

Key lifelong competences: exploring EFL teachers' perceptions and challenges in Greek state schools

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Abstract

The study aims to explore the familiarity of EFL teachers with the concept of key lifelong competences and examines their preparedness in integrating them in their classes in Greek schools.

Quantitative research was carried out using a questionnaire (N=95) comprising in total 15 questions and exploring aspects such as the EFL teachers' perceptions of the FL curriculum, their familiarity with the concept of key competences and their preparedness to integrate them in their teaching practice along with potential barriers they face and solutions in coping with them. The data from the questionnaire was processed using descriptive and inferential statistics and revealed that almost half of the teachers are aware of the term competence and to a considerable extent prepared to integrate key competences in their teaching context. The EFL teachers are adequately aware of multilingual competence and are highly prepared to integrate it in their classes, given the distinct emphasis placed on multilingualism in Greece. On the contrary, competences such as entrepreneurship, and citizenship are the least known to teachers. It should be noted that the EFL teachers identify barriers in implementing all competences which indicates that focused training on promoting a gradual complete immersion of the entire educational system in the principles of key competences should be considered.

Keywords: Key competences, EFL curriculum, Teachers, Perceptions, Integration of competences, State schools, Greece.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, key lifelong competences have been at the core of education policies in EU countries as well as globally, given the societal demand for citizens to be equipped with a new set of skills suited to the knowledge society, which requires the creation of new knowledge rather than its accumulation (Anderson, 2008; Voogt & Roblin, 2012). What is more, in the developing global socio-economic scene, acquiring knowledge is no longer viewed as an abstract concept within the disciplinary structure of education, rather citizens are expected to be able to actively employ it in the fields they operate (Roegiers, 2016).

Accordingly, an effort was made in many countries to incorporate 21st century competences into the educational standards by reforming curricula or even developing new national curricula. (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). Within this frame, the national curriculum for foreign language (FL) teaching in the state school sector,

the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC), was introduced and piloted in 2011 (Government Gazette, 2011) while it was established in the academic year 2016-2017 (Government Gazette, 2016). The IFLC is common for all FLs that are currently offered in Greek state schools, while it adopts a generic approach to FL learning applicable to all languages, whether compulsory or optional on offer, in the school curriculum (Dendrinou, et al., 2013). The generic approach adopted to FL learning no longer treats the teaching of FLs as separate, clearly defined subjects while more coherence and systematicity in FL education can be achieved through the link offered between FL curricula for primary education and secondary education (ibid, 2013).

Through the IFLC, FL teaching, learning objectives, content, methodology, and evaluation are organized in line with the levels of competence identified by the Common European Framework of the Council of Europe, outlining what students can do with the target language, and adopting an action-oriented approach which promotes teaching which can be adapted to the needs of specific educational, social, and cultural contexts (Seewald, 2022).

Moreover, a further important aspect of innovation in FL education is the introduction and development of learners' key competences which are defined by the European Commission (2018b) as a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values appropriate to the context. Particular focus is laid on issues such as global citizenship, education for sustainable development, media literacy, the learners' intrapersonal and interpersonal skills (Seewald, 2022), and '21st-century skills', which include communication, co-operation, teamwork, creativity, critical and innovative thinking, problem-solving, and leadership (Government Gazette, 2021), introducing novel thematic strands such as robotics, entrepreneurship, environmental protection among other (Seewald, 2022).

Implementing innovations such as promoting key competences in line with EU policy, at school level is prioritized as the particular context can solidify the values that underlie a society and meet the emerging challenges of the 21st century. Attending schools, citizens of tomorrow start their unofficial 'training' to become strong, independent members of society, thus, it is upon the educational institutions to implement curricular innovations (Rychen, 2016).

It should be noted that curriculum reform cannot guarantee the implementation of competences in the FL classroom as teachers are key agents in educational reform and, therefore, their perceptions and willingness are of major importance in fostering competences to classroom practice (Butler & Schnellert, 2012). In turn, their perceptions on factors which may influence their preparedness to adopt any educational reform should be considered instead of assuming that they will be willing to implement new curricula in the way intended by designers (Cerit, 2013).

The present study aims to explore the concept of key lifelong competences, set by the Council of the European Union (European Commission, 2018a) as perceived by EFL teachers. More specifically, it investigates the EFL teachers' perceptions of the curriculum, their familiarity and satisfaction with it as well as their familiarity with the concept of key competences and their preparedness to integrate them in their teaching practice. In addition, it examines the EFL teachers' views on whether there are potential barriers to the integration of competences in the Greek school context concerning EFL teaching and considers possible

solutions. Quantitative research was carried out, with ninety-five (95) EFL teachers employed in Primary and Secondary Greek State Schools answering a questionnaire on the issues identified previously.

