International Journal of Multilingualism

ISSN: 1479-0718 (Print) 1747-7530 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rmjm20

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To cite this article: Milla Luodonpää-Manni, Laura Lahti, Toni Mäkipää & Kaisa Hahl (09 Sep 2025): Teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices in foreign language education in Finland, International Journal of Multilingualism, DOI: 10.1080/14790718.2025.2556001

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2025.2556001

Published online: 09 Sep 2025.

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTILINGUALISM
https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2025.2556001

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Teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices in foreign language education in Finland

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ABSTRACT

This study examines teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices in foreign language education in Finland. The Finnish national core curricula at various educational levels recognise the vital role of multilingual and language-aware pedagogical approaches in advancing social justice by promoting equal learning opportunities for all students, and enhancing versatile language skills that are essential for communication in a globalised world. As teachers are important language policy implementers and their views affect the way they interpret and implement these policies, it is important to examine their perceptions. The data used in this study comprise a survey (n = 550) and focus group interviews of foreign language teachers (n = 20) from primary to adult education. The datasets were analysed using both descriptive statistics and qualitative thematic analysis. The findings show that many teachers believed that multilingual and language aware practices, such as cross-linguistic comparison and attention to linguistic form and function, were beneficial in enhancing their students' learning. However, teachers expressed uncertainty about the implementation of truly inclusive multilingual practices. This suggests a need for more systematic support for teachers through tailored training and the provision of ready-to-use pedagogical materials.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 8 January 2024
Accepted 28 August 2025

KEYWORDS
Teachers' perceptions; foreign language education; multilingual competence; language awareness; social justice

1. Introduction

This study aims at developing an understanding of teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices in foreign language education in Finland. It is important to examine teachers' perceptions because teachers are powerful agents in language policy implementation (Menken & García, 2010; Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018) and their views affect the way they interpret and implement these policies. In the Finnish national core curricula (Finnish National Board of Education, henceforth FNBE, 2016; Finnish National

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Agency for Education, henceforth FNAE, 2020) multilingualism is closely linked to language awareness which is understood in broad terms (Cots & Garrett, 2018) covering not only language learners and language teachers but all teachers alike. In line with the Finnish national core curricula, by *multilingual and language-aware practices* we refer to any pedagogical approaches teachers may use to appreciate linguistic and cultural diversity, enhance their students' multilingual competence, and emphasise the role of language in all learning.

Multilingual and language-aware practices are essential in foreign language education at least from two key perspectives: social justice and multilingual competence. First, they promote equity by fostering inclusive learning environments that support all students, regardless of their linguistic or cultural backgrounds. Over the past two decades, research on multilingualism and multilingual pedagogies has expanded significantly in response to the diversification of societies (May, 2019). Traditional monolingual ideologies and norms have been challenged (e.g. Alisaari et al., 2019; Charalambous et al., 2016; Jonsson, 2017; Rodríguez-Mojica et al., 2019), and the questions of linguistic power and social justice have gained importance (e.g. Cunningham, 2019; García, 2017; Van Parijs, 2011). Multilingual approaches, such as linguistically responsive teaching (Lucas & Villegas, 2011, 2013) and pedagogical translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014), are increasingly recognised for their potential to facilitate access to subject content and to contribute to more just educational outcomes (e.g. MacSwan, 2017).

Second, multilingual and language-aware practices support the development of versatile language skills that are essential for communication in a globalised world. Multilingual competence, i.e. the capacity to be able to exploit the full linguistic repertoire a student has acquired in different languages, is now considered a fundamental component of modern communication skills (Council of Europe, 2020) and should be explicitly addressed in foreign language education. The Finnish national core curricula reflect this view by fostering a broad and inclusive understanding of multilingualism, whereby all students are regarded as multilingual. In Finnish basic education (grades 1–9), students are required to study at least two languages in addition to the mother tongue: the second national language (Swedish or Finnish) and one foreign language, which is English for over 90% of students (Education Statistics Finland, 2023). Students may also study up to two optional languages during basic education, with further options available in upper secondary education, although the uptake of optional languages has declined since the mid-1990s (FNAE, 2019). Besides formal language education, students often possess knowledge of other languages through non-institutional contexts, further contributing to their multilingual competence.

Relatively few studies have examined teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices in Finland. However, some recent studies (Alisaari et al., 2019, 2021; Heikkola et al., 2022; Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018) suggest that teachers do not always encourage multilingual practices, such as students' home language use in learning tasks. These prior studies included data from language teachers, but they were not the focus of the studies. The present study contributes to research by filling this gap and by answering the following research questions:

(1) What perceptions do Finnish foreign language teachers have of multilingual and language-aware practices used in the classroom?

