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Implementing the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum in Greek EFL Education: Teachers' Beliefs, Practices and Professional Challenges

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This article examines Greek EFL teachers' beliefs, training experiences, and reported classroom practices in implementing the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC, hereafter) — a nationwide curriculum innovation introduced in Greek state schools as part of a broader reform agenda to modernize foreign language education. Drawing on English foreign language (EFL, hereafter) teachers' beliefs, training and practices, the study explores how teachers mediate top-down curricular change within complex institutional realities. Employing a mixed-methods design, quantitative data from 370 EFL teachers were triangulated with semi-structured interviews with 16 EFL teachers and 8 school advisors, alongside the analysis of 12 lesson plans. The findings reveal limited awareness and fragmented training, resulting in partial and uneven implementation of the IFLC. While many teachers endorse the innovation's communicative and learner-centered philosophy, deeply entrenched beliefs, contextual constraints, and insufficient professional support hinder full implementation. Nonetheless, emerging evidence of adaptive and selective agency suggests teachers' gradual movement toward more reflective and context-responsive practices. The study also highlights the importance of sustained, collaborative professional learning and participatory curriculum design in promoting meaningful educational innovation. Implications are discussed for teacher education, curriculum policy as well as scholarship on agency and innovation in global educational contexts.

Keywords: curriculum implementation, educational innovation, teacher beliefs and practices, teacher professional development, EFL

INTRODUCTION

Context of the research

Within the past half-century, profound social, technological, and geopolitical shifts have transformed the purposes and practices of education worldwide, prompting governments to invest in the reform of education in order to prepare future generations to operate within a constantly evolving environment. In this vein, 21st-century societies demand new forms of literacy, flexibility, and intercultural competence, compelling educational systems to align with the needs of a globalized and multilingual world

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(Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Fullan, 2016). These reform pressures are especially visible in FL education, where curricula increasingly emphasize communicative competence, critical thinking, digital literacy, and intercultural awareness (Dendrinos et al., 2014; Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). As such, FL (FL, hereafter) curriculum innovation has become a crucial arena for examining how teachers negotiate policy change, exercise professional judgment, and implement new pedagogical paradigms in their classrooms (Sofiana et al., 2019; El-Annan & Hassoun, 2025). In this landscape, the teacher's role is no longer limited to delivering prescribed content but extends to interpreting, adapting, and reconstructing curricular guidelines — a process central to understanding teacher involvement in curriculum innovation.

A salient example of such large-scale curriculum reform is the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC), introduced in Greek state education as part of the broader "New School" reform agenda and formally institutionalized in 2016. The IFLC represents a significant departure from previous FL curricula in Greece, as it proposes a unified, level-based framework for all foreign languages taught across primary and secondary education. Grounded in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the IFLC emphasizes communicative competence, plurilingualism, mediation, learner autonomy, and differentiated instruction, while granting teachers increased responsibility for syllabus design and material selection. In doing so, it aspires to transform both language pedagogy and teachers' professional roles within a traditionally centralized educational system.

Rationale and purpose of the research

The present study investigates the dynamics of curriculum innovation through the lens of teacher agency, focusing on how EFL teachers understand, negotiate, and implement the IFLC in everyday practice. Specifically, the study explores a) the key factors influencing Greek EFL teachers' implementation of the IFLC innovation, b) the extent to which their beliefs and reported practices align with the IFLC principles, and c) how training and professional support shape their capacity to act as agents of curriculum innovation. Drawing on a mixed-methods design, the research triangulates quantitative data from a nationwide questionnaire with qualitative insights from teacher and advisor interviews and lesson-plan analysis. In doing so, it addresses a central question for innovation scholarship: *How do teachers interpret and recontextualize top-down reforms within their situated pedagogical realities?* By empirically examining teachers' beliefs and reported practices, the study contributes to ongoing debates on teacher professional development, curriculum mediation, and agency in FL contexts.

This investigation is significant in both empirical and conceptual terms. Empirically, it constitutes the first large-scale, systematic analysis of IFLC implementation since its adoption as the national FL curriculum in Greek education. Conceptually, it bridges the micro-level of teacher implementation with the macro-level of curriculum change, illustrating how individual sense-making shapes policy realization. By situating the IFLC within global conversations on educational innovation and teacher professionalism, the study aims to advance understanding of how agency, belief systems, and contextual constraints intersect in the enactment of curriculum

innovations. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of how educational changes are interpreted, negotiated, and recontextualized at the intersection of policy and practice — an issue of long-standing interest for policymakers, educators, and researchers worldwide.

