

Teachers' beliefs on the complexity to learn the curricular languages in the Basque Country

ABSTRACT

The present research focuses on studying teachers' beliefs about the complexity of learning the curricular languages in the Basque Country, with special focus on Basque, the minority language. The study adopts a mixed-methods research design. For the quantitative data, 1093 participants completed a specifically designed online questionnaire, which was administered to three groups: pre-service (N = 564), in-service (N = 418), and university teachers (N = 111). In the qualitative part of the study, the beliefs of 20 in-service teachers were collected through four focus groups. The results indicate that in-service and university teachers hold favourable beliefs toward learning curricular languages, and consider Basque a difficult language to learn, even more so than English and French. However, the statistical results suggest a significant change in that belief for the pre-service teachers, who perceive Basque easier to learn than English and French. This perception could result in the gradual elimination of the 'difficult language' label given to Basque. Moreover, in-service teachers show concerns about the imbalance between the knowledge of the minority language and the use. In particular, they seek innovative solutions for establishing Basque at the core of multilingual education, so that this minoritized language can take safe steps forward towards normalisation.

Introduction

Earlier this year, a public employee in the Basque Country who failed to reach the level of Basque required for her position was readmitted as the court ruled in her favour by arguing that Basque is the fifth most difficult language to learn. The sentence added that, in some rankings, it is considered the most difficult language in the world (Aperribai, 2022). This controversial piece of news became a topic of conversation on the streets, on TV and social media in the Basque Country, and therefore the following question was raised again: is Basque really a difficult language to learn? Is it actually more complex than other languages? This paper takes sociolinguistic and educational perspectives, aiming to analyse the beliefs surrounding the perceived difficulty of learning Basque as well as to the curricular languages in the Basque Autonomous Community¹ (Henceforth, BAC) and the Foral Community of Navarre² (henceforth, the sum of both territories will be addressed with the term BasqueCountry). Morespecifically, itexploresthe beliefsofthe three maingroups of teachers (pre-, in-service and university teachers), essential agents in the future of multilingualism in

the Basque Country, and reports the statistically significant differences of these three groups toward the perceived complexity of learning the curricular languages.

The topic of teachers' beliefs in multilingual settings has been of growing interest in recent years. From an educational perspective, research on teachers' beliefs is a vital component in the study of multilingual education and language learning, since such beliefs are highly relevant factors in the understanding, adaptation, and teaching of the languages of the school curriculum, having a considerable impact on the pedagogical challenges of teaching and addressing linguistic diversity in the classroom (Vikøy & Haukås, 2021). Although teachers' beliefs about language learning have been explored from different angles (Haukås, 2016; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2019; Lundberg, 2018; Maluch & Kempert, 2017), literature on the beliefs of teachers about the difficulty of the languages in multilingual educational contexts is scarce. The present study attempts to address this gap by exploring what viewpoint teachers hold concerning the curricular languages and the difficulty of learning them. Findings provide valuable data on the perceived complexity of these languages by the target groups both individually and in comparison to one another. This paper considers Basque a core language and gives a preferential role to the in-service teachers, who are key in the understanding of language teaching and learning processes as well as to the exploration of the beliefs and attitudes transmitted in the initial phases of language learning. Therefore, in-service teachers' voices will shed light on the specific beliefs attached to the complex processes of learning the curricular languages in the Basque Country, i.e. Basque, Spanish, English, and French. Specifically, this investigation aims at finding an answer to the following research question:

What is teachers' perceived complexity toward learning the curricular languages (Basque, Spanish, English, and French) in the Basque Country?