(2) What functions do teachers report for various languages in the foreign language classroom in Finland?

To answer the research questions, the article draws on a multimethod approach. The qualitative analysis is based on focus group interviews of foreign language teachers (n = 20). The data used in the quantitative analysis comprise a survey (n = 550). This approach may offer insights into teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices in foreign language teaching in Finland.

2. Two key perspectives on multilingual and language-aware practices in foreign language classrooms

The term *foreign language* (*vieras kieli* in Finnish) is used in the Finnish national core curricula to refer to various optional and mandatory language syllabuses (FNAE, 2020; FNBE, 2016). In this context, we use it as an umbrella term that also includes the second national language (Swedish or Finnish), which, in practice, often functions as a foreign language for many students. In foreign language education, teachers may employ multilingual and language-aware practices (1) to encourage students to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire – acquired across different languages – to promote equal learning opportunities for social justice; and (2) to support the development of versatile language skills – actively contributing to students' multilingual competence – as a core objective of foreign language education. While the first perspective has gained significant attention in recent years (e.g. García & Kleyn, 2016; Heikkola et al., 2022; Paulsrud et al., 2020), relatively few studies have explored how multilingual competence is fostered within foreign language education (see, however, Haukås, 2016; Peyer et al., 2021). These two perspectives are further discussed below.

2.1. Promoting equal learning opportunities for social justice

Despite the diversification of Finnish society, the language of instruction (Finnish or Swedish), is commonly used in foreign language classrooms and textbooks. This brings additional challenges to the foreign language learning for students with immigrant backgrounds and less proficient in Finnish or Swedish (Háhn, 2017; Härmälä & Marjanen, 2022, 2023). The first key perspective on multilingual and language-aware practices in foreign language teaching is advancing social justice by promoting equal learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their linguistic or cultural backgrounds. The framework of linguistically responsive teaching proposed by Lucas and Villegas (2011, 2013) aims at this perspective, highlighting essential orientations, key pedagogical knowledge, and skills. First, teachers need to be aware of the sociopolitical dimensions of language use and the interconnection between language, culture, and identity. Second, linguistically responsive teachers value linguistic diversity and understand that their attitudes about students' home languages and linguistic backgrounds have an impact on students' learning. Third, they advocate for students' learning the language of instruction and facilitate it by paying explicit attention to linguistic forms and functions used in different academic disciplines. They also identify the language demands of classroom tasks, considering factors such as vocabulary and syntactic complexity, and provide instructional scaffolding based on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development. Examples of

scaffolding include extra-linguistic support, such as visual cues, supplementing and modifying language, giving clear and explicit instructions as well as encouraging students' home language use (Lucas & Villegas, 2011).

The Finnish national core curricula recognise the prominent role of language in thinking, learning, interaction, and identity formation. Supporting growth in students' cultural capital and language awareness is one of the guiding principles at all educational levels (FNAE, 2020; FNBE, 2016). This means that students are guided to pay attention to the features of language and language use. It also means appreciating the coexistence of multiple languages and cultures at school and in the community. This reflects the definition by the Association for Language Awareness (2024) which describes language awareness as 'explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use'.

The implementation of multilingual and language-aware practices requires specific pedagogical skills and an understanding of language as socially constructed and changeable (García, 2017). However, teachers do not always encourage students to draw on their entire linguistic repertoires. According to previous research, this reluctance is often linked to a desire to enhance the learning of the language of instruction or to the misconception that teachers must be proficient in students' home languages to make use of them in the classroom (e.g. Alisaari et al., 2021; Haukås, 2016). Peyer and others (2021) observed that when multilingual practices are implemented successfully, they can leverage students' linguistic and cultural awareness. Conversely, poorly implemented practices may lead to student frustration and even reinforce stereotypes. Students may also hesitate to use their home languages in class due to concerns about being perceived as representatives of a particular nationality, rather than as full members of the community (Charalambous et al., 2016).

Leading the debate on cultural identities requires sensitivity and pedagogical tact (Peyer et al., 2021), and teachers need to be supported to acquire the necessary skills in multilingual pedagogy. This need extends to preservice teacher education, where students' beliefs about linguistic and cultural diversity and their own linguistic identities should be critically examined. Preservice teachers, who often belong to the dominant language group, may view diversity as 'other people's' phenomenon (Haddix, 2008). Yet, research suggests that teachers in Finland have not received sufficient training to support students with immigrant backgrounds in foreign language classrooms (e.g. Illman & Pietilä, 2018; Pitkänen-Huhta & Mäntylä, 2021).