Concerning the structure of the study, firstly, an introduction to key competences is provided and the eight types of competences are identified; Then, the study is presented in terms of aims, sampling procedures, research tool and data analysis. The presentation of the research data follows along with a discussion while the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are presented before its conclusion.

2. Identifying and defining Key Competences

The Council of the European Union adopted a Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning, which was firstly introduced by the European Parliament and the European Council in 2006 (European Commission, 2018a). The European Reference Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning - which is attached as an annex to the Recommendation for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (European Commission, 2018b)- sets the context for the development of the following eight key competences, which are briefly defined based on its content (ibid, 2018b):

Literacy competence concerns the ability to understand and express oneself both orally and in writing, using any type of medium in any given context. It includes being able to read and write, understand written and spoken language, adjust it according to different communicative situations, and use language as a means of social interaction.

Multilingual competence reflects the ability to mediate between different languages and media, using vocabulary, grammar, and different registers. It involves intercultural communication along with cultural diversity.

Mathematical competence and *competence in science, technology, and engineering*; the former, mathematical competence is the ability to develop and apply mathematical thinking and insight to solve a range of problems in everyday situations. It requires knowledge of numbers, measures, and understanding of mathematical terms. The latter, competence in science, technology, and engineering, refers to the ability to explain the natural world by making use of knowledge and methodology, including observation and experimentation, to identify questions and to draw evidence-based conclusions. It encompasses critical thinking and employing scientific and technological tools.

Digital competence is related to the use of and engagement with digital technologies in any aspect of every-day life, essential to acquire not only for social inclusion and active citizenship, but also for dealing with all aspects of daily routine in a safe, ethical, and critically engaging way.

Personal, social and learning-to-learn competence, a multidimensional one, which means being able to self-reflect, work collaboratively, and manage one's own learning and career, to name some of its constituents. It embodies knowing one's abilities and using them to make decisions, finding motivation, and understanding others' points of view overcoming prejudice.

Citizenship competence concerns the ability to act responsibly and fully participate in civic and social life, based on one's knowledge of social, economic, legal, and political surroundings, as well as global developments and sustainability.

Entrepreneurship competence reflects the capacity to act upon opportunities and ideas, and to transform them into values for others. It is founded upon creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving; it necessitates a strong sense of drive and desire for cooperation with others to create projects of cultural, social, or financial value.

Cultural awareness and expression competence is related to understanding and respecting how ideas and meaning are creatively transformed and interpreted across different cultures, through a range of cultural forms.

3. The Study

3.1. Aims of the research

The present research aims to explore EFL teachers' perceptions and challenges regarding the integration of key lifelong competences in the Greek state school sector. The research looks into the EFL teachers' views about the current curriculum, their familiarity with key competences and their preparedness to integrate them in their teaching. Additionally, it investigates the way that their age, teaching experience, educational qualifications, and the level of school they are employed affect their perceptions and challenges on the previously mentioned issues. Within this framework the following three research questions were formed:

1. Do the age, teaching experience, educational qualifications and employment context of the participants affect their familiarity and satisfaction with the curriculum?
2. Do the age, teaching experience, educational qualifications and employment context of the participants affect their conception of the term 'competences'?
3. Do the age, teaching experience, educational qualifications and employment context of the participants affect their preparedness to integrate the key competences in their teaching practice?

3.2. The Participants

The strategy for sampling used was snowball nonprobability convenience sampling by connecting with professional groups on social media platforms, acknowledging the fact that it is identified as a viable means of accessing participants in research (Marcus et al., 2017; Reagan et al., 2019). The participants comprise a total of 95 EFL teachers employed in Greek state schools. Most of them are female, from 41 to 50 years old and have a teaching experience from 16 to 20 years and have a Master's degree. Most of the participants had worked in the past or were employed at the time of the research in primary education. The demographic data of the sample are presented in detail in section 3.5 (Tables 1-4).

3.3. Research tool

The research tool employed is a questionnaire as it can be easily administered to a large number of people (Dörnyei, 2007), and can elicit a large amount of data relatively quickly (Richards & Lockhart, 2013).