This article is organized as follows. Section 1 (Introduction) situates the study within the broader context of curriculum innovation and implementation and outlines the rationale and aims of the research. Section 2 (Literature Review) examines the key theoretical and empirical strands informing the study, focusing on the innovatory features of the IFLC, teacher involvement in curriculum design and implementation and the role of training and support as preconditions for meaningful reform. Section 3 (Method) describes the mixed-methods research design, participants, data collection instruments, analytical procedures, and ethical considerations. Section 4 (Research findings) presents the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study, while Section 5 (Discussion) interprets these results in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Finally, Section 6 (Conclusion) summarizes the main insights of the study, discusses pedagogical and policy implications, and highlights the broader significance of the findings for curriculum innovation in centralized educational contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The innovatory features of the IFLC

More specifically, the IFLC provides a unified curriculum across all education levels for all foreign languages currently taught in Greek schools, as well as those that may be incorporated in the future. It is the first time in the Greek educational context that a subject-specific curriculum is detached from the structure of the wider school curriculum, since the IFLC proposes that students be grouped according to their level of language proficiency rather than their school grade. Moreover, learners' communicative and linguistic competencies are defined through specific descriptors aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which outline the content knowledge and linguistic functions that students are expected to acquire and perform at different proficiency levels (Dendrinos et al., 2013). Moreover, the curriculum is grounded in research evidence derived from the KPG multilingual corpus (i.e. the National Foreign Language Exam System), rather than relying solely on experts' intuition, thereby ensuring that its content is both relevant and effective. Finally, the IFLC has a sustainable design that allows it to adapt to changes in teaching hours and to accommodate the integration of new foreign languages in the future.

Its aims are ambitious. It purports to offer autonomy to teachers in the development of their own syllabi alongside their design and selection of material or tasks using multiple sources of information to break the one-textbook-per-subject rule (Karavas, 2018). It is for the first time ever that Greek FL teachers are called upon to undertake the role of a designer rather than being mere implementers of standard syllabi. It also aspires to promote differentiated instruction to accommodate students' diverse needs and styles, develop learners' plurilingualism and multiliteracies, foster the contextualized use of language in a variety of real-world settings to serve specific communicative purposes (Karavas, 2018), enhance experiential and collaborative learning as well as cultivate

learner autonomy through alternative assessment and mediation tasks (Dendrinos et al., 2013; Mitsikopoulou et al., 2018). The IFLC therefore represents not merely a technical adjustment to content but a paradigmatic redefinition of teachers' professional roles — from knowledge transmitters to designers of communicative, learner-centered experiences. Realizing these aspirations, however, presupposes teachers' deep understanding of curriculum principles and their capacity to reinterpret them in context.

Teacher involvement in curriculum design and implementation

Over the past three decades, curriculum developers have often assumed that educational innovations would succeed simply by instructing teachers how to implement them. However, contemporary research increasingly challenges this assumption, emphasizing that sustainable reform depends on teachers' active involvement rather than compliance (Fullan, 2016). This shift reflects a broader evolution in curriculum theory, which has moved from linear, top-down models of change toward more complex, dynamic, and context-sensitive frameworks. Early foundational theories, such as Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations model, conceptualized change as a process of adoption influenced by factors like perceived usefulness and compatibility. While influential, such models have been criticized for underestimating the importance of context and the active role of teachers in shaping implementation outcomes.

More recent perspectives, particularly Fullan's (2016) theory of educational change, emphasize the multidimensional and non-linear nature of reform processes. Change is understood as an ongoing, interactive phenomenon requiring alignment between policy, practice, and professional learning. Building on this, Priestley et al. (2015) highlight that successful curriculum innovation depends on the interplay between individual agency and institutional structures. In this regard, teacher engagement, professional judgment, and collaborative decision-making are now seen as central to effective curriculum enactment in complex educational environments (Leijen et al., 2020).

A central concept underpinning this shift is teacher engagement, defined as teachers' capacity to act purposefully and constructively within specific contexts (Priestley et al., 2015). Unlike earlier models that positioned teachers as passive implementers, current frameworks conceptualize them as co-constructors of curriculum. Empirical research shows that teacher agency is shaped by structural conditions (e.g., policy frameworks and resources), cultural factors (e.g., school norms), and individual capacities (e.g., beliefs and professional knowledge) (Leijen et al., 2020). This reconceptualization reinforces the importance of involving teachers directly in curriculum design processes.

In an era marked by rapid educational change and increasingly diverse classrooms, teacher involvement in curriculum design has become essential. Research indicates that teachers who actively participate in curriculum development demonstrate greater ownership, instructional coherence and responsiveness to learner diversity (Voogt et al., 2016; Priestley et al., 2021). This aligns closely with the concept of curriculum enactment**,** which emphasizes how teachers interpret and transform official curricula into situated classroom practices. As Coburn & Penuel (2016) argue, implementation is inherently interpretive, with teachers mediating reforms through their beliefs and experiences. This perspective challenges traditional notions of fidelity of

implementation, suggesting instead that adaptation and transformation are necessary for meaningful innovation.

In this context, the IFLC represents a significant shift in Greek education, granting teachers the autonomy to draw on multiple knowledge sources and design syllabi responsive to their students' needs (Dendrinos et al., 2014; IFLC, 2016). This aligns with broader European trends toward competence-based and flexible curricula (European Commission, 2022; Council of Europe, 2020). Teachers are thus positioned as facilitators of learning, responsible for selecting differentiated tasks aligned with students' interests and learning profiles, rather than relying exclusively on prescribed textbooks.

As the IFLC emphasizes, no textbook can fully address the diverse needs of learners or support differentiated instruction independently (Sifakis & Tsantila, 2019). Accordingly, while IFLC descriptors outline expected learning outcomes, decisions regarding sequencing, methodology, and materials are entrusted to teachers, enabling context-sensitive implementation (IFLC, 2016). Differentiated instruction, therefore, entails recognizing learner variability and promoting equitable participation. Contemporary research highlights that differentiation is most effective when grounded in formative assessment and adaptive expertise (Deunk et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 2017).