2.2. Enhancing students' multilingual competence

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2020) distinguishes between the coexistence of multiple languages at school (multilingualism) and the capacity of individual school members to communicate in several languages (plurilingualism). In this study, however, we use the term *multilingualism* to refer to both aspects of multilingualism, i.e. the use of more than one language at school or by a member of the school community (Cenoz, 2013). The second key perspective of multilingual and language-aware practices in foreign language teaching is actively enhancing students' multilingual competence, i.e. capacities to use different languages, dialects, and varieties, of which a person has varying degrees of proficiency, for communicative

purposes (Council of Europe, 2020). These include the capacities to switch languages (or dialects) during interaction or to exploit the knowledge of various languages to recognise new words and meanings. Another multilingual activity gaining importance in our societies is mediation between individuals to build collective understanding. These situations may arise because of cultural differences, insufficient language skills or uneven distribution of information. Mediation activities may include translation or interpretation as well as reformulation of a text or a message for a third party who has no direct access to the original source (Council of Europe, 2020). The concept of mediation, translated as *constructive interaction* (*rakentava vuorovaikutus* in Finnish), has been introduced into the learning objectives of upper secondary education in Finland (FNAE, 2020).

Research on foreign language teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices is not abundant. Haukås (2016) has studied language teachers' beliefs on multilingualism in Norway and concludes that their views on multilingualism are positive but multilingual practices are not commonplace. Research undertaken by Peyer and others (2021) in Switzerland suggests that the introduction of multilingual practices in the language classroom is undermined by vague learning objectives and a limited number of foreign language lessons. In the Finnish context, studies have primarily focused on the support provided to students with immigrant backgrounds (e.g. Illman & Pietilä, 2018; Pitkänen-Huhta & Mäntylä, 2021), while the second perspective on multilingual and language-aware practices, i.e. enhancing students' multilingual competence, remains underexplored. Research suggests, however, that students with immigrant backgrounds had greater language awareness than students with non-immigrant backgrounds (Pitkänen-Huhta & Mäntylä, 2021). This suggests that multilingual and language-aware practices are beneficial to all students regardless of their linguistic background and should thus be an integral part of foreign language education.

3. Data and methods

This study is a part of a larger project in which we are developing an understanding of the concurrent foreign language classroom reality in Finland (e.g. teaching materials and methods, teaching activities, the roles of teachers and students in the classroom, and language awareness and diversity; Mäkipää et al., 2024). We use a multimethod approach to examine foreign language teachers' perceptions of their practices from various perspectives. The data consist of two self-reporting instruments, a survey and semi-structured focus group interviews with teachers. The survey was used to gather a broad overview of the teachers' perceptions of their practices, while the interviews were used to obtain a more nuanced understanding of them. In this study, we analysed the data parts related to teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware classroom practices.

3.1. Data and participants

Informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to data collection. All the teachers participated voluntarily, and their anonymity was considered at all stages of this research project. According to the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2020), no ethical review statement from a human sciences ethics

committee is needed for non-intrusive research with adults when the principles of informed consent are followed.

The survey data were collected with an online questionnaire that was distributed on social media and through teacher network e-mail lists and personal connections. The data were collected in April and May 2022. We received responses from 550 language teachers. Most teachers were female (n = 506, 92%), and 29 were male (5%). Moreover, the participants were experienced language teachers as 403 of them (73%) had worked for over 10 years as teachers, and only 21 had worked for under two years (4%). In terms of age, most teachers were 30–39 years (n = 110, 20%), 40–49 years (n = 200, 36%), or 50–59 years (n = 177, 32%).

Most teachers worked in basic or upper secondary education, but we received some responses from vocational and adult education language teachers as well. Therefore, when talking about students, we refer to pupils and students at various educational levels. The participants represented several languages, the most common being English (68%) and Swedish (65%), followed by German (25%), French (17%) and Spanish (11%). As it is common in Finland for teachers to teach several languages and work at various educational levels concurrently, the percentages exceed 100%.