2. Beliefs on language complexity: are some languages more difficult to learn than others?

Beliefs are intrinsically complex and extremely difficult to unite in a single definition (Pajares, 1992). Beliefs are ordered systems that function as truths for the individual, serving as action guidelines for teachers, enabling them to decode the context and adapt their teaching performance to the characteristics of the environment (Zheng, 2013). Likewise, these have a decisive relevance in the classroom since they are reflected in the teaching practice both consciously and unconsciously, being present in all the teachers' pedagogical decisions (Borg, 2011). In other words, teachers' beliefs form integrated systems of beliefs intertwined with theories, trends, personal experiences, decisions, and assertions. Such belief systems function as the teachers' theoretical truth to direct their teaching performance, modulate their cognitive functions, order their thinking and thus filter and interpret future experiences (Mohamed, 2006). Investigating teachers' beliefs leads to a more in-depth understanding of language teaching and learning. Such knowledge will improve their effectiveness, personalising teachers' training needs, and adapting their curricular content (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017), because understanding teachers' beliefs allow us to know more about their pedagogical decisions and what happens inside the classroom (Haukås, 2016).

It is a commonly stated idea that some languages are more complex than others, and therefore, more difficult to learn. However, these ideas are often rooted in prejudices and misconceptions. Using Kusters (2003, p. 6) words, we could say that 'complexity is not a simple predicate attributable to language but a relation between two entities: a language and someone who evaluates the language'. In fact, the complexity of a language lies in the learner's previous knowledge, and in this case, their L1. Similarly, Anderson (1998) argues that this relative difficulty relies on the linguistic distance between learners' L1 and the target language. Therefore, the dominant linguistic repertoire or language knowledge does have an effect on the consequent language learning, not only attributable to the linguistic competence but also to the sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. Regarding L1 acquisition in the BAC, only one-third of the students have Basque as the L1 and the vast majority learn the minority language (L2) through immersion programmes (Eustat, 2022). DeKeyser's (2005) study on the elements hardening L2 grammar acquisition explains five main variables interacting with the L2 language learning process: the effect of the L1; the learner's age; the individual cognitive and emotional characteristics; the learning goals and context; and the inner characteristics of the L2.

Besides the generalizability of the term 'complex' being a rather arduous task, the current school of thought understands complexity as the sum of the numerous factors determining this judgment of value towards the language learning process, and regard it a dynamic and evolving variable (Deutscher, 2009) that plays an important role in language learning as this multidimensional construct has a direct impact on the process (Housen et al., 2012). Previous studies have explored whether some languages are more difficult to learn than others, and Korzen's (2021) investigation reports that perceived complexity about learning the L2 or additional languages appears to be fairly common among language learners whose L1 has a considerable linguistic distance between the L1 and the L2 (i.e. Scandinavian students learning Romance languages), and that the typological and structural resemblance between the two languages are decisive factors. Findings from Housen et al. (2016) explain that fluent native speakers do not seem to perceive this complexity as they perceive themselves to have full command of the language and, additionally, a similar phenomenon occurs to L2 speakers of a major or an international language as learners tend to perceive them grammatically easier and less isolated from their L1.

When exploring the topic of beliefs about language learning and complexity, language learners have been the main focus. The topic has been analysed in different contexts, including minority language contexts, and findings show that the difficulty of language learning seems to be especially contextualised. For example, in a study conducted with adolescents in Iceland, Thordardottir (2021a) found that L1 speakers of Icelandic believed their language particularly complex to learn, while this idea was not common among L2 speakers of Icelandic. The author explains that 'L1 speakers see preserving this language as primordial, but on the other hand not sufficiently important to justify making immigrants go through learning a useless language which they also think is unusually hard to learn' (p. 13). Findings in a parallel study conducted in Iceland (Thordardottir, 2021a), which investigates adolescents' language learning outcomes in complex trilingual realities, showed the vulnerability of the Icelandic language when competing with English, particularly in non-Icelandic speaking communities. The researcher emphasises the need to achieve a good

command of Icelandic (it is especially the case of L2 speakers) to ensure the vitality of the language and to provide the same educational, social and professional chances to all.