Its administration took place online via Google form. The questionnaire includes 15 questions in total and is organized in five sections. More specifically, the first section explores the demographics and academic background of the participants through 5 close-ended questions. The second section investigates the

participants' familiarity and satisfaction with the current curriculum in Greek state schools, through 4 close-ended questions, two of which are three-point Likert scale questions, one is a multiple selection question, and one is a five-point Likert-type question with 8 subquestions which focus on the weaknesses of the curriculum. Additionally, the third section examines the familiarity of EFL teachers with the term competence and the eight key competences through 3 close-ended questions, two of which are three-point Likert scale questions, and one is a multiple selection question. Furthermore, the fourth section includes a five-point Likert-type question with 8 subquestions which investigate the readiness of the participants to integrate key competences into their teaching. Lastly, the fifth section employs 2 close-ended questions, multiple selection questions, to identify the EFL teachers' perceptions about the barriers in incorporating competences in their teaching as well as possible solutions to deal with the issue. For all multiple selection questions an 'other' option was offered to the students to add an aspect not presented as part of the options provided.

3.4. Data analysis

To analyze the data gathered, and answer the research questions, the statistical package SPSS, version 25, was employed. All the questions of the research tool are presented using percentages, frequencies, means and standard deviations.

The Chi-Square test and Crosstabulation Analysis were used to explore the first research question about whether there is statistical significance among all the variables (age, years of teaching experience, academic background, teaching context) and EFL teachers' familiarity with the FL curriculum and satisfaction with it. On the same line, the Chi-Square and Crosstabulation Analysis were used to explore the second research question about whether there is statistical significance among the participants' demographic characteristics and their conception of the meaning of the term 'competence'. To investigate the third research question, The non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis was used for the age, the teaching experience, and the highest-level degree, while the parametric t-test was chosen for the teaching context - level of education - in which the participants worked in the past or are currently employed.

3.5. Research results

3.5.1. Demographics and academic background of the participants

Concerning the demographics of the participants, it should be noted that the vast majority of them (97.9%) are female with only 2.1% of the sample male (Table 1).

Table 1. Gender

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	2	2.1	2.1
Female	93	97.9	100.0
Total	95	100.0	

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Regarding their age (Table 2), 46.3%, of the EFL teachers are from 41 to 50 years old, 37.9% are from 31 to 40 years old, and 14.7% are over 50 years old. It is striking, that participants from 25 to 30 years old, comprise only 1.1% of the sample, which is indicative of the age of EFL teachers in Greek public schools.

Table 2. EFL teachers' age

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
25-30	1	1.1	1.1
31-40	36	37.9	38.9
41-50	44	46.3	85.3
Over 50	14	14.7	100.0
Total	95	100.0	

As shown in Table 3, most of the participants are very experienced; 34.7% and 36.8% have more than 10 and 20 years of teaching experience respectively. Only few of them (3.2%) have been teaching for 6 to 10 years and 2.1% of them for 1 to 5 years.

Table 3. Years of teaching experience

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1-5	2	2.1	2.1
6-10	3	3.2	5.3
11-15	33	34.7	40.0
16-20	35	36.8	76.8
More than 20	22	23.2	100.0
Total	95	100.0	

Concerning their academic background (Table 4), the highest level of degree that the EFL teachers have obtained or are about to obtain is presented. It is revealed that the majority of them (41.1%) have a Master's degree, while 25.3% are in progress to obtain one. Furthermore, the participants with a Ph.D. or Ph.D. in progress are 3.2% and 1.1% respectively whereas another and 1.1% answered "Other" indicating Lifelong Learning Seminars.

Table 4. EFL Teachers' highest degree obtained or about to obtain

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Bachelor degree	27	28.4	28.4
Master's degree	39	41.1	69.5
Master's in progress	24	25.3	94.7
Ph.D.	3	3.2	97.9
Ph.D. in progress	1	1.1	98.9
Other	1	1.1	100.0
Total	95	100.0	

In Table 5, the level of state school in which the participants are currently employed or worked in in the past, is presented. 45% of the total answers were Primary schools, 22.9% Junior High Schools and 16.5% Senior High Schools. Another, 15.6% was cast on the option “All of the above”.

Table 5. Level of education of current or past employment

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Primary school	49	45.0	45.0
Junior High school	25	22.9	67.9
Senior High school	18	16.5	84.4
All of the above	17	15.6	100.0

3.5.2. Teachers' familiarity and satisfaction with the FL curriculum

In Table 6, the EFL teachers' familiarity with the current FL curriculum is indicated. The FL teachers in their vast majority (74.7%) responded positively and stated to be familiar with it, and one out of four teachers (24.2%) considered themselves familiar to a certain degree whereas only 1.1% of the participants responded negatively and identified themselves as not familiar with the FL curriculum.