In the online questionnaire, we asked for volunteers to participate in a focus group interview (Marková et al., 2007) in autumn 2022. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with two to five participants in each focus group (N = 20). Fifteen interviewees were women and five men. Each interview lasted about two hours. We chose a focus group interview for a particular reason. Instead of only the researchers benefitting from the interviews, we wanted to offer the teachers an opportunity to reflect with colleagues and discuss various issues related to teaching a foreign or a second national language (Krueger & Casey, 2014). That is why the participants were grouped according to the educational level they were teaching at (primary, grades 1–6; lower secondary, grades 7–9; or upper secondary levels, or adult education).

The interview was constructed around broad guiding questions: (1) What does language awareness mean in foreign language education? (2) What is the relationship between the language of instruction and the target language in the classroom? (3) How is the students' multilingualism utilised in language teaching? At the beginning of the interview, each interviewer emphasised that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions, and everyone was asked to share their own experiences and conceptions. The teachers were encouraged to enter into a dialogue with each other by commenting on each other's responses and even disagreeing with others if they felt it fitting (Marková et al., 2007). The Finnish-language interviews were later transcribed and anonymised. In the Findings section, to ensure trustworthiness, we use direct quotes from the interviews, translated into English by the authors.

3.2. Methods of analysis

The survey data were analysed with descriptive statistics and three-way ANOVA (Dörnyei, 2007). Teaching experience, educational level, and geographical location were used as independent variables. Teaching experience was used as an independent variable as it has been shown to affect teachers' beliefs and practices (Alisaari et al., 2019; Borg, 2018). Regarding educational level, the national core curricula emphasise various skills

and learning outcomes at various educational levels, which is why it is worthwhile to investigate differences at school levels. Moreover, geographical location was used as an independent variable because the population with immigrant background is unevenly distributed across the country, the number of populations with immigrant backgrounds being highest in southern and south-western urban areas (Statistics Finland, 2023). Levene's test was run to test the homogeneity of variances.

The analysis of the interview data was carried out by two researchers using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive approach is characterised by a reflexive, iterative research process that recognises the significant role of the researcher(s) in generating the themes. Guided by Braun and Clarke's guidelines (2006, 2021), the two researchers first familiarised themselves with the data by reading the transcripts several times. The initial coding was done in an inductive way: both researchers created initial codes independently trying to capture key features of the data. Once initial coding was complete, a third researcher joined the team to compare the alternative codes and to reflect on the observed similarities and differences in their interpretations of the data. As a result of the negotiation, larger patterns were identified across the dataset and the codes were grouped, generating initial themes. Recognising our role as researchers in generating the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021), the codes and initial themes were then reviewed and developed by going through the original transcripts once more to confirm that themes were faithful to the data, instead of being steered by definitions from previous research, for example. A spreadsheet was used to refine, define, and name the themes and it served as a practical tool when writing the analysis. The final part of the analysis involved writing the Findings section, enriching it with data extracts, and contextualising the analysis in relation to existing literature.

4. Findings

The findings from survey data are presented in sub-section 4.1, followed by interview data in sub-section 4.2.

4.1. Survey

The first research question focused on establishing what perceptions Finnish foreign language teachers have of multilingual and language-aware practices in the classroom. The second research question aimed to discover teachers' perceptions of the functions for various languages in foreign language classroom. Descriptive statistics were used to explore language teachers' perceptions of their practices from the quantitative questionnaire data. The results are displayed in Table 1 in order of prevalence.

As shown in Table 1, teachers expressed employing concepts of language knowledge in teaching to a great extent. According to the respondents, they often guided their students to notice phenomena connecting and separating languages, and made use of their proficiency in other languages in teaching. Teachers also reported occasionally drawing students' attention to the languages in the surrounding environment. However, teachers indicated that they rarely implemented the target language into teaching grammar, and a

Table 1. Multilingual and language-aware practices (survey).

	M	S.D.
I teach concepts of language knowledge (e.g. tenses).	4.28	0.64
I guide the student to notice phenomena that connect and separate languages.	3.92	0.76
When studying the target language, we also make use of the student's knowledge of other languages.	3.59	0.92
I use the target language more than the language of instruction in my teaching.	3.21	1.06
With the students, we observe languages in the surrounding environment.	2.74	0.91
Students use the target language more than the language of instruction in class.	2.66	1.10
I use the target language for teaching grammar.	1.97	1.01

Note: M = mean, S.D. = standard deviation. Likert-scale: 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = almost every lesson.

considerable number of their students spoke the school's language of instruction more than the target language in class.

A three-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether educational level, teaching experience, and geographical location affected the teachers' responses (see 3.2). Interaction between the independent variables was also considered in the analysis but statistically significant interaction was not detected in these items.

The items with statistically significant differences regarding the educational level are displayed in Table 2.