In this vein, Tawalbeh's (2019) review on the influencing factors affecting minority languages in this matter is explanatory, as the researcher stresses the strong effect of attitudes, identities, ideologies, values, and environmental elements such as institutional support, language recognition, economic factors and community characteristics on the use and perceived difficulty of the language. In a similar line, Diab (2006) investigates university students' beliefs about learning the main foreign languages studied in Lebanon, English, and French, and finds that, out of the three, most students rated Arabic as the most difficult language

to learn, 'a peculiar finding since these students' native language is Arabic' (p.89). The participants view English as an easy or very easy language to learn and French as a difficult one, and considers that it is easier to learn French before learning English, which, due to political and sociocultural elements, seems to be a popular belief in the context of Lebanon.

In the Spanish context, a greater concern is shown about the imbalance between the knowledge and the use of minority languages such as Catalan, Galician or Basque, as students are schooled in bilingual and immersion programmes but the language use in the public domain is still dominated by Spanish (Urla & Ramallo, 2022). In the Basque context, the belief that Basque is a difficult language seems very common (Amorrortu et al., 2009; Moreno Cabrera, 2013; Ortega et al., 2016). A work that deserves special consideration is the one by Amorrortu et al. (2009), in which the authors explore the main prejudices about the Basque language by non-Basque speakers. The main reason for thinking that Basque is a hard language to learn is its difference typologically speaking, when compared to other languages spoken in the area; Basque is a non-Indo-European language unlike Spanish, French, English, or Catalan. Previous research has also found contradictory conclusions, i.e. the study of Ibarraran et al. (2008) reports that local and immigrant students have positive attitudes toward Spanish, but negative toward Basque, whereas, a more recent study (Etxebarrieta et al., 2020) highlights that no statistical differences exist between autochthonous and migrant students. However, findings concerning teachers' beliefs in this study stress that negative attitudes toward the minority language are largely influenced by their families. This paper aims to shed more and new light on the matter, and bridge the gap in knowledge about the views of the Basque educational agents (pre-, in- and university teachers) on the difficulty of learning Basque and the curricular languages for students in the Basque Country, with special attention to in-service teachers, key actors who shape and witness the evolution of these beliefs at initial language learning stages.

3. Multilingualism in the Basque Country

From a historical standpoint, multilingual competence in educational contexts has been defined from a monolingual perspective, setting the native speaker level as the target in all languages of the multilingual speaker (Cenoz & Gorter, 2014; Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2014). Viewing languages as separate entities have led to the application of individualised teaching methodologies for curricular languages, ignoring the linguistic knowledge of the multilingual learner (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022). This phenomenon is not unique to the Basque

Country, since the traditional view of languages has been widespread globally, fuelling the individualised use of languages within the classroom and overlooking the linguistic diversity of schools (Putjata & Koster, 2021). The understanding of multilingualism progressed with The Multilingual Turn (Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2014). In the BAC, the Focus on the Multilingualism approach (Cenoz & Gorter, 2014) has broadened the horizons of educational research. Today, despite the presence of multilingualism in society, methodologies based on language separation are still very present (Gartziarena & Altuna, 2022; Gartziarena & Villabona, 2022; Gorter & Arocena, 2020; Lasagabaster, 2022).

In the Basque Country, as in other European regions, the minority language coexists with the official state language and with the foreign languages aiming for the acquisition of Basque, Spanish, English, and French in education. More specifically, education in the BAC is progressively moving from bilingualism toward multilingualism, which is one of its major educational objectives (Cenoz & Gorter, 2019); however, the situation of a Basquerooted multilingualism is rather complex in Navarre, as governmental language policies have enhanced and reproduced unbalanced societal situations of Basque, Spanish, and English for the last half century (Erdocia, 2018). In the BAC, the mission of the educational system is to achieve a high level in the two official languages and an acceptable level in – at least – English with the option of studying a second foreign language, usually French, in compulsory secondary education (Basque Government, 2019). In both territories, programmes have been implemented to introduce the foreign language at an early age.

