingualism programs.

As can be seen from the results, only the academic training variable has an impact on the answers provided by the respondents. Neither receiving specific training related to plurilingualism nor the implementation of plurilingual approaches or having experience in this type of program has a significant impact on the responses obtained. In relation to items 1 and 5, the comparison of the answers provided in relation to the academic training variable shows statistically significant differences in items 1, 2, 5, and 8, while in the rest of the items, such differences do not occur.
In relation to items 1 and 5, teachers who have had academic training related to mother tongues or foreign languages, unlike those who have had other types of training, mostly disagree with the fact that the education system should prioritize the mastery of a foreign language over the promotion of plurilingual teaching ($x = 2.92$ vs. $x = 2.57$), and most of them are in agreement with the proposal to guarantee the learning of at least two foreign languages in the compulsory education of students ($x = 1.34$ vs. $x = 1.25$). Regarding item 2, the Mann–Whitney U test also reveals that there are differences in the beliefs about the relative importance attributed to languages. Thus, teachers who have received specific training in languages have a more neutral view on this issue than the rest of the teachers ($x = 3.27$ vs. $x = 2.85$), who are somewhat more in agreement with the claim that there are languages which are more important than others.

Finally, in item 8, teachers trained in languages disagree to a greater extent with the idea that the strategies developed when learning one language cannot be extrapolated to subsequent languages, with this difference again being significant ($x = 1.56$ vs. $x = 2.06$), as shown in the results in Table 3.

Table 4 shows the results of the Kruskal–Wallis test, conducted for variables in which there are more than two independent samples.

In addition to their academic background, the number of languages known by respondents is also significant in the agreement or disagreement that they express in relation to the statements presented. Since the Kruskal–Wallis test only indicates the existence of differences, but not the groups in which these differences occur, we performed pairwise comparisons using the Mann–Whitney U test.

In relation to the first statement, there are differences between teachers who only know one foreign language ($x = 3.15$) and those who know two ($x = 2.27$) ($Z = −3.527$, $p = 0.000$), three ($x = 2.12$) ($Z = −4.584$, $p = 0.000$), and four languages ($x = 1.91$) ($Z = −4.195$, $p = 0.000$), in the sense that the former are more in favor of mastering a foreign language than promoting multilingual competence. In relation to statement five, there are once again differences between teachers who have only learned one language ($x = 3.62$) and those who know three ($x = 4.20$) ($Z = −2.716$, $p = 0.007$) and four languages ($x = 4.39$) ($Z = −2.606$, $p = 0.009$).
Table 4. Results of Kruskal–Wallis test by statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of Languages</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The education system should focus on the mastery of a</td>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>1.223</td>
<td>34.807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foreign language rather than promoting multilingual teaching.</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>0.747</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Some languages are more important than others.</td>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>0.558</td>
<td>17.770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>df</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>0.906</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Plurilingual competence implies that students achieve a</td>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>1.505</td>
<td>6.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high level in all the languages learnt.</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>0.681</td>
<td>0.227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Languages should be learnt without establishing</td>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>6.653</td>
<td>12.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationships between them.</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>0.084</td>
<td>0.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. It is necessary to ensure that at least two foreign</td>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>0.983</td>
<td>13.437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>languages are taught in compulsory education.</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>0.805</td>
<td>0.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The simultaneous use of different languages in</td>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>6.322</td>
<td>5.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication is not recommended.</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>0.097</td>
<td>0.316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. It is not worth learning a language that few people</td>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>0.705</td>
<td>15.570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speak.</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>0.872</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The learning strategies developed in the acquisition of</td>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>6.838</td>
<td>11.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one language cannot be extrapolated to others.</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>0.035</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding the relative importance of languages (item 2), differences exist between teachers who only know one foreign language ($\bar{x} = 3.35$) and those who know two ($\bar{x} = 2.65$) ($Z = -3.197, p = 0.001$) and three languages ($\bar{x} = 2.53$) ($Z = -3.173, p = 0.002$). Something similar occurs when we analyze statement 7, where once again there are differences between teachers who know one foreign language ($\bar{x} = 2.36$) and those who know two ($\bar{x} = 1.94$) ($Z = -2.695, p = 0.007$) and three languages ($\bar{x} = 1.65$) ($Z = -3.533, p = 0.000$). In other words, knowledge of foreign languages is a relevant factor in teachers’ considerations regarding languages and their importance.

