

BRIDGING SECTORS IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A CROSS-SECTORAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE APPROACH TO MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGE IMPLEMENTATION IN IRISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Julia Collins

School of Education, University College Cork (Ireland)

Abstract

Recent curriculum reform in Ireland has positioned Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) as an increasingly significant component of primary education, generating new and evolving professional knowledge demands for teachers. While the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) and Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026 (DES, 2017) articulate ambitions for continuity across educational phases, opportunities for sustained, dialogic and practical collaboration between primary and post-primary teachers remain limited. Responding to this gap, this study examines the defining features of an effective Cross-Sectoral Community of Practice (CCOP) designed to advance MFL teaching and learning through structured professional dialogue across primary and post-primary contexts. Guided by Communities of Practice theory, the study examines how shared inquiry, peer-observations, collaborative reflection, and reciprocal expertise contribute to teacher learning and pedagogical development. A qualitative design was employed, involving facilitated CCOP sessions with primary and post-primary MFL teachers, supported by reflective prompts and professional artefacts. Data were generated through recorded discussions, reflective journals, focus groups and expertise mapping exercises. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of data sources, reflective practice, and ongoing participant validation throughout the CCOP process. Findings indicate that effective CCOPs are characterized by relational trust, parity of professional voice, curriculum-informed dialogue, and a focus on pedagogical continuity. Participants reported increased confidence in MFL pedagogy, enhanced understanding of learner progression across curricular phases, and a strengthened sense of collective responsibility for language learning trajectories. Importantly, the CCOP functioned as a space for co-learning, co-designing of resources, challenging traditional hierarchical professional boundaries and fostering sustainable cross-sectoral relationships. The study contributes to emerging research on teacher professional learning in MFL education by identifying sustainable frameworks and design principles for effective cross-sectoral collaboration. It offers practical implications for policy, initial teacher education, and continuing professional development, particularly in systems where primary MFL provision is evolving and requires coherent, teacher-informed support structures.

Keywords: *Modern foreign languages, community of practice, cross-sectoral collaboration, curriculum reform, Irish primary education.*

1. Introduction

Early Language Learning (ELL) (4–12-year-olds) is increasingly recognised for its cognitive, social, cultural, and linguistic benefits (Batardière et al., 2022; Dillon, 2011; Flynn & Singleton, 2025). In the ever-evolving linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms, teachers are expected not only to support language acquisition, but also to foster inclusive and plurilingual learning environments that reflect the realities of contemporary education (Dooley, 2009; Gearon et al., 2009; Ku, 2023). Consequently, the successful implementation of MFL within primary education requires teachers to possess evolving forms of pedagogical knowledge, plurilingual competence and professional confidence.

Recent curriculum and policy developments in Ireland have further elevated the role of languages within primary education. Initiatives such as *Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026* (DES, 2017), the *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019), and the redeveloped *Primary Curriculum Framework* (2023) reflect growing recognition of multilingualism, language awareness, and plurilingual pedagogies within Irish schools. These developments have simultaneously highlighted the increasingly complex teacher knowledge base required to support effective MFL teaching. The *Céim Standards for Initial Teacher Education* and the *Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning* similarly emphasise the importance of ongoing professional learning and pedagogical expertise in supporting teachers' evolving roles within language education (Teaching Council, 2016).

However, despite these policy ambitions, opportunities for sustained professional collaboration between primary and post-primary teachers in relation to MFL remain limited. Teachers are increasingly expected to move beyond traditional monolingual approaches and act not simply as 'transmitters of linguistic knowledge', but as 'facilitators of language experiences' (Little et al., 2017; Shukhratova, 2025; Shulman, 1987, p. 9). Within this context, CCOPs offer a valuable framework through which teachers can collaboratively share expertise, reflect on practice, and co-construct professional knowledge across educational sectors.

In response to these evolving curricular and professional demands, this study examines the role of a CCOP in supporting teacher professional learning and pedagogical development in MFL. Specifically, the study seeks to explore how participation in a CCOP shapes primary teachers' professional learning and classroom practice in MFL education. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How does cross-sectoral participation reshape teachers' perceptions of expertise and professional identity in MFL education?
- **RQ2:** What design features make a CCOP sustainable and meaningful for primary MFL teachers?
- **RQ3:** What barriers and identified solutions affect effective cross-sector collaboration within a CCOP for primary MFL?