In terms of the educational level, statistically significant differences were detected in two items. Tukey's post hoc tests showed that primary school teachers reported exploring languages in the surrounding environment more than their colleagues in lower secondary ($p < .05$) and upper secondary schools ($p < .001$). Similarly, teachers in lower secondary schools indicated exploring them more than teachers in upper secondary schools ($p < .001$). Primary school teachers expressed employing the concepts of language knowledge less than their colleagues in lower and upper secondary schools ($p < .001$). The effect size of the differences was medium in the first item and small in the second item.

Regarding teaching experience, one statistically significant difference was found in the item: Students use the target language more than the language of instruction in class. Less-experienced teachers reported lower scores (M = 2.40, S.D. = 0.96) for his item compared to experienced teachers (M = 2.66, S.D. = 1.06), $F(1, 488) = 5.986$, $p < .05$. This means that experienced teachers agreed slightly more with the statement that their students use the target language more than the language of instruction. However, the partial eta squared was .01, indicating a small effect size.

In terms of geographical location, two statistically significant differences were found. In the region of Uusimaa, situated in the capital area of Finland (M = 2.90, S.D. = 0.90), the teachers reported observing languages in the surrounding environment with students more than in other regions (M = 2.67, S.D. = 0.90), $F(1, 488) = 7.889$, $p < .05$. Moreover, the teachers in Uusimaa (M = 3.35, S.D. = 1.12) indicated using the target language more than the language of instruction in their teaching compared to the teachers in other regions (M = 3.14, S.D. = 1.02), $F(1, 488) = 4.705$, $p < .05$. Again, the partial eta squared was .01, indicating a small effect size in both items.

4.2. Focus group interviews

Four themes were generated to represent various perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices reported by language teachers during the focus group

Table 2. Statistically significant differences regarding the educational level. ** = $p < .001$

	Primary		Lower secondary		Upper secondary				
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	d*f*	F	η^2
With the students, we observe languages in the surrounding e nvironment.	3.10	0.87	2.82	0.82	2.43	0.87	2	21.363**	.08
I teach concepts of language knowledge (e.g. tenses).	4.09	0.69	4.38	0.54	4.39	0.57	2	11.362**	.05

interviews: appreciating all language skills, teaching language knowledge, language choice, and scaffolding instruction.

4.2.1. Appreciating all language skills

The interviewed teachers mentioned several practices for showing appreciation to all language skills, including cross-linguistic comparison that was the most cited multilingual and language-aware practice in the data. More than half of the teachers mentioned comparing languages known by the students, Germanic languages in particular. Many teachers, like Teacher 20, gave examples of promoting learning by making use of students' linguistic repertoires.

> Most students know English well and it can sometimes be useful in understanding Swedish structures, such as conditional. I also often ask if anyone has studied German in lower secondary school, and if they notice lexical similarities allowing to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words based on German. (Teacher 20)

The perceptions expressed by Teacher 20 may reflect not only a commitment to promoting social justice by facilitating students' access to subject content but also an understanding of the importance of fostering multilingual competence, such as the ability to recognise new words and meanings. According to Teacher 20, students' proficiency in English can be leveraged to support their understanding of Swedish grammatical structures. Applied in classroom, the practice described by Teacher 20 may contribute to more equitable educational outcomes regardless the students' linguistic backgrounds, particularly when compared to approaches that prioritise the language of instruction alone (e.g. MacSwan, 2017). In addition, Teacher 20 also said that they guided their students to 'infer the meanings of unfamiliar words' based on their previous knowledge of German. As described in *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2020), the ability to recognise new words and meanings is an essential component of modern multilingual competence. The excerpt from Teacher 20 therefore indicates the potential of cross-linguistic comparison in addressing the two key perspectives on multilingual and language-aware practices in parallel, i.e. social justice, and enhancing students' multilingual competence.

The minority of teachers who reported never comparing languages said that they did not have the necessary knowledge of languages. This suggests that the respondents

believed it was necessary to be familiar with the other languages before facilitating comparative language activities among students. Some considered that the structural differences between the languages were too great for a meaningful comparison. For example, Teacher 11 expressed cautious views on comparing languages because they believed it might be confusing to students.