As previously stated, this study is conducted in the two territories of the peninsular region of the Basque Country: the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) and the Foral Community of Navarre. Both territories belong to the Spanish state but have different laws and official status regarding the presence and teaching of the minority language. In the BAC, Spanish and Basque have been the official languages since the Statute of Autonomy of 1979 was passed, and in 1982 the Law of Normalization of Basque legally ensured the teaching of this language and its presence in society, being somewhat successful in promoting and revitalising Basque following the Franco dictatorship. In Navarre, however, the legislation of the minority language is more complex. The territory is divided into three regions: the Basque-speaking zone in the north, the mixed zone in the centre, and the non-Basque-speaking zone in the south. Due to the Foral Law 1986/18, Basque's official status is only granted in the Basque-speaking zone and some areas of the mixed zone, while Spanish is official in all three. This situation has a negative effect on the knowledge of the minority language and therefore restricts the presence of the minority language in society. Education in Navarre does not provide access to all students for learning Basque, and creates an intricate linguistic reality that harms the fragile state of the minority language (Erdocia, 2018). Table 1 displays the Primary Education enrolment data by language models in the BAC and Navarre.

With regard to the use of Basque in the streets, the latest report concludes that Basque is still in a vulnerable position, and gives key aspects on its fragile situation (VII Sociolinguistic Survey, 2022). Among the most important, the report concludes that one in every eight persons use Basque, and that there are no significant differences in the last five years. Another finding is related to the heterogenous development of its use from region to region, and overall, the use of Basque has decreased among the strongest Basque communities. However, it is noteworthy to mention that children and youngsters are the two groups with

the most extensive use of Basque, and this fact is connected to the teaching of Basque through immersion programmes in education settings.

Table 1. Primary Education enrolment data by linguistic models in the BAC and Navarre.

Linguistic model	Description of the model	BAC (2021/2022)	Navarre (2019/2020)
The A model	Spanish is the vehicular language, and Basque is taught as a specific subject.	3.1%	14.3%
The B model	Spanish and Basque are vehicular languages and are taught equally.	18.3%	.8%
The D model	Basque is the vehicular language, and Spanish is taught as a specific subject.	77.8%	17.4%
The G model	Spanish is the vehicular language, and Basque is not taught as a specific subject. Available only in Navarra.		66.8%
The X model	Spanish is the vehicular language; Basque is not taught as a specific subject. Available only in the BAC.	0.8%	
Other			0.8%

Source: Eustat (2022) and Nastat (2022).

4. Methodology

This section will provide a detailed description of the methodology used, specifying the main characteristics of the sample, the instruments used, the data collection procedure, and data analysis. With regard to the research question, the main hypothesis for this investigation to meet is that all three groups of teachers (pre-, in- and university teachers) may find Basque a difficult language to learn, based on previous investigations in the Basque Country (Amorrortu et al., 2009; Moreno Cabrera, 2013; Ortega et al., 2016).

4.1. Sample characteristics

This study adopted a mixed approach. Qualitative data were obtained through four focus group discussions, in which five in-service school teachers participated in each. In addition, one focus group was held for each of the four provinces in both territories, collecting data on the beliefs of 20 teachers. In contrast, the quantitative sample data (N = 1093) consisted of the responses to a specifically designed online questionnaire of three types of teachers: pre-service teachers (N = 564), in-service teachers (N = 418), and university teachers (N = 111). This investigation made the decision to choose and gather the beliefs of these three groups as they represent the present, the future, and the main educators in the Basque education. This decision may allow more detailed comparisons between them and a more comprehensive view of the educational reality.

Delving into the main characteristics of the three types of teachers in the sample, Table 2 presents the summary of some of the main characteristics (age, gender, and first language data). The in-service teachers had 18.6 years of teaching experience, and the university teachers had 17.2 years. The pre-service teachers were distributed over five academic years: 21.1% were in the first academic year of the education degree; 35.28% in the second; 22.34%

in the third; 17.2% in the fourth; and the remaining 4.1% were in additional academic years. In this last group, 79.1% were studying for the

Table 2. Teachers data regarding first language, age, and gender.