Teachers also play a pivotal role in identifying the limitations of curriculum innovations and assessing their classroom feasibility. While Rogers (2003) emphasizes adoption factors, more recent studies stress that teachers' experiential knowledge mediates policy intentions and classroom realities, often determining whether reforms are meaningfully implemented or superficially adopted (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). As Karavas (2018) notes, motivated FL teachers tend to welcome the IFLC's flexibility and learner-centered orientation, which enhance professional autonomy and foster innovation.

Overall, the IFLC reflects a paradigm shift toward recognizing teachers as curriculum co-designers rather than passive implementers. By enabling educators to use CEFR-based descriptors to develop syllabi, design differentiated activities, and establish assessment criteria—often supported by digital tools—the IFLC aligns with contemporary understandings of curriculum innovation as a socially constructed, context-dependent process grounded in teacher agency, adaptation, and reflective practice.

Building teacher capacity for curriculum innovation

Effective implementation of curriculum innovations depends not only on teacher cognition but also on systematic, context-sensitive professional learning and sustained institutional support. While earlier models of reform often relied on one-off, transmission-oriented training, contemporary research—drawing on sociocultural perspectives—emphasizes that teacher learning is situated, collaborative, and continuous (Fullan, 2016). This reflects a broader shift in the literature toward understanding professional learning as a key driver of curriculum innovation rather than a supplementary component.

Recent studies confirm that ongoing, practice-embedded professional development is essential for supporting meaningful instructional change (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Traditional approaches have proven insufficient because they fail to engage teachers as active learners or address the complexities of classroom practice. In contrast, sustained and collaborative models—such as professional learning communities, coaching, and inquiry-based approaches—enable teachers to experiment, reflect, and refine their practices over time (Voogt et al., 2016). This emphasis on professional learning is closely linked to the concept of teacher capacity which is a rather emergent trait shaped through participation in supportive professional environments (Priestley et al., 2015). Therefore, building teacher capacity involves not only developing individual competencies but also creating conditions that enable teachers to exercise judgment, take initiative, and adapt innovations to their contexts (Leijen et al., 2020).

For this reason, comprehensive training programs should address both theoretical and practical dimensions of teaching, including pedagogy, assessment, and classroom management. Experiential and inquiry-based models have been shown to enhance teacher learning and facilitate the transfer of knowledge into practice. Furthermore, contextualized training—tailored to specific school environments—enables teachers to move beyond superficial compliance and engage in meaningful adaptation of innovations (Priestley et al., 2021).

In addition to training, sustained support and feedback are essential for effective curriculum implementation. Instructional coaching, mentoring and peer collaboration provide ongoing opportunities for reflection and improvement. Such support mechanisms also reinforce the interpretive nature of curriculum enactment, helping teachers navigate the complexities of translating policy into practice (Kraft et al., 2018). Open feedback channels between teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers further contribute to successful innovation. As Coburn & Penuel (2016) highlight, implementation is an iterative process that benefits from continuous dialogue and mutual adaptation. This not only improves the quality of the innovation but also strengthens teachers' sense of ownership and professional responsibility. Equally important is the role of leadership and systemic support. Research shows that school leaders play a critical role in shaping the organizational conditions necessary for innovation, including fostering collaboration, allocating resources, and promoting a culture of trust and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). Without such support, even well-designed reforms risk superficial or fragmented implementation.

Ultimately, building teacher capacity requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that combines continuous professional learning, collaborative structures, coaching, and strong leadership. This aligns with contemporary understandings of curriculum innovation as a complex, socially mediated process that depends on the interaction between individual agency, institutional conditions, and professional learning. Within this framework, teachers are not merely recipients of reform but active agents whose capacity to interpret, adapt, and co-construct curriculum determines the success and sustainability of innovations such as the IFLC.

METHOD

Research design overview

This study employed a mixed-method design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both the breadth and depth of implementation dynamics surrounding the IFLC innovation in Greece. The design integrated three research instruments: a) a questionnaire, b) semi-structured interviews, and c) lesson plan analysis. By triangulating survey data with in-depth qualitative accounts and classroom artifacts, the study aimed to explore not only the extent of IFLC implementation but also the processes through which teachers interpret and enact curriculum innovation. The overall aim was to reveal the interaction between structural conditions and human agency in curriculum reform.

The use of mixed methods is consistent with contemporary educational research, where complex phenomena such as curriculum innovation require both numerical generalizability and contextualized understanding (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, this approach recognizes that curriculum innovation is mediated by teachers' beliefs, experiences, and professional identities, rather than implemented uniformly across classrooms (Nachmias et al., 2014).

Importantly, although the instruments used were designed specifically for this study, they were theory-driven and systematically developed rather than arbitrary or ad hoc. Their construction drew on established frameworks in curriculum innovation, teacher agency, and IFLC principles. To ensure scientific rigor**,** the development process followed widely accepted procedures for educational research instrument design, including piloting, expert validation, iterative refinement, and methodological triangulation (DeVellis, 2017). These steps provide evidence for both the validity and reliability of the instruments in assessing IFLC implementation.

Participants, instrument design and validation

The study drew on data from three complementary sources: a) a nationwide questionnaire completed by 370 EFL teachers, b) semi-structured interviews with 16 EFL teachers and 8 regional EFL school advisors, and c) a corpus of 12 lesson plans developed by the interviewed teachers. Participants were drawn from a population of approximately 8,000 EFL teachers across primary and secondary education in Greece, representing urban, semi-urban, and rural areas to ensure geographical and demographic representativeness.