> Doesn't it sometimes get messy comparing Swedish and English? One might feel that the word order is wrong in Swedish, for example. That the natural Swedish language sense may suffer if there is English alongside. (Teacher 11)

Beyond cross-linguistic comparison, several teachers described highlighting the value of all languages during classroom discourse, thereby demonstrating a commitment to fostering linguistic diversity. Many respondents indicated that they regularly emphasised that knowing multiple languages is inherently valuable. Some teachers also reported encouraging the students to reflect on the broader benefits of language learning, such as its relevance in professional contexts. Teacher 7 specifically noted that the key role of the language teacher is to raise awareness of the intrinsic value of all languages, beyond their instrumental benefits.

> I think that the one thing language teachers can do is spread general joy of languages. For example, I personally try to bring up domestic minorities, such as the International Romani Day and the Sámi National Day. (Teacher 7)

Teachers also mentioned observing languages in the surrounding environment or in the classroom. However, showing interest in students' languages divided teachers' opinions. Some teachers reported that they discussed students' linguistic identities in class, while others stated that they avoided the topic unless students initiated the conversation themselves. This hesitation was often attributed to the belief that students might feel uncomfortable disclosing their linguistic backgrounds. The differences between schools were major as demonstrated by the exchange of experiences between Teachers 14 and 15:

> The students who speak another language are often shy to show it. Many have even forbidden me to tell anyone they speak this or that language fluently. (Teacher 14)

> Ok, we do not have this at our school, that one would be ashamed of it. We have so many languages here in general, around hundred different languages are spoken in our school. (Teacher 15)

Teacher 14 representing a school with low proportion of students from immigrant backgrounds expressed more cautious views on discussing students' linguistic identities while Teacher 15 coming from culturally diverse Helsinki metropolitan area (Uusimaa) indicated that their students were not apprehensive about revealing their linguistic backgrounds. The example suggests that, despite teachers' commitment to fostering linguistic diversity, students may feel more comfortable using their home languages in environments where multilingualism is a lived, everyday reality (Charalambous et al., 2016).

4.2.2. Teaching language knowledge

The interviewed teachers described various practices for teaching language knowledge by guiding students to reflect on language structure, variation, and function,

demonstrating a commitment to raising students' language awareness. Many teachers said that they considered the knowledge of basic grammatical concepts important and reported using them frequently. However, grammatical structures are sometimes learned in foreign languages even before they are taught in the mother tongue classes, as mentioned by Teacher 8. This brings additional challenges to foreign language teachers.

> Once I taught the German accusative to the fourth graders and realized that they had not learned the terms subject and object yet. I kept it simple and avoided using those terms, but the students are smart. A year later I heard them talking about sentence structure [in the mother tongue] and saying that this is one of the things we learned first in German. (Teacher 8)

In addition to specific grammatical structures, many teachers reported teaching metalinguistic knowledge and paying explicit attention to form, meaning and function (e.g. polysemy, synonymy). Teacher 6 shared an example of how they explained the concept of polysemy to the students.

> Learning a foreign language is not about learning separate words. If you ask me what is 'pilkku' in Swedish, I have five examples. What 'pilkku' can be in Swedish depends on whether it's related to grammar [a comma] or ladybug [a spot] or flashing the lights at pubs [last call]. The same word has a lot of meanings. So, don't think of one word at a time, but of a whole phrase. (Teacher 6)

In the example above, Teacher 6 demonstrates how they guide students to consider the larger context before choosing the word they need for expressing the desired idea. As students often tend to translate ideas word for word, Teacher 6 considers this practice helpful in raising students' understanding of how languages convey meanings.

Many teachers also emphasised the importance of drawing students' attention to situational, geographical, and social variations in language (e.g. registers, dialects). According to teachers, this included exploring differences in politeness norms and levels of formality in addressing others. Beyond formal politeness, some teachers noted that respectful and inclusive communication requires an understanding of human diversity. For instance, Teacher 2 mentioned the use of the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* in Swedish as an example of inclusive discourse.

> The use of the pronoun "*hen*", for example. You must be careful when you speak because there are students with diverse backgrounds, and you don't want to hurt anyone. (Teacher 2)

The perceptions expressed by Teacher 2 may reflect a commitment to fostering collective understanding – referred to as mediation – which is a key multilingual activity as described in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2020). Applied in the classroom, the self-reported practices described above, such as drawing students' attention to situational, geographical, and social variations of language, have the potential to enhance students' constructive interaction skills and support this goal.

4.2.3. Language choice

In foreign language teaching, teachers often face the decision of whether to use the target language (i.e. the foreign language the students are trying to acquire) or the

language of instruction (Finnish in Finnish-speaking schools and Swedish in Swedish-speaking schools) in the classroom. The interviewed teachers reported that the language of instruction was used to ensure comprehension and provide essential instructions, particularly working with beginners. Teachers also said that they preferred it for specific subject content areas, such as grammar and cultural topics. Some teachers noted that it helped them build personal connections with students. For example, Teacher 11 explained their preference for the language of instruction by fostering an inclusive, supportive environment.