Finally, with respect to statement 4, the results of the Mann–Whitney U test indicate that there are statistically significant differences between teachers who know one foreign language ($\bar{x} = 1.91$) and those who know two ($\bar{x} = 1.64$) ($Z = -2.133, p = 0.029$) or three languages ($\bar{x} = 1.47$) ($Z = -2.632, p = 0.008$) and, with respect to statement 8, between those who know one foreign language ($\bar{x} = 1.84$) and three ($\bar{x} = 1.45$) ($Z = -2.155, p = 0.012$) or four languages ($Z = -2.246, p = 0.025$). Again, knowledge of languages turns out to be a significant variable, since knowledge of only one language leads to a more lukewarm rejection of the claims made.

4. Discussion

As discussed in the Introduction, knowledge of teachers’ beliefs is of crucial importance for understanding their decisions in the classroom. This paper investigates the beliefs of working teachers regarding plurilingualism in a monolingual community located in southwestern Spain. The analysis of the results shown in the previous section, based on a sample of 307 teachers, is a first step towards understanding what teachers think about plurilingualism.
Our first research question aimed to explore teachers’ beliefs about languages and the promotion of plurilingualism, presenting them with some positive and negative statements about the principles that underpin this concept. As we have already stated, the Council of Europe’s language policy set the objective, three decades ago, for Europeans to learn two languages in addition to their mother tongue, and the recommendations of the Council of Ministers of Education, as well as the actions launched and the instruments developed, have the clear aim of developing the plurilingual and pluricultural competence of its citizens. On the other hand, the basic education curricula in the new Spanish education law implements these European objectives by incorporating plurilingual competence as a key competence that students must acquire and develop. Since 2011, the region in which this study is carried out has incorporated an article into its own education law that is dedicated to the promotion of plurilingualism, which is also proposed as a strategic commitment. To this end, a specific plan was launched, called Linguaex (Junta de Extremadura 2009), which specifies a series of practical actions, aimed at teachers, students, schools, and society in general. The results obtained show that 45% of the survey respondents are in favor of the promotion of plurilingualism, and 66% are likely in favor of the compulsory study of two foreign languages. However, it is striking that a quarter of the respondents agree that the objective of the education system should be the mastery of only one foreign language, as opposed to the development of plurilingualism and, in addition, that there are almost a third of teachers who are not clear in their stance on this position. For this group of teachers, slightly more than half of the sample, this implies a lack of knowledge or rejection of an educational approach and purpose that transcends the borders of the region itself. This lack of clarity regarding the objective of our education system, with regard to plurilingualism, contrasts not only with all the recommendations put forward by the Council of Europe and the instruments developed for the promotion of multilingualism, such as the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001), or the European Language Portfolio (Council of Europe 2008), but also with Spanish society’s perception, as established in the Special Eurobarometer 540 survey (European Commission 2024) on Europeans and their languages. This division of opinions is also found in other contexts, in which teachers show, although less markedly, different views on multilingualism. Thus, for example, Haukås (2016) states that the teachers in her study see plurilingualism as a potentially positive asset, but although they recognize that it has benefited them in their own language learning, they do not see it as a self-evident asset for students. Lundberg (2019), on the other hand, posits that Swedish teachers’ beliefs are rather welcoming towards multilingualism but acknowledges that some teachers have a more skeptical view, and the results reveal several misconceptions about multilingualism. Also, this positive view is sometimes betrayed by classroom practices (Rodriguez-Izquierdo 2022). We certainly cannot conclude that the beliefs of the teachers in our sample demonstrate a negative point of view towards plurilingualism, an issue about which they have not been directly asked, but the fact that more than 50% of the respondents are unclear or reject the promotion not only of this concept but also of guarantees of the study of two languages in the educational system is significant. We cannot forget, as we have mentioned, that in a monolingual region such as Extremadura, the multilingualism of students can only be developed through formal instruction. This question also contrasts with the views of teachers in other countries such as Italy or Austria, who are almost unanimously in agreement with the idea that it is important in a society to know several foreign languages (De Angelis 2011).