A stratified random sampling method (Nachmias et al., 2014) was used for the questionnaire to capture variation in school type, region, and teaching experience. The final sample included 207 primary and 163 secondary teachers with teaching experience ranging from 1 to over 20 years. For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling identified teachers and advisors representing diverse teaching contexts and professional backgrounds, with advisors included as key informants due to their supervisory and support roles.

The teacher questionnaire comprised 50 items, including closed-ended questions, a five-point Likert scale, and open-ended responses exploring implementation challenges and

professional development needs. Its design was guided by the study's theoretical framework, incorporating constructs such as teacher agency, curriculum enactment, and differentiated instruction. To ensure content validity**,** items were aligned with IFLC policy documents and relevant literature (Dendrinos et al., 2014; IFLC, 2016) and reviewed by two experts in applied linguistics and curriculum studies. A pilot study with 20 EFL teachers was conducted to assess clarity, comprehensibility, and response variability. Reliability analysis of Likert-scale items yielded acceptable internal consistency, confirming that the instrument was robust and reliable (Field, 2018).

The semi-structured interview protocol was also theory-driven, exploring participants' understandings of IFLC implementation, institutional constraints, and pedagogical practices. Interviews were piloted and refined to ensure clarity and consistency while allowing flexibility for context-specific insights. Member checking was also applied to enhance credibility, with summaries shared with participants for verification.

The lesson plan analysis framework was developed based on IFLC principles and CEFR-aligned descriptors. Analysis used explicit, predefined criteria: a) alignment with "can-do" descriptors and communicative objectives, b) integration of authentic, multimodal, and ICT-supported materials, and c) design of learner-centered and interactive activities. Construct validity was strengthened by grounding the criteria in IFLC documentation and literature on communicative language teaching and differentiation. An inter-rater reliability check on a subset of lesson plans confirmed consistency in coding.

Data analysis and methodological rigor

Before presenting the findings, it is important to clarify the analytical framework and criteria used to evaluate the results. Data analysis followed a sequential explanatory design with quantitative results informing qualitative exploration. Questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS (version 26.0) while Likert-scale items in the questionnaire were measured on a five-point scale (1 = very low / strongly disagree to 5 = very high / strongly agree). Mean scores were interpreted using the following analytical thresholds, commonly adopted in educational research:

- 1.00–2.49: low level
- 2.50–3.49: moderate level
- 3.50–5.00: high level

This categorization provided a consistent basis for interpreting teachers' responses and ensured transparency in evaluating trends.

To strengthen the robustness of the findings, both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were applied. Descriptive statistics (means, percentages, standard deviations) were used to identify general patterns, while inferential tests (Chi-square, Fisher's exact test, Mann-Whitney U, and Kruskal-Wallis H) examined relationships between variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$, ensuring that reported associations were unlikely to be due to chance (Field, 2018).

Interview transcripts underwent thematic content analysis, combining deductive categories based on the theoretical framework with inductive insights from participants'

narratives. This dual approach increased analytical depth and reduced bias. Established qualitative rigor criteria—including credibility, dependability, and confirmability—were applied.

Methodological triangulation across questionnaires, interviews, and lesson plans enabled cross-validation of findings. Comparing self-reported practices with lesson design allowed for a nuanced understanding of curriculum enactment and mitigated the risk of response bias.

Ethical considerations

All participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Furthermore, written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms and code identifiers. Digital files were stored securely and accessible only to the researcher. Given the study's focus on teachers' professional experiences, particular care was taken to ensure that participants' views would not be used evaluatively or reported in a way that could identify individual schools or regions.

FINDINGS

Awareness and training

A central focus of the research questionnaire was to assess teachers' awareness of the IFLC's key components — its aims, structure, and pedagogical principles — as well as the extent and quality of related training they had received. All relevant items were measured on a five-point Likert scale and interpreted using predefined criteria, ensuring consistency and transparency in evaluation.

Overall, the results indicated low to moderate levels of awareness. While 58% of respondents reported having "heard of" the IFLC, fewer than 35% stated that they had read its framework in detail or understood its descriptors. Mean scores for awareness of specific IFLC principles — such as plurilingualism, mediation, and project-based learning — ranged between $M = 2.8$ and $M = 3.2$, placing them within the moderate but limited familiarity range.

Training opportunities were found to be limited, inconsistent, and largely theoretical (Figure 1). Only 41% of teachers reported attending at least one training session since the introduction of the IFLC. Importantly, correlational analysis revealed statistically significant associations between training participation and contextual variables such as school location and level of qualifications, indicating unequal access to professional development.

Moreover, 72% of respondents evaluated training as overly theoretical, with mean ratings exceeding $M = 3.8$, indicating a statistically significant negative perception of its practical relevance. These findings demonstrate that teachers have been expected to implement an innovation without adequate preparation, highlighting a structural gap between policy design and professional learning provision. This pattern is consistent

with international literature on curriculum reform, where insufficient training undermines implementation effectiveness.