Table 6. Familiarity with the FL curriculum

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	71	74.7	74.7
No	1	1.1	75.8
To a certain degree	23	24.2	100.0
Total	95	100.0	

Considering the EFL teachers' satisfaction with the FL curriculum, Table 7 reveals that 64.2% of the participants are only partly satisfied with the FL curriculum and think that it needs improvement. The percentage of teachers who are satisfied with the FL curriculum reaches 24.2%, in contrast the respective percentage of the EFL teachers who are not satisfied is 11.6%.

Table 7. Satisfaction with the curriculum

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	23	24.2	24.2
No	11	11.6	35.8
Partly, it needs improvement	61	64.2	100.0
Total	95	100.0	

In Table 8, the participants' views about the characteristics of the FL curriculum that satisfy them are presented based on their responses to a multiple selection question asking them to select all items applicable to them. The flexibility of the curriculum (26.6%), and the freedom it offers to EFL teachers (25.8%) were considered satisfactory by a considerable part of the participants in the study. Its reflection on recent developments in the field (12.7%), and its consideration of students' needs, and preferences (9.4%) were also appreciated by part of the EFL teachers. The continuity of the curriculum across levels as well as the provision of clear information on teaching methods, received 7.4% each, while its guidance on creating teaching materials and its suitability to Greek FL state school classes received 5.3% respectively.

Table 8. Satisfaction with the current curriculum

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
allows a great deal of freedom	63	25.8	25.8
offers flexibility	65	26.6	52.5
provides continuity	18	7.4	59.8
reflects recent developments in the field	31	12.7	72.5
provides clear & detailed information on teaching methods	18	7.4	79.9
provides guidance on creating teaching materials	13	5.3	85.2
considers students' needs and preferences	23	9.4	94.7
suited to Greek FL state school classes	13	5.3	100.0

Moreover, the EFL teachers' views on the possible weaknesses of the current FL curriculum, are presented in Table 9 based on their responses to a five-point Likert scale question (5 strongly agree, 4 agree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 2 disagree, 1 strongly disagree) with 8 items. The higher means indicate the participants' agreement that an aspect is perceived as weakness. In turn, between neutrality and agreement, leaning to the former, the participants identify the curriculum as not providing supplementary aids and sources (3.44). Also, they are neutral about its suggestions being difficult to materialize (3.24), not being in touch with the Greek reality (3.20), and not keeping up with current developments in the field (3.09). Furthermore, they do not seem to agree or disagree on whether it requires a lot of training (2.93) and places more emphasis on language teaching (2.80). Lastly, they seem to disagree about the curriculum not being as flexible as they desire (2.22) and not allowing much freedom in designing a lesson (2.14).

Table 9. Curriculum weaknesses

	Mean	Std. Deviation
does not allow much freedom in designing a lesson	2.14	0.985
not as flexible as I would desire	2.22	1.064
does not keep up with current developments in the field	3.09	1.289
places more emphasis on language teaching	2.80	1.038
does not provide supplementary aids and sources	3.44	1.269
suggestions are difficult to materialize	3.24	1.137
requires a lot of training to put principles to practice	2.93	1.054
not in touch with the Greek reality	3.20	1.190

3.5.3. Teachers' familiarity with the term competence and the eight key competences

In Table 10, the EFL teachers' conception of 'competence' is presented based on their responses to a multiple selection question asking them to select all items applicable to them. The option 'all of the above' which is reflective of the term was offered by almost half of the participants (48.8%). 'Skill' (26.4% and 'knowledge' (18.2%), received considerably lower percentages while 'value' (5%), and 'attitude' (1.7%) significantly lower ones.

Table 10. Conception of the term "competence"

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Knowledge	22	18.2	18.2
Skill	32	26.4	44.6
Attitude	6	5.0	49.6
Value	2	1.7	51.2
All of the above	59	48.8	100.0

Additionally, the vast majority of the participants (60%) were familiar with the term 'key lifelong competence'. A significantly lower percentage of them responded negatively as were not familiar with the term (24.2%), while fewer of them (15.8%) stated to be 'not sure' about the term (Table 11).

Table 11. Familiarity with the term 'key lifelong competence'

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	57	60.0	60.0
No	23	24.2	84.2
not sure	15	15.8	100.0
Total	95	100.0	

In Table 12, the different types of competences that the participants are aware of are presented based on their responses to a multiple selection question asking them to select all items applicable to them. 16.4% of the answers identified awareness of digital, 15.9% literacy, and 14.4% mathematical. On the same line, 14% of the answers identified multilingual, 13.1% personal, social, and learning to learn, and 12.2% cultural awareness and expression. Less awareness of citizenship competence (7.9%), and entrepreneurship competence (6.1%) was recorded.