Likewise, when teachers are against or undecided about the promotion of plurilingualism, choosing instead to favor the mastery of a single foreign language, they seem to agree with the idea that it is preferable to learn one language well than several in an “imperfect” way, and that mastery should be the goal when learning languages. The first idea clashes squarely with the characterization of plurilingual competence included in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001), since the imbalance in the domain and profile of competences in the different languages that make up the linguistic repertoire of individuals is one of the elements that define it. The second focuses on the widespread idea that to know a language
is to know it like a native, a belief that is present in the results of various studies (Fons and Palou 2014; Pérez-Peitx and Sánchez-Quintana 2019). In other words, the discrepancy between language policies, including approaches in favor of multilingualism and the use of pluralistic approaches to teaching, and what teachers think and do in classrooms is based, in part, on beliefs that are “rooted in monolingual and traditional ideologies” of language education (Lundberg 2019, p. 280).

In relation to their beliefs about the importance of languages, teachers show contradictory beliefs, with 40% of the sample disagreeing that some languages are more important than others, compared to the 43% who agree. Talking about the importance of languages is a complex issue that inevitably generates debate and confrontations (Moreno Fernández 2015). Beyond immersing ourselves in a debate which can be approached from various angles (linguistic, anthropological, economic...), the key idea, based on European perspectives, is that all languages are important. The results reveal that, for a substantial part of the sample, languages are conceptualized in a hierarchical way, to the detriment of a more horizontal conception. This same belief is highlighted by Pérez-Peitx and Sánchez-Quintana (2019), who conclude that languages such as English are given greater importance than others due to their degree of communicative, social, and institutional prestige. Furthermore, this existence of differences in the importance of languages is mainly expressed by teachers who only know one language—English in 90% of cases. However, when asked if they agree that it is not worth learning a language that few people speak, teachers mostly disagree (70%). We believe that these two beliefs are the result of the apparently opposing tendencies towards, on the one hand, regionalization—that is, the recognition and consequent defense and promotion of minority languages, especially with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe 1992)—and, on the other, internalization with the spread of English (Hoffann and Ytsma 2004), whose prominence in very diverse fields has caused it to become the language of international communication. The results described above are especially in conflict with the situation in our country, since we cannot forget that Spain is a multilingual country, in which, in addition to Spanish, minority and co-official languages such as Catalan, Galician, Basque, and Valencian are spoken. This social reality of our country is perhaps a strong argument for advocating for the importance of all languages, although no explicit reference has been made to minority languages in general and to those of our country in particular in the question posed.

Our second research question aimed to delve deeper into how teachers understand plurilingual competence and its development. We found that 36% of the respondents reject the idea that multilingual competence implies that the level of proficiency in the languages that constitute it must be high. This is consistent with approaches that define this competence itself as unbalanced or uneven (Coste et al. 2009), since general proficiency may vary according to language. However, 37% of the sample had neutral answers, i.e., they do not have a clear opinion, and 26% said that the level of proficiency should be high in all languages. As our results show, these questions seem to be a little bit controversial for the respondents, as they do not clearly state a specific opinion regarding plurilingual competence. Perhaps some teachers have a monolingual vision, in which the model of the native speaker is maintained, and partial competences are not recognized, an aspect that is also highlighted by Pérez-Peitx and Sánchez-Quintana (2019). However, the majority of teachers do agree with another characteristic, which is the possibility of using different languages in communication, implying that this competence is not a simple addition of two (or more) monolingual competences in several languages, but that it permits combinations and alternations, such as switching codes during a message or resorting to bilingual forms of speech. That is, they agree with the idea of “a single, richer repertoire of language varieties and available options, thus allowing choices based on this interlinguistic variation when circumstances permit” (Coste et al. 2009, p. 11).