> There are always students in the class who don't understand if I speak English. I have the principle that I don't want to make anybody feel bad, so I must speak Finnish quite a bit. (Teacher 11)

However, many teachers considered the extensive use of the language of instruction problematic and stated that they would like to use the target language more if they could find a way to ensure comprehension. They explained that if they tried to use it more, some students did not understand and got frustrated, as indicated by Teacher 6:

> They stop listening and start working on something else while the teacher is speaking the target language. (Teacher 6)

To avoid these difficulties, many teachers reported that they relied on extensive target language use primarily with more advanced groups, particularly in English. With less proficient groups, they reported using the target language more selectively, often limiting it to formulaic expressions such as greetings and simple instructions. Some teachers noted, however, that they consistently used the target language, even when students initially addressed them in the language of instruction. Overall, they considered that they used the target language more frequently than their students during classroom interactions.

In the literature, the reluctance of some students to use the target language has been linked to foreign language anxiety (e.g. Teimouri et al., 2019) highlighting the importance of creating a supportive learning environment that reduces stress and builds communicative confidence (Lucas & Villegas, 2011). For example, Teacher 12 noted that students who regularly used multiple languages in their daily lives appeared less anxious about speaking in a foreign language.

> Often students with bilingual backgrounds are brave to use the foreign language too. They are used to switching languages even in the middle of the sentence and if they don't remember a word in a foreign language, they just say it in another language. It's natural for them. Those who have not had the habit of always switching languages are more reluctant to speak a foreign language. (Teacher 12)

According to Teacher 12, students using multiple languages in their daily lives seem to be less rigid about using a single language and more flexible exploiting their knowledge of various languages. This observation highlights the importance of multilingual competence to all students regardless of their linguistic background.

4.2.4. Scaffolding instruction

According to teachers' self-reported accounts, various forms of scaffolding were used to support students' language learning. Respondents described employing gestures, facial

expressions, picture vocabularies, and simplified language to facilitate comprehension of the target language. Several teachers also reported that they relied on parallel language use, such as giving oral instructions in one language while displaying them in another on the board. In cases where students did not share a common language repertoire, some teachers indicated that they used English or the target language as a lingua franca to enable classroom communication.

Encouraging students' home language use was also mentioned occasionally in the interviews. Some teachers described inviting students with immigrant backgrounds to compare their home languages with the target language. A few respondents also reported guiding students to use online dictionaries to check word meanings in their home languages or seeking peer assistance from classmates who shared the same linguistic background. One teacher (Teacher 19) noted that they had learnt to greet students in their home languages to foster a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment. Overall, the number of teachers' self-reported accounts of using student's home languages, other than Finnish or Swedish, remained limited. According to teachers, a key reason for not exploiting students' home languages was the difficulty of supporting languages they themselves did not know:

> I have a student whose second language is Arabic. It's difficult [laughs], I can't use it in any way. (Teacher 14)

Some teachers reported that they did not allow home language use in the classroom because they considered it impolite and disturbing to others. The uncertainty of several teachers in encouraging students' home language use suggests a need for more systematic teacher education in multilingual pedagogies.

5. Discussion

Given the limited research in this field, this study extends our knowledge of teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices in foreign language teaching in Finland. The research focused on teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices and the functions they attributed to the use of different languages in the classroom. In answer to the first research question, teachers' perceptions often reflected a commitment to linguistic diversity and raising language awareness. Both the survey and the interview data showed that focusing on linguistic form and function, as well as observing similarities and differences between languages, were among the most frequently reported multilingual and language-aware practices.

Although the two datasets differ in sample size, they are complementary. The questionnaire data provided broader patterns, while the interview data offered more in-depth insights into how important teachers perceived drawing students' attention to language meaning and structure, linguistic variation, and polite language use. Teachers also emphasised the importance of acquiring metalinguistic knowledge, such as grammatical concepts, as a foundation for lifelong learning. This emphasis may explain why teaching the concepts of language knowledge was more commonly reported in lower and upper secondary schools than in primary education. In primary schools, students are still acquiring these concepts in their mother tongue, which may limit their topicality in foreign language classes from primary teachers' perspective.