Table 12. Familiarity with the eight key competences

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Literacy competence	86	15.9	15.9
Multilingual competence	76	14.0	29.9
Mathematical competence & competence in science Technology & engineering	78	14.4	44.3
Digital competence	89	16.4	60.7
Personal, social and learning to learn competence	71	13.1	73.8
Citizenship competence	43	7.9	81.7
Entrepreneurship competence	33	6.1	87.8
Cultural awareness & expression competence	66	12.2	100.0

3.5.4. Teachers' readiness to integrate key competences into their teaching.

Additionally, the preparedness of the participants to integrate different types of competence in their teaching is presented in Table 13 based on their responses to a five-point Likert scale question (5 always, 4

often, 3 sometimes, 2 rarely, 1 never) with 8 items. The higher the mean score, the higher the participants' preparedness to integrate the following key competences in their FL teaching: multilingual (4.42), civic (4.19), personal, social and learning to learn (4.16), cultural awareness and expression (4.05), literacy competence (4.01), entrepreneurship competence (3.90), mathematical, science technology & engineering (3.61), digital competence (3.31). Concerning, the last two a much lower level of preparedness to integrate these competences was indicated but still above average.

Table 13. Level of preparedness to integrate key lifelong competences

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Preparedness to integrate literacy competence	0.835	2	4.01	0.731
Preparedness to integrate multilingual competence	0.745	2	4.42	0.629
Preparedness to integrate mathematical competence, science technology & engineering competence	0.798	4	3.61	0.765
Preparedness to integrate digital competence	0.884	4	3.31	0.974
Preparedness to integrate personal, social & learning to learn competence	0.859	4	4.16	0.677
Preparedness to integrate civic competence	0.831	4	4.19	0.700
Preparedness to integrate cultural awareness & expression competence	0.881	5	4.05	0.759
Preparedness to integrate entrepreneurship competence	0.858	5	3.90	0.770

The barriers that EFL teachers perceive to impede the integration of the key competences, among them beyond practical constraints are the lack of frameworks and tools, as well as lack of adequate knowledge (Table 14). Of the answers provided, which are based on their responses to a multiple selection question asking them to select all items applicable to them, the most important barriers comprise: lack of the necessary classroom time (23.4%), students' difficulty in understanding them (21.1%), not having the time to create materials (16.9%), lack of a framework to measure students' progress (12.6%), Further obstacles, which, nevertheless, received lower percentages, are difficulty to assess them (6.9%), the complexity of the concepts (5.4%), the general nature of the concepts (5%), lack of knowledge on how to incorporate them (5%). The

lowest percentages were recorded for barriers such as 'I do not understand what they entail' (1.9%) and 'I do not have the means' recorded in the 'other' category (1.9%) respectively.

Table 14. Barriers impeding the incorporation of key lifelong competences

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
I do not have the necessary classroom time	61	23.4	23.4
I do not have time to create or modify materials	44	16.9	40.2
They are difficult to assess	18	6.9	47.1
I do not have any frameworks or indicators to measure progress in them	33	12.6	59.8
They are too general as concepts	13	5.0	64.8
It is difficult for students to understand & appreciate them	55	21.1	85.8
They are complicated as concepts	14	5.4	91.2
I do not know how to incorporate them in my teaching	13	5.0	96.2
Other: I do not understand what they entail	5	1.9	98.1
Other: I do not have the necessary means	5	1.9	100.0

The solutions to overcoming barriers in integrating key lifelong competences suggested by the EFL teachers, based on their responses to a multiple selection question asking them to select all items applicable to them, highlight the need for further issues to be considered as part of introducing a new curriculum to ensure its efficient implementation (Table 15). The teachers need all the help they can get beyond school funding and administrative support. More specifically, among the suggestions provided based on the percentages they received are the following: development of new teaching materials that promote the philosophy of key lifelong competences (18.5%), seminars and training on competences (17.6%), increasing the funding of schools to create innovative learning environments (13.9)%, encouraging learning activities in various sites beyond school (11.5%), Lower percentages were given to suggestions such as promoting the development of more inclusive schools (9.5%), training school leaders to become more aware and supportive of innovations (8.3%), the state prioritizing school autonomy over accountability (8%). The least offered solutions identified are creating appropriate assessment methods & tools for assessing competences (6.8%) and creating reference grids to assist in the monitoring of students' progress in terms of key competences (5.9%).