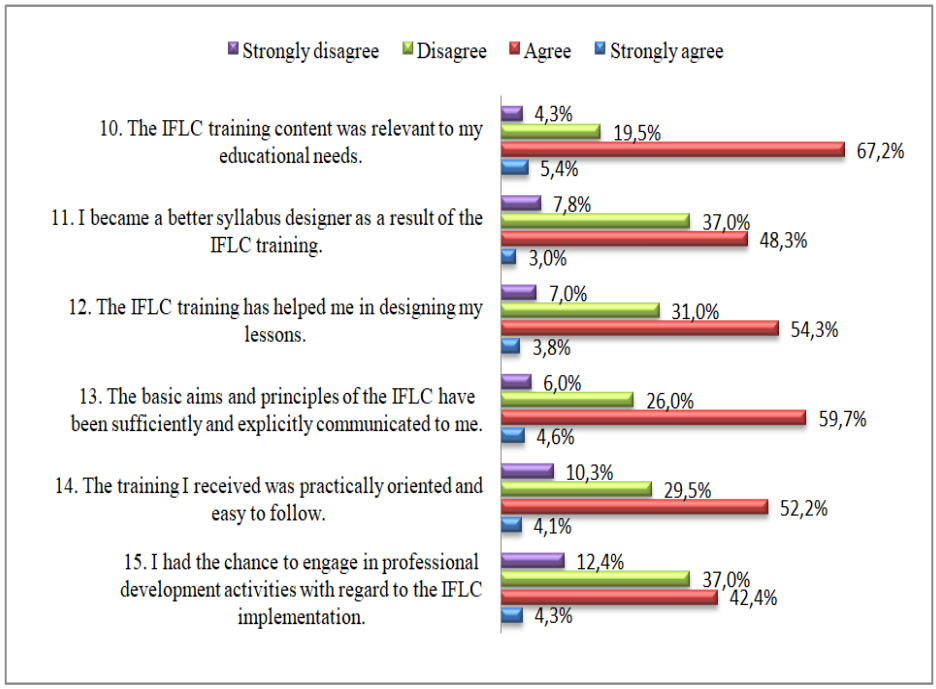

Figure 1
Teachers' opinions in relation to their IFLC training

Teachers' beliefs about innovations and the IFLC

Despite the limited training, questionnaire data revealed a generally positive orientation toward educational innovation in principle. Over 70% of teachers agreed that curriculum reforms are necessary to modernize language teaching and align it with learners' needs in the 21st century. Teachers also expressed strong endorsement of communicative and learner-centered approaches, with mean agreement scores above 4.0. These findings suggest that the conceptual climate among Greek EFL teachers is receptive to change, at least at the level of stated beliefs.

However, this optimism was tempered by skepticism toward the IFLC's practical implications. Specifically, the majority of respondents described the IFLC as non-applicable or unrealistic in the Greek school context. The key reasons cited were overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, and the dominance of exam-oriented practices — factors that teachers perceived as incompatible with the IFLC's learner autonomy and mediation-oriented philosophy.

Correlation analyses indicated meaningful relationships between teachers' beliefs and their background variables. More experienced teachers (over 20 years) tended to rate the IFLC as less feasible, while younger and postgraduate-qualified teachers expressed greater optimism. This aligns with research suggesting that novice or recently trained teachers are often more open to innovation due to greater exposure to contemporary pedagogical frameworks (Borg, 2015). Nevertheless, the coexistence of positive attitudes and perceived impracticality underscores a belief–context tension, whereby teachers conceptually support reform ideals yet feel unable to realize them under existing institutional conditions.

Reported classroom practices

The questionnaire also explored teachers' self-reported classroom practices, focusing on their alignment with IFLC principles related to communicative competence, mediation, plurilingual awareness, collaborative experiential learning, digital literacy and alternative assessment methods. However, the data indicated a partial and uneven adoption of these innovative practices.

Specifically, a large majority (85%) reported regularly using communicative activities, pair work, and authentic materials — practices consistent with the IFLC's emphasis on meaningful communication. Similarly, 74% claimed to incorporate elements of task-based learning and student-centered interaction. However, these practices often coexisted with traditional grammar and translation exercises, revealing an eclectic pedagogical orientation typical of reform contexts where teachers attempt to balance innovation with established expectations.

In contrast, IFLC features such as mediation, plurilingual awareness, and digital literacy appeared far less common. Only 22% of respondents reported integrating mediation tasks (e.g., summarizing or translating between languages), and just 18% incorporated digital or multimodal tools systematically in lesson planning. Moreover, while the IFLC's communicative dimension is partially implemented, its broader objectives — particularly plurilingualism and autonomous learning — seem to remain largely aspirational. Cross-tabulation analysis showed that teachers with prior exposure to IFLC-focused training reported higher use of project-based learning and formative assessment, reinforcing the link between professional learning and classroom enactment (Fullan, 2016).

Taken together, these results point to a hybrid implementation pattern: teachers selectively adopt elements that align with existing practice while overlooking or modifying those perceived as incompatible with institutional constraints. Such partial uptake is consistent with international evidence that teachers mediate reforms through personal pedagogical reasoning rather than direct replication of official guidelines (Priestley et al., 2015).