The following section outlines the methodological approach adopted to examine the participating teachers' experiences, professional learning, and collaborative engagement within the CCOP, followed by the presentation and discussion of the findings, before concluding with the broader implications of the study for MFL education and cross-sectoral professional learning.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative interpretivist methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) to investigate how participation in a CCOP influenced teachers' professional learning, beliefs, and pedagogical approaches in relation to MFL. The methodological approach was informed by Communities of Practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), positioning teacher learning as socially situated, collaborative, and constructed through dialogue, reflection, and shared professional experience i.e. 'the domain, the community and the practice' (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). The study sought to privilege teacher voice and lived experience by examining how participants interpreted, negotiated, and reshaped their understanding of MFL teaching within a sustained cross-sectoral professional learning environment.

The CCOP was intentionally designed as a collaborative and dialogic professional learning space in which participants could share expertise, reflect on practice, and co-construct knowledge related to MFL teaching and learning. The structure and design of the sessions reflected Wenger's and Lave's conceptualisation of Communities of Practice through mutual engagement, shared enterprise, and the development of a collective professional repertoire. Consequently, session content focused not only on pedagogical strategies, but also on broader themes including teacher beliefs (Collins et al., 2025; Clayback et al., 2023; Borg, 2011; Orafi and Borg, 2009 Haney et al; 2002) teacher identity (El soussi, 2025; Beijgaard et al., 2000), plurilingualism, (Council of Europe, 2022; Council of Europe, 2007; Ollerhead & Choi, 2018) curriculum interpretation, and collaborative problem-solving. Early sessions established shared understandings of key concepts such as teacher knowledge (Shulman, 1987; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Tamir, 1991; Ball et al, 2005) and key characteristics of a COP while later sessions encouraged participants to critically reflect on their own professional identities and contextual realities through activities including visual elicitation, collaborative scenario discussions, reflective dialogue, and peer-exchange observations.

Participants were recruited from primary and post-primary schools located within Cork City and county. Recruitment occurred through school principals and a local Education Support Centre, both of whom received formal information regarding the aims and structure of the study before teachers were invited to participate voluntarily. The participant group included both in-service and pre-service teachers from English-medium and Irish-medium educational contexts who demonstrated an interest in language education, plurilingual pedagogies, or MFL teaching. Approximately eight to twelve participants took part in weekly one-and-a-half-hour CCOP sessions over the course of six weeks.

Data generation occurred through multiple qualitative methods designed to capture reflective, collaborative, and experiential dimensions of teacher learning. Initial individual interviews were conducted at the beginning of the study to establish participants' professional backgrounds, perceptions of MFL teaching, and self-positioning in relation to language education. The CCOP sessions themselves formed a central source of qualitative data and consisted of facilitated professional discussions, collaborative tasks, co-design activities, and reflective exercises. Participants engaged in activities such as mapping their 'language journeys' co-constructing peer-observation frameworks, collaboratively designing plurilingual school initiatives, and discussing practical challenges associated with MFL implementation across educational sectors. Peer-exchange classroom observations also formed part of the professional learning process, enabling participants to observe MFL teaching practices across differing educational contexts and learner age groups.

Participants additionally maintained reflective e-journals throughout the study using Microsoft OneNote. These journals documented individual reflections, evolving beliefs, classroom observations, and responses to guided reflective prompts. Visual elicitation activities (Ingram, 2025) were also incorporated to encourage deeper reflection regarding participants' experiences of language learning and teaching. Through the discussion of significant or 'proud' MFL teaching moments, participants explored evolving understandings of confidence, competence, teacher knowledge, and plurilingual identity. Researcher field notes were maintained following each session in order to document contextual observations, group dynamics, and emerging themes throughout the CCOP process.

All interviews, professional dialogues, and focus group discussions were audio-recorded and manually transcribed by the researcher. Data was anonymised at the point of transcription through the use of pseudonyms and securely stored in accordance with GDPR and University ethical guidelines. Trustworthiness was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, methodological triangulation, reflective journaling, and ongoing collaborative dialogue throughout the duration of the CCOP. Collectively, the methodology enabled an in-depth exploration of how cross-sectoral collaboration may support teacher professional learning, pedagogical confidence, and plurilingual practice within the evolving landscape of MFL education in Ireland.

3. Findings and discussion

The findings of this study indicate that an effective CCOP in MFL education was characterised by relational trust, parity of professional voice, curriculum-informed dialogue, and sustained collaborative engagement across educational sectors. Over the course of the CCOP, participants increasingly positioned themselves as co-learners rather than as representatives of hierarchical sectors or differing levels of expertise. Professional dialogue developed within a supportive and non-evaluative environment in which both primary and post-primary teachers were encouraged to share pedagogical experiences, challenges, and contextual realities related to MFL teaching and learning. This reciprocal exchange contributed to a greater recognition of the complementary forms of expertise held within each sector. While post-primary teachers frequently contributed specialist subject knowledge and experience in formal MFL instruction, primary teachers shared approaches related to child-centred pedagogy, language awareness, and holistic classroom practice.