Table 15. Solutions to overcome barriers in integrating key lifelong competences

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Training of school leaders to be more aware & supportive of innovations	34	8.3	8.3
Seminars and training on how to incorporate key lifelong competences in FL teaching	72	17.6	25.9
New teaching materials reflecting the philosophy of key lifelong competence	76	18.5	44.4
Creating appropriate assessment methods & tool for evaluating competences	28	6.8	51.2
Creating reference grids to assist monitoring of students' progress in competences	24	5.9	57.1
Increase in funding of schools for creating innovative learning environments	57	13.9	71.0
Encourage learning activities in various sites beyond school	47	11.5	82.4
Creating opportunities for more inclusive schools	39	9.5	92.0
The State should prioritize school autonomy over accountability	33	8.0	100.0

To answer the first research question, the Chi-Square test was used to explore the statistical significance among all the variables and EFL teachers' familiarity with the FL curriculum and satisfaction with it. As shown in Table 16, there is 1 statistically significant correlation between the variables highlighted in bold.

Table 16. Chi-Square of familiarity and satisfaction with the current FL curriculum

	Familiarity the current FL curriculum	Satisfaction with it
Age	0.692	0.097
Years of teaching experience	0.545	0.388
Highest level degree you have obtained or are about to obtain	0.444	0.583
State Primary school	0.186	0.050
State Junior High school	0.107	0.296

State Senior High school	0.350	0.306
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The above statistically significant dependency is investigated (Table 17). As shown, while most of the participants are satisfied with the FL curriculum of Greek state schools, they believe that it needs improvement. However, the participants who worked or are currently working in State Primary Schools are more in agreement that it needs improvement, compared to the EFL teachers employed in other levels of education.

*Table 17. Crosstabulation State Primary school * Satisfaction with FL curriculum*

		satisfied with it			Total
		Yes	No	Partly, it needs improvement	
State Primary school	Count	12	3	15	30
	No % within State Primary school	40.0%	10.0%	50.0%	100.0%
Primary school	Count	11	8	46	65
	Yes % within State Primary school	16.9%	12.3%	70.8%	100.0%
Total	Count	23	11	61	95
	% within State Primary school	24.2%	11.6%	64.2%	100.0%

Concerning, the second research question the Chi-Square and Crosstabulation Analysis were used. From the results in Table 18, it is revealed that the participants' demographic characteristics do not affect their conception of the meaning of the term 'competence'.

Table 18. Chi-Square of the meaning of the term 'competence'

	Knowledge	Skill	Attitude	Value	All of the above
Age	0.297	0.651	0.311	0.306	0.743
Years of teaching experience	0.814	0.547	0.482	0.461	0.461
Highest level degree you have obtained or are on the way to obtain	0.639	0.893	0.663	0.410	0.988
State Primary school	0.620	0.921	0.417	0.571	0.778
State Junior High school	0.808	0.474	0.727	0.213	0.912
State Senior High school	0.949	0.966	0.103	0.672	0.568

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To investigate the third research question, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis was used for the age, the teaching experience, and the highest level of degree, while the parametric t-test was chosen for the level of education in which the participants have worked before or are currently employed. From the results in Table 19, 4 statistically significant dependencies are revealed (see Table 19, in bold).