Teachers as mediators, not executors

Across interviews, teachers described their role in IFLC implementation not as one of faithful execution of policy but as mediated adaptation. Many articulated a sense of personal responsibility for translating the curriculum into classroom practice, even in

the absence of direct guidance. Several teachers stated that they had "skimmed" the IFLC document or accessed summaries online and then sought to interpret its principles independently. Others drew on elements from training sessions or peer discussions to make "localized" sense of the reform. For instance, a primary school teacher noted:

> "We can't apply the IFLC as it is written, but we try to follow its general philosophy. I use some descriptors to plan group work or projects when possible, but we still follow the textbook because that's what the students and parents expect."

Teachers thus perceive themselves as curriculum mediators — balancing top-down policy demands with bottom-up contextual realities. While the IFLC frames teachers as syllabus designers, the institutional culture of Greek education — marked by centralized control and heavy textbook dependence — limits the space for such agency. As the lesson plan analysis revealed, although some teachers experimented with task-based or mediation-oriented activities inspired by the IFLC, most continued to align lessons with textbook progression and exam syllabi.

This duality exemplifies the paradigm of principled adaptation: teachers selectively integrate innovation elements that resonate with their beliefs or classroom needs while omitting those they perceive as impractical. Most importantly, such mediation should not be viewed as "deviation" but as a form of context-sensitive professionalism; a hallmark of teachers' reinterpretation of IFLC descriptors, thus simultaneously sustaining the innovation's spirit while negotiating its limitations.

Training and support: fragmentation and detachment

A pervasive theme in teachers' narratives concerned the insufficiency and fragmented nature of professional development related to the IFLC. Interview data confirmed and deepened the quantitative finding that formal training was inconsistent and largely theoretical. Teachers repeatedly described seminars as "one-off presentations," "too general," or "detached from school reality." As one secondary teacher commented:

> "Most of the times, the trainers told us how to incorporate different practices into our lessons but we were not told explicitly what the practical implications of the IFLC and its guidelines are within the everyday school reality".

This lack of practical support generated feelings of insecurity and disempowerment, particularly among teachers with less experience in syllabus design. Furthermore, the absence of follow-up mentoring or school-based collaboration limited teachers' opportunities for collective reflection and experimentation. Consequently, the IFLC's intended transformation of teachers into autonomous curriculum agents remained largely rhetorical.

The school advisors interviewed in the study corroborated these perceptions. While acknowledging teachers' goodwill, they pointed to systemic issues that undermined the reform's implementation. As one advisor explained:

> "In the case of the IFLC, the amount of training hours was scant and the teachers were not systematically supported throughout their implementation of the

> programme. In my opinion, teacher training should include well-prepared educational input and simulation of experiential micro-scenarios."

Another advisor emphasized that the absence of institutionalized mechanisms for ongoing feedback or peer learning meant that "implementation stopped at awareness." These insights align with Fullan's (2016) assertion that sustainable educational change depends on continuous, collaborative professional learning rather than sporadic top-down training.

Coping and adaptation: selective alignment strategies

Despite limited training and structural constraints, many teachers displayed resourceful coping strategies that enabled partial engagement with the IFLC's principles. This phenomenon captures teachers' efforts to blend new curricular guidelines with established practices. In this vein, teachers often selectively utilized IFLC descriptors in order to enrich rather than replace their existing lesson designs. Others adapted the IFLC principles of collaboration and learner autonomy through small-scale adjustments, such as introducing peer feedback or group writing activities. In doing so, teachers recontextualized innovation to fit local realities, exercising agency through pragmatic compromise. For example, one secondary teacher described how she integrated project-based learning by connecting textbook topics with real-life tasks:

> "When the book had a unit about the environment, I asked students to make posters and present them in English. It was not exactly the IFLC format, but it made the lesson more communicative."

However, this selective approach also indicates partial assimilation rather than full transformation. Teachers tended to appropriate surface-level features (e.g. group work, projects) while overlooking deeper curricular shifts like cross-linguistic mediation, multimodality, or formative assessment. This selective implementation pattern reflects what Karavas (2018) identified as "innovation filtering," where teachers internalize only those components compatible with their existing pedagogical schemata. Nevertheless, such adaptive filtering can serve as a transitional stage in innovation adoption, enabling teachers to experiment incrementally while maintaining professional stability.

Emerging shifts in pedagogical practices

Despite the structural and pedagogical challenges, the qualitative data also revealed signs of emerging shifts in teachers' pedagogical practices. Specifically, despite teachers' limited implementation of the IFLC principles, lesson plan analysis revealed that the introduction of the IFLC innovation encouraged some teachers to make slight adjustments to their long-established teaching practices. These included partially aligning lesson objectives with the IFLC descriptors, creating thematically engaging learning materials and adopting a more learner-centered approach to lesson design. In these cases, students' self-motivation was fostered by encouraging them to incorporate their background knowledge into the lesson, explore new information independently or in groups and reflect on their learning experiences. Additionally, the incorporation of educational technology has enhanced the communicative orientation of certain lesson

plans as the textbook activities have been supplemented with a variety of meaningful multimodal input which resembled the authentic use of language in real-world settings.

Such practices, though limited in scope, signal the beginnings of pedagogical renewal and a shift toward viewing language as a social, integrative skill. School advisors also noted that some teachers had become more reflective and confident to try new instructional methods since the introduction of the IFLC. Thus, although few teachers fully implemented the IFLC framework, many began to internalize its principles through practice-based experimentation. In this sense, the IFLC has initiated a slow but perceptible shift in teachers' professional self-conceptions — from compliant implementers toward reflective, adaptive practitioners.