Regarding the second research question, the functions of various languages in the classroom were primarily discussed in the interview data in relation to the language of instruction and the target language. Most teachers reported preferring the language of instruction with beginners for ensuring comprehension and delivering essential information and instructions. The target language was preferred with advanced groups, particularly in English. With less proficient groups, teachers expressed more hesitation about the use of the target language often restricting it to formulaic utterances like greetings and straightforward instructions. Many would have liked to use the target language more if they could find a way to ensure student comprehension.

Only a few examples of involving students' home languages were provided, suggesting a gap between inclusive intentions and self-reported classroom implementation. Similar to previous findings (Alisaari et al., 2021; Haukås, 2016), several teachers believed they would need to know students' other languages before they could make use of those languages in their classes. Some teachers considered the use of home language impolite and disturbing to others. These findings align partially with previous research, which suggests that truly inclusive multilingual practices are not always institutionally encouraged (Alisaari et al., 2019, 2021; Heikkola et al., 2022; Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018). The findings highlight the need for greater attention to multilingual pedagogies, given that allowing students to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning is essential for promoting equitable learning opportunities for all students (Lucas & Villegas, 2011, 2013).

Nevertheless, in addition to the teachers' beliefs, the ideologies of the surrounding environment may also affect teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices. Contextual factors such as educational level, school location, and teaching experience may further shape teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices, as suggested by the findings in the survey data. For example, teachers in the culturally and linguistically diverse Helsinki metropolitan area (Uusimaa) reported observing languages in the surrounding environment with students more frequently than in other regions. According to the respondents, students living in linguistically less heterogenous environments may be more anxious of revealing their linguistic identity because of some deep-rooted assumptions about language and national belonging (Charalambous et al., 2016). Therefore, we conclude that leading successful discussions on cultural identities is essential to broaden students' perspectives (Peyer et al., 2021).

In addition to promoting equal learning opportunities for social justice, this study also examined the development of multilingual competence as a core objective of foreign language education (Council of Europe, 2020). Most teachers considered multilingual activities involving cross-linguistic comparison, the knowledge of different dialects and registers as well as the capacity to recognise new words and meanings beneficial to students – reflecting an understanding of the importance of fostering multilingual competence. Beyond these activities, some teachers observed that students who regularly navigated multiple languages in their daily lives tended to be less anxious when speaking a foreign language. Given that nearly half of the teachers interviewed in this study reported challenges in promoting target language use and expressed a desire to strengthen it in their classrooms, we argue that a pedagogical shift towards a more flexible and multilingual mindset – one that embraces greater linguistic flexibility and reduced adherence to using a single language – could serve as an effective strategy for

reducing language anxiety and fostering a more inclusive and confidence-building learning environment (Teimouri et al., 2019).

Taken together, the findings suggest that more pre-service and in-service teacher education in truly inclusive multilingual pedagogies is required. Teachers at various educational levels and career stages need different support and training. Therefore, training tailored to meet individual needs is essential. As teachers are important agents in language policy implementation (Menken & García, 2010), they require current and diverse tools for fostering students' growth toward cultural diversity and language awareness (see e.g. García, 2017; García & Kleyn, 2012; Haddix, 2008; Rodríguez-Mojica et al., 2019). New insights from training will be advantageous for both students and teachers as teachers will discover innovative ways of perceiving linguistically responsive teaching. Additionally, providing teachers with ready-made multilingual teaching materials would be helpful.

The study has some limitations. First, the limited amount of survey and interview data based on self-selection does not allow for generalisations of the findings. This means that the participants do not represent all teachers in Finland but constitute a sample of them. Second, since we did not explicitly inquire teachers' perceptions about specific multilingual or language-aware practices during the interviews, the activities mentioned by teachers reflect those they chose to highlight. It is possible that they employ additional practices that were not discussed during the interviews. In addition to the two self-reporting tools, exploring language teachers' multilingual and language-aware practices through classroom observation would be an interesting area for further research.

6. Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices in foreign language education in Finland. Employing a dual perspective framework, we examined how these perceptions may reflect a commitment to promoting social justice by recognising all student languages as meaningful learning resources, as well as an understanding of the importance of fostering multilingual competence, a crucial skill in today's globalised society. While many teachers regarded strategies such as cross-linguistic comparison and attention to linguistic form and function as beneficial, they also expressed uncertainty about the nature of truly inclusive multilingual practices. This highlights the need for more systematic support for teachers through tailored training and the provision of ready-to-use pedagogical materials. Furthermore, contextual factors such as educational level, teaching experience, and regional diversity appear to influence teachers' perceptions of multilingual and language-aware practices.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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