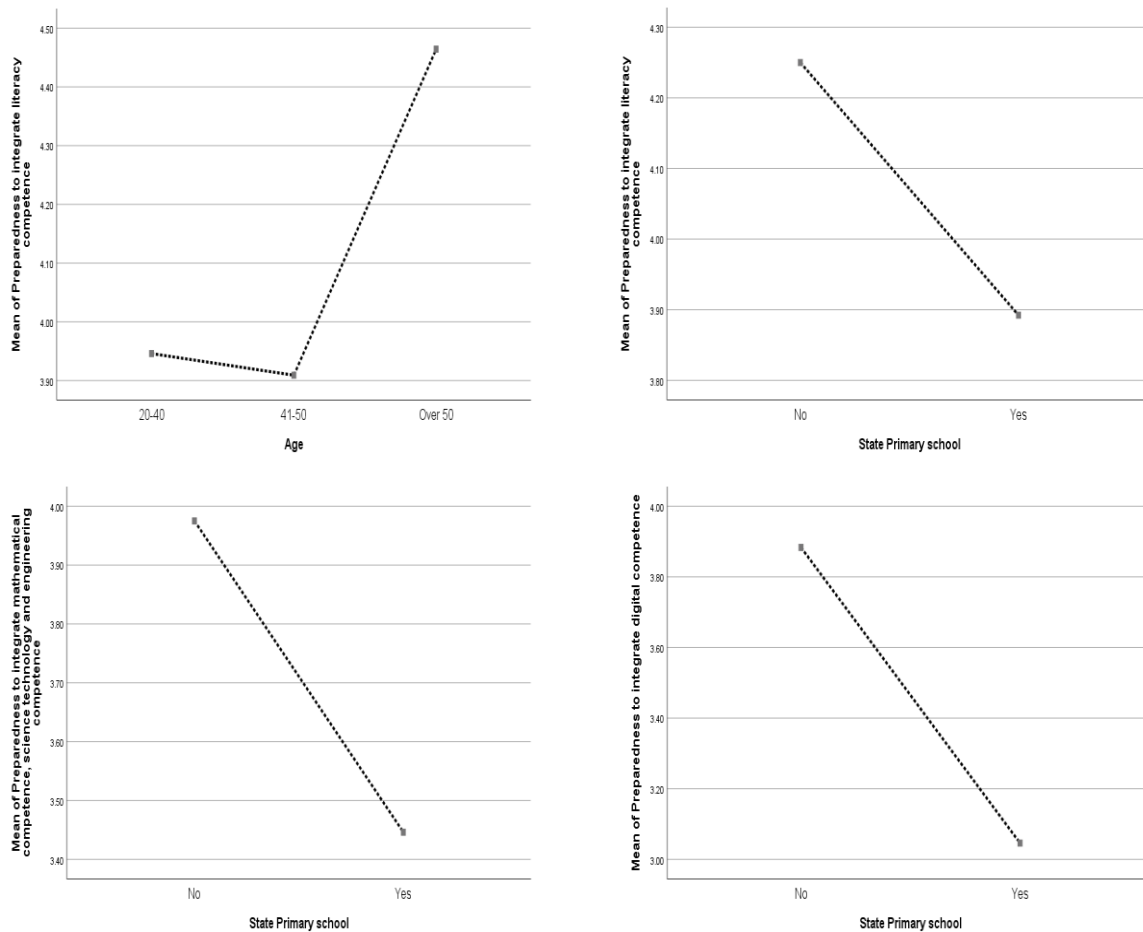
Table 19. Dependencies of the preparedness to integrate key lifelong competences

	Age	Years of teaching experience	Highest degree obtained or are about to obtain	State Primary school	State Junior High school	State Senior High school
literacy competence	0.038	0.451	0.339	0.026	0.355	0.412
multilingual competence	0.282	0.307	0.758	0.762	0.570	0.460
mathematical, science technology & engineering competence	0.929	0.767	0.638	0.001	0.098	0.062
digital competence	0.837	0.826	0.236	0.000	0.078	0.193
personal, social & learning to learn competence	0.165	0.594	0.724	0.265	0.686	0.592
civic competence	0.927	0.703	0.864	0.349	0.130	0.992
cultural awareness & expression competence	0.973	0.800	0.675	0.107	0.237	0.924
entrepreneurship competence	0.229	0.438	0.946	0.129	0.264	0.718

In the following Graphs 1-4, the above statistically significant dependencies are analyzed. As shown, the participants who are over 50 years old are prepared to integrate literacy competence on a higher level, while the EFL teachers with an age range from 41 to 50 indicate that they are less prepared. Moreover, the participants who worked or are currently working in State Primary Schools, are prepared to integrate literacy

competence, mathematical, science technology and engineering competence and digital competence on a higher level.

Graphs 1-4. Dependencies of the preparedness of EFL teachers to integrate competences



4. Discussion

The research data presented, offer an account of the EFL teachers' perceptions and challenges concerning key competences in the Greek state school sector. Concerning the first research question, which explores whether the age, teaching experience, educational qualifications and employment context of the participants affect their familiarity and satisfaction with the FL curriculum, the data revealed that the EFL teachers who worked or are currently employed in State Primary Schools agree that the FL curriculum of Greek schools needs improvement. In relation to the second research question, which investigates whether the age, teaching experience, educational qualifications and employment context of the participants affect their conception of competences, the participants' demographic characteristics do not affect their conception of the term 'competence'. In the third research question, which looks into whether the age, teaching experience, educational qualifications and employment context of the participants affect their preparedness to integrate the key competences in their FL teaching practice, it is revealed that EFL teachers over the age of 50 are more prepared to integrate literacy competence in their classes, while participants who worked or are currently employed in State Primary Schools are more prepared to integrate more types of competences namely, literacy, mathematical, science technology and engineering, and digital competence.