Overall, the qualitative findings have deepened understanding of how EFL teachers in Greece navigate the complex interplay between reform ideals and contextual constraints. Teachers overwhelmingly value the IFLC's pedagogical vision but experience limited structural support, inconsistent training, and systemic barriers that curtail full implementation. Within these constraints, they enact adaptive forms of agency — mediating, selectively utilizing, and gradually internalizing aspects of the innovation. Their adaptive strategies, while producing partial implementation, also indicate pathways for sustainable change through professional learning, collegial collaboration, and contextual responsiveness.

DISCUSSION

Partial implementation and constrained mediation

The combined quantitative and qualitative findings provide a multidimensional picture of Greek EFL teachers' experiences with the IFLC innovation. Both data strands converge on a clear pattern: teachers conceptually endorse the IFLC's pedagogical principles yet struggle to implement them fully in practice. Quantitative evidence showed positive beliefs about innovation and communicative, learner-centered pedagogy, alongside limited awareness of IFLC descriptors and minimal training. Qualitative data deepened this interpretation, revealing goodwill, adaptive strategies, and selective uptake rather than outright resistance. Teachers mediate the IFLC innovation within the constraints of their professional and institutional contexts, yet systemic, structural, and resource limitations significantly bound their involvement.

These findings align with recent international studies on curriculum reform in language education. For example, Sofiana et al. (2019) report similar belief–practice gaps in English language teaching innovations, highlighting how teachers often conceptually support reforms while adapting them pragmatically to local constraints. Likewise, Priestley et al. (2021) emphasize that adaptive implementation — where teachers selectively integrate new curriculum elements — is a widespread phenomenon in top-down educational reforms, particularly where systemic rigidity limits autonomy. Similarly, contemporary research demonstrates that externally designed curricular reforms are frequently experienced as restrictive, particularly when teachers are required to operate within prescriptive frameworks and limited time conditions (Grecu, 2022). The IFLC case thus reflects both persistent structural constraints and the latent

potential of teachers as adaptive, reflective agents capable of negotiating reform demands.

Belief–practice discrepancy

The persistence of traditional practices underscores the enduring influence of teacher cognition on curriculum enactment. Quantitative data revealed that while teachers endorse learner autonomy, mediation, and plurilingual approaches in principle, classroom routines remain largely teacher-fronted and textbook-centered. This finding is consistent with recent studies demonstrating that entrenched pedagogical beliefs strongly mediate the uptake of innovative language teaching methods (Priestley et al., 2021).

In Greece, decades of centralized curriculum control, high-stakes assessment culture, and examination-driven accountability reinforce these patterns (Dendrinos et al., 2014). The IFLC's emphasis on plurilingualism and multiliteracies demands a profound epistemological and pedagogical shift, which, without targeted and sustained professional development, teachers tend to interpret through existing cognitive frames. Our findings suggest that belief–practice gaps persist globally but are particularly pronounced in contexts with centralized control and limited teacher autonomy.

Structural and institutional barriers to innovation

Partial implementation of the IFLC is closely tied to systemic and institutional barriers. Greece's centralized education system affords limited teacher and school-level autonomy (Dimitropoulos & Kindi, 2017). Teachers are constrained by mandated textbooks, rigid timetables, and exam-oriented assessment frameworks. Interviews highlighted how parental expectations, administrative oversight, and high-stakes testing further discourage risk-taking, showing that systemic pressure reduces the scope for innovative pedagogy.

Moreover, professional development remains inconsistent and fragmented. One-off seminars and theoretical workshops, rather than sustained, collaborative learning communities, limit opportunities for reflection, adaptation, and collective problem-solving. In addition, contemporary studies emphasize that professional development models which are top-down and disconnected from classroom realities often fail to support meaningful pedagogical change (Beisser & Thoma, 2021). Similarly, institutional inertia — the prioritization of policy documentation over implementation support — exacerbates the disconnect between IFLC intentions and classroom reality (Dendrinos et al., 2014).

Teacher implementation as negotiated practice

The IFLC case reinforces contemporary conceptualizations of teacher implementation as negotiated and contextually bounded. Our data challenge binary classifications of teachers as either compliant or resistant, showing instead a continuum of pragmatic adaptation. Teachers reinterpret policy through selective alignment, gradual adaptation, and incremental experimentation, reflecting what Priestley et al. (2021) describe as "adaptive enactment" in constrained reform contexts.

This negotiated form of implementation emphasizes selective adoption, creative mediation, and gradual change, rather than wholesale transformation. The Greek IFLC experience contributes empirical evidence to ongoing debates about fostering conditions that enable deliberative, reflective, and collaborative teacher agency, emphasizing that pedagogical innovation depends as much on systemic support and professional learning as on policy content.

Comparative analysis with contemporary research

By situating the IFLC findings within the context of contemporary research, several points of convergence become apparent. First, the persistence of belief–practice gaps aligns with research on teacher cognition, which suggests that teachers often endorse innovative, learner-centered approaches at a conceptual level but struggle to enact them consistently in practice (Borg, 2015; Sofiana et al., 2019). Moreover, the influence of structural constraints in the Greek context reflects broader international patterns, where systemic factors such as accountability pressures, curricular demands, and limited institutional support can hinder the implementation of reform-oriented practices (Fullan, 2016; Dimitropoulos & Kindi, 2017). Furthermore, the findings regarding professional development are consistent with evidence indicating that fragmented or insufficiently practice-oriented training limits teachers' ability to translate new pedagogical principles into classroom practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Kraft et al., 2018). Finally, the study reinforces the view of teacher implementation as a mediated and adaptive process, supporting the conceptualization of teachers as active agents who interpret and reshape curriculum innovations in contextually responsive ways (Priestley et al., 2015; Leijen et al., 2020).