Regarding the development of this competence, most of the respondents agree on two other key issues: the relationship between languages and the transfer of learning strategies. The first is one of the key defining characteristics of plurilingualism as opposed to
multilingualism, as characterized by the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001, p. 4): an individual “does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact”. This interaction is also a feature of the process of learning third languages (Herdina and Jessner 2000), so comparing and reflecting on them exemplifies key strategies of plurilingual education (Beacco et al. 2016; Galante et al. 2022). Something similar happens with the transfer of learning strategies from one language to another, an issue with which most teachers (more than 80% of them) agree. This perception is consistent with research conducted on bilingual and multilingual learners in the sense that, as a result of their experience in language learning, on the one hand, they use a different repertoire of learning strategies to that used by monolingual learners when learning their first foreign language (Jessner 2008), and on the other hand, they have a greater repertoire of strategies that help them in learning other languages later on (Golonka 2010; Mißler 2000; Psaltou-Joycey and Kantaridou 2009). It remains to be analyzed whether this belief materializes into a classroom practice that leads students to reflect on their previous learning experiences, an issue that is sometimes contradictory to the beliefs, or if the practice is conditioned by the acquired L2 (Haukås 2016).

Only two of the variables analyzed in this study show significant differences in the results obtained: academic training and the number of languages known to language teachers. In relation to the former, it is logical to think that language teachers, because of their more specific training, have a clearer awareness of the advantages of plurilingualism and are more favorable towards its promotion and towards language learning in the school system. We believe, as Haukås (2016) points out quoting Neuner (2009), that reforms in the school environment, such as the development of plurilingual competence by students, can be developed if teachers are aware of their benefits for students and receive sufficient training. It does not seem that all the teachers in our sample are convinced of this, and one of the reasons may be that innovation in teacher education does not always occur at an adequate speed (De la Maya Retamar and Luengo González 2015). In addition, changes at the legislative level are often not accompanied by training to ensure that teachers can cope with the challenges that they face (Pérez Cañado 2016). We think that differences in the academic training of teachers are evidence of this aspect. We also believe that there is a need for greater collaboration between native and foreign language teachers. This collaboration, which is also absent in other contexts and is not recognized as necessary (Haukås 2016), can be useful to overcome the reluctance to change the way in which they teach, which, in many cases, comes from the teachers’ personal beliefs regarding languages and their acquisition (Beacco et al. 2016).

Regarding language knowledge, it has been shown that it is a variable that also determines the results, so that the beliefs of those who only know one language, mostly English, seem to be based on the idea that knowing this language is sufficient as a vehicle of communication, not only with native English speakers but also as a lingua franca with speakers of other languages (Hoffmann 2000). This means that it would not be necessary to develop plurilingual competence and thus learn more languages. Since teachers who know more languages show more favorable beliefs towards plurilingualism, the learning of more languages, and the characteristics of plurilingual competence, we consider that their personal experience of language learning conditions their view of plurilingualism. We have already explained at the beginning that the beliefs that teachers hold about their work, students, or subject matter are a consequence of, among other factors, their own experience as students. Their presumed use of reflective strategies about languages and their learning should contribute to a greater awareness of the benefits of language knowledge and previous language learning experiences in later foreign language learning. That is, their experience as language learners can have an influence on their beliefs, as well as on their teaching practice, as Gutierrez Eugenio (2014) pointed out.
5. Conclusions

This article has highlighted the beliefs about plurilingualism in a sample of teachers in a monolingual region such as Extremadura. The results presented reveal that beliefs about the promotion of plurilingualism, the objective of language learning, the determination of its importance, and the characterization of plurilingual competence do not always conform to the European language policy and its approaches to plurilingualism, although there is agreement on other issues. Based on these results, which should be complemented with an analysis of the dimensions of the questionnaire that are not addressed here, we believe, with other authors (De Angelis 2011; Fons and Palou 2014), that specific modules on plurilingualism should be incorporated into teacher training, both initial and continuous. These will make it possible to raise awareness among teachers about its benefits, characteristics, and practices; move away from a conception based on monolingualism; and advocate for plurilingualism to better reflect the realities of the classrooms (Rodríguez-Izquierdo 2022). We cannot lose sight of the fact that, in some of the studies reviewed, teachers show resistance to plurilingual education practices (Pérez-Peitx and Sánchez-Quintana 2019). Hence, we are also aware that, in this paper, we only analyzed beliefs, so more research is needed to “explore the representation of the various teachers’ beliefs in practice” (Lundberg 2019, p. 280). Also, it would be convenient to replicate this study with a random sampling stratified by languages, as well as with non-linguistic-discipline teachers to understand their perceptions.


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