Participants reported that the CCOP enhanced their understanding of pedagogical continuity and learner progression across curricular phases. Discussions surrounding curriculum specifications, planning documents, and language learning expectations facilitated greater awareness of how MFL experiences may develop from primary through post-primary education. Cross-sectoral dialogue also enabled participants to critically reflect on how teaching methodologies may require adaptation depending on educational context, learner age, and school setting. Peer-exchange classroom observations emerged as a significant feature of this process. Primary teachers observing post-primary MFL classrooms, and vice versa, provided opportunities to examine contrasting pedagogical approaches, classroom management strategies, target language use, and learner engagement practices. Participants frequently identified these exchanges as professionally valuable due to the practical insights gained into unfamiliar educational environments and teaching approaches.

The co-construction of professional resources and reflective tools further contributed to the collaborative nature of the CCOP. Participants collectively designed observation sheets tailored to their own professional interests and MFL-related needs, with emphasis placed on areas such as classroom climate, plurilingual practices, learner participation, teaching methodologies, and target language use. This collaborative design process reinforced participant agency within the CCOP and ensured that professional learning activities remained contextually relevant and participant-informed. Similarly, participants engaged in collaborative discussions regarding the development of inclusive school language policies informed by the work of Little & Kirwan (2024). These discussions focused on the practical implementation of plurilingual approaches within schools, including the establishment of plurilingual committees, the visibility of home languages within school environments, and the creation of structures intended to celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity. The practical dimensions of these activities contributed to participants' perceptions of the CCOP as professionally meaningful and applicable to their own educational contexts.

The findings also indicate that the CCOP functioned as a significant space for reflective professional identity work. Structured reflective activities encouraged participants to critically examine their evolving roles as language educators within increasingly plurilingual educational settings. Activities such as 'My Language Journey' and visual elicitation tasks facilitated deeper exploration of participants' personal and professional experiences of language learning and teaching. Through the discussion of significant or 'proud' MFL teaching moments, participants engaged in authentic reflection regarding confidence, competence, and professional growth. These activities frequently generated more detailed and emotionally grounded reflections than traditional discussion-based tasks, enabling participants to articulate evolving understandings of teacher knowledge, plurilingual identity, and professional expertise.

Across the duration of the CCOP, participants reported increased confidence in MFL pedagogy and a strengthened sense of collective responsibility for language learning trajectories across educational phases. The collaborative and dialogic nature of the CCOP challenged traditional professional boundaries between sectors and promoted greater recognition of shared educational aims within MFL education. Furthermore, the findings suggest that sustainable CCOPs require structured opportunities for reflection, practical collaboration, participant voice, and sustained cross-sectoral engagement. The integration of peer-observation, collaborative problem-solving, reflective journaling, curriculum-informed dialogue, and co-designed professional activities contributed to the development of a professionally meaningful learning community capable of supporting both individual and collective pedagogical development.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the role of a CCOP in supporting teacher professional learning and pedagogical development within the evolving landscape of MFL education in Irish primary schools. The findings demonstrate that sustained cross-sectoral collaboration can provide a meaningful and professionally relevant space through which teachers collaboratively negotiate expertise, reflect on practice, and develop greater confidence in MFL pedagogy. The CCOP enabled participants to engage in reciprocal professional learning that challenged traditional hierarchical distinctions between primary and post-primary education while simultaneously promoting a stronger sense of pedagogical continuity across curricular phases.

Importantly, the study highlights that effective CCOPs are characterised not solely by professional dialogue, but by relational trust, participant agency, collaborative problem-solving, and opportunities for sustained reflective engagement. Activities such as peer-observation, co-designing professional resources, reflective journaling, and visual elicitation facilitated deeper exploration of teacher identity, plurilingualism, and professional knowledge within contemporary language education contexts.

As Ireland continues to progress toward greater MFL integration within primary education, the findings suggest that teacher-informed, collaborative professional learning structures may play a significant role in supporting sustainable implementation. More specifically, the study provides practical insights into the development of a future sustainable and replicable framework for CCOP within the MFL space. In doing so, the research contributes to emerging discussions surrounding teacher professional learning, plurilingual pedagogies, and curriculum reform by identifying key design features capable of supporting coherent, reflective, and collaborative approaches to language education across educational sectors.

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