Taken together, these comparisons not only enhance the study's external validity but also demonstrate that the Greek IFLC experience reflects broader trends in contemporary language education, while simultaneously underscoring the unique contextual challenges that shape curriculum implementation in Greece.

CONCLUSION

Summary of insights

This study has examined how EFL teachers in Greece have responded to and enacted the IFLC innovation — a major attempt to modernize foreign language education through principles of plurilingualism, learner autonomy, and communicative competence. The mixed-methods design illuminated both the scope and the limits of this curricular innovation. Quantitative data revealed widespread conceptual endorsement of reform ideals but low awareness and uneven implementation, while qualitative evidence depicted teachers as adaptive agents negotiating reform within significant structural and institutional constraints. Together, these findings suggest that implementation of the IFLC has been partial, localized, and mediated, rather than systematic.

On the whole, teachers' IFLC implementation emerged as a fragile but dynamic force: although many educators demonstrated creativity, reflection, and commitment, their efforts were undermined by insufficient training, policy centralization, and resource

scarcity. The result is a persistent gap between reform rhetoric and classroom reality — a pattern not unique to Greece but emblematic of global educational contexts where ambitious curricular visions outstrip systemic support. Yet the study also highlights optimism: through small acts of adaptation, collaboration, and experimentation, teachers began to internalize elements of the IFLC's pedagogical philosophy, laying the groundwork for gradual, bottom-up transformation.

Implications for pedagogy and policy

The findings of this study carry several implications for pedagogical practice as well as policy design. With regard to pedagogical implications, the evidence highlights the necessity of continuous, situated professional learning that moves beyond transmissive models of training. Teachers require opportunities to engage collaboratively with the curriculum through workshops, peer observation, and reflective inquiry. Establishing teacher-led innovation communities — networks that enable sharing of lesson designs, classroom experiments, reflections and concerns — can nurture both confidence and competence in implementing the IFLC principles. Professional development must be reconceived as an ongoing, context-embedded process that supports teachers in transforming their beliefs and practices over time.

Concerning policy implications, the results of the study highlight that curriculum developers should adopt participatory design models, involving teachers in all stages — from planning and piloting to evaluation. This participatory ethos would enhance teachers' sense of ownership and ensure that policy objectives are grounded in classroom realities (Fullan, 2016). Moreover, establishing structured feedback mechanisms between teachers, advisors, and policymakers can facilitate adaptive refinement of curriculum frameworks based on empirical classroom evidence. The Greek Ministry of Education could further strengthen the IFLC's impact by institutionalizing sustained mentoring systems and embedding innovation metrics into school evaluation processes.

Ultimately, the IFLC experience illustrates both the promise and fragility of curriculum innovation in centralized education systems. Reform documents may articulate progressive pedagogical visions, but their realization depends on the everyday implementation of teachers — their capacity to interpret, adapt and sustain change in the classroom. No matter how cautiously a curriculum is planned, without capable, well-resourced, and motivated teachers, no curriculum innovation can possibly succeed. The challenge for policymakers and researchers alike is therefore not only to design innovative curricula but to cultivate the contextual conditions that allow teacher agency to flourish within them.

Significance of the research findings

Overall, it is believed that the current research can raise a new kind of awareness concerning the factors influencing the implementation of curriculum innovations as well as teacher agency in mediating educational changes within complex institutional landscapes. Specifically, the results carry significance at three interrelated levels — theoretical, practical, and policy-oriented.

Theoretically, the study extends global scholarship on teacher agency and curriculum innovation by empirically illustrating how teachers in centralized educational systems enact reform through adaptive, context-sensitive mediation. As Fullan (1992:22) insightfully observes, "without knowing what's in the 'black box' of implementation, we do not know how to interpret the outcomes. […] In short, without implementation data we cannot link particular changes to learning outcomes". Within this context, the study offers concrete evidence of how agency manifests under conditions of limited autonomy and fragmented support. The findings thus contribute to a more nuanced understanding of agency as a negotiated, rather than purely individual, construct — one deeply conditioned by systemic and institutional affordances.

Practically, the research sheds light on the real-world mechanisms through which large-scale curricular innovations are filtered, interpreted, and selectively implemented by teachers. Identifying the specific forms of adaptation, compromise, and coping strategies used by Greek EFL teachers provides a blueprint for anticipating and addressing similar challenges in comparable reform contexts. In this sense, the study offers transferable insights that can inform professional development design, teacher mentoring structures, and school-level leadership practices aimed at sustaining innovation.

At the policy level, the study underscores that educational reform cannot be sustained through curriculum documents alone. The IFLC's partial implementation exposes the risks of policy detachment from classroom realities and highlights the necessity of integrating teacher voice, participation, and sustained support mechanisms into all stages of reform. Consequently, the findings hold value not only for Greece but also for policymakers in other centralized systems seeking to reconcile top-down innovation with bottom-up ownership.

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