The research findings also revealed that the participants are familiar with the current FL curriculum, which is of major significance acknowledging the role of the teachers as catalysts for curriculum change according to Graves (2008). Many of them are partly satisfied with the curriculum, believe it needs improvement, and support that its greatest strength is its flexibility. In fact, flexibility is an important aspect of the FL curriculum as according to Finney (2002), it allows responding to the changing needs of learners and acknowledging them as active participants in the learning process.

Furthermore, most of the participants are aware of the term 'competence' although it comprises a complex construct involving multiple layers (European Commission, 2018b). While the vast majority of the EFL teachers believe that the term 'competence' relates to knowledge, skill, attitude and value (ibid), there is a considerable part of them who do not conceive the term appropriately and relate it to skills or knowledge only. This can be rooted to a popular misconception that competences were mainly part of vocational education and training (OCDE, 1994), which gradually became redundant, since it greatly limits their richness and potential (Halász & Michel, 2011).

What is more, the EFL teachers tend to be familiar with the various key competences with the exception of entrepreneurship and citizenship, which are the least known to teachers. The finding is supported by Eurydice reports on citizenship (2017b) and entrepreneurship education (2016), which recount fragmented policies, limited chances for teachers to specialize in these competences and policy gaps in their implementation across Europe (Tahirsylaj & Sundberg, 2020).

It is also interesting to note that the EFL teachers are adequately aware of multilingual competence and are highly prepared to integrate it in their classes, given the distinct emphasis placed on multilingualism within the European Union, and the policy promoting it in educational contexts, Greece included (Eurydice, 2017a).

Overall, the EFL teachers' stated preparedness to integrate competences can be supported by their familiarization with competence-driven education based on the National Lifelong Learning Strategies for the 'New School' of the Greek Ministry of Education, towards curricula which include competences and cross-curricular activities, and emphasize learning outcomes (Riviou, 2014).

It should be noted that the EFL teachers despite stating to be highly aware of digital competence, they indicated being least prepared, although above average, to integrate it. The finding can be related with the 2nd Survey on Schools on ICT (European Commission, 2019) which revealed that lack of pedagogical and technical support on ICT is one of the most important factors teachers encounter concerning the use of digital technologies. This finding can also be associated with the teachers' statement that schools need more funding to create innovative learning environments.

Moreover, concerning barriers that impede the integration of key competences, the most important one seems to be practical such as the lack of necessary classroom time while the learners' perspective is also highlighted in the difficulty the students face in understanding them. Assessment methods and tools also comprise obstacles which is also identified by Redecker's report (2013). Lastly, the participants believe that some new teaching materials that include the philosophy of key competences would be most helpful (Riviou, 2014). In fact, the barriers and proposed solutions outlined in the present study were among the issues raised by representatives from more than 30 European countries in a conference titled "Supporting Key Competence

Development: Learning approaches and environments in school education” (European Commission, 2020). The proceedings of the conference report that educators face similar problems across Europe concerning the integration of competences in the curricula, thus, they need to be supported in dealing with the demands of competence-based education through professional development policies (ibid) One such initiative was the “TRANSIt” project, a needs analysis of the training needs of teachers in Greece concerning key competences, which was conducted in 2013 (Riviou & Sotiriou, 2016).

4.1. Limitations and suggestions for further research

Although the data from the research offered an informative account on EFL teachers' perceptions and challenges in integrating key lifelong competences in Greek state schools, the number of the EFL teachers who participated in the study is very low compared to the overall number of EFL teachers to allow for results that can be generalizable. Even though various conclusions for EFL teachers' perceptions of key competences and their preparedness to integrate them can be drawn, it is not possible to make broad inferences about the teachers' preparedness and the extent to which they would be efficient in including competences in their teaching practice, based on the findings of this study.

A mixed-method approach, triangulating data from different informants and using different methods rather than, eliciting quantitative data only, would offer a more coherent account of the issues explored, which could be considered for future research. Specific competences could also be considered as the focal point of future research along with the training needs of EFL teachers.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, it is suggested that EFL teachers employed in the state school sector could benefit from being offered focused training on overcoming all the barriers and promoting a gradual complete immersion of the entire educational system in the principles of all key competences. In this direction, competence-oriented approaches should be embedded in initial training, and continuing professional development of EFL teachers to support them in line with recommendations for implementing policy reforms which promote the development of key lifelong competences for all learners (European Commission, 2022).

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