Teachers	First language				Age (M)	Gender		
	Basque	Spanish	Bas. + Spa.	Other		Female	Male	No binary
Pre-service	36%	44.1%	19.1%	0.6%	21.2	77.1%	21.8%	1.1%
In-service	41.6%	45.5%	12.4%	0.5%	43.3	79.2%	19.9%	1%
University	39.6%	53.2%	7.2%	0%	45.2	66.7%	29.7%	3.6%

Table 3. Data regarding the linguistic model teachers immersed during compulsory education.

Teachers	Model D	Model B	Model A	Model G	Other
Pre-service	88.3%	9.4%	1.4%	0.9%	.1%
In-service	47.8%	8.9%	23.2%	18.4%	1.7%
University	44.1%	6.3%	21.6%	27.9%	0%

Primary Education degree, 19.1% the Early Childhood Education degree, and the remaining 1.8% indicated studying other degrees related to teaching.

Regarding the linguistic model, 84.4% of the teachers were teaching in Model D, 6.2% in Model B, 4.8% in Model A, 2.6% in Model G, and 1.9% taught in other models. Table 3 displays the data for the three groups of teachers concerning the linguistic model in which they were immersed during compulsory education.

4.2. The instruments

This research combined both quantitative and qualitative methods. This approach is common in research of this nature since ‘a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena arises from a researcher’s simultaneous look at the phenomenon from two perspectives’ (Joslin & Müller, 2016, p. 1044). This research is part of a more extensive study analysing teachers’ beliefs about multilingualism and language teaching methodologies. For this research, we selected the items of the section on teachers’ beliefs toward language learning. For the quantitative component of this research, an online questionnaire was used as a data collection tool, which was designed and inspired by previous studies conducted by the researchers of the Donostia Research on Education and Multilingualism (DREAM) research group for an efficient collection of teachers’ beliefs. The structure of the questionnaire was closed questions, and this section had four items measuring teachers’ beliefs about the difficulty of learning the four curricular languages under study: Basque, Spanish, English, and French. The four items were: (1) How hard is to learn Basque for you? (2) How hard is to learn Spanish for you? (3) How hard is to learn English for you?, and (4) How hard is to learn French for you? These items were scored on a Likert scale ranging between 0 (very low difficulty to learn) and 4 (very high). Here participants were asked to rate the difficulty of learning each language, with a low value indicating greater learning difficulty and a high value indicating less difficulty. For the qualitative data, focus group discussions were chosen to ensure additional, complementary information for comparison with the qualitative data. The design of the focus groups was semi-structured and semi-guided to avoid the limitations of the

environment, promote a climate with the least possible tension, and obtain more reliable beliefs.

4.3. Data collection and analysis procedure

Regarding the quantitative data, the four items described above were selected from the questionnaire. The online questionnaire was piloted by five members of the research group and eight volunteer primary school teachers. After making the suggested adjustments, the invitation to participate in the study was sent by e-mail in Basque, Spanish, and English, with the link to the online questionnaire integrated into the message, guaranteeing anonymity and free participation. All participants completed the questionnaire in the 2017/2018 academic year, with the link to the questionnaire being active for two months. During this period, participation was closely monitored, reminders were sent, and any problems related to its completion were resolved. The data were analysed using SPSS (Version 26). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the means between the three groups of teachers. This enabled a more quantitative and detailed comparison of the three groups. Tukey's HSD post-hoc analysis was also conducted for a more comprehensive between-group comparison. Means of the dependent variables were calculated from teacher ratings toward each language, ranging again between 0 and 4. Eta-squared (η^2) and Cohen's d (d) were used to report statistically significant effect sizes.

Concerning the qualitative data, a similar and parallel procedure was adopted with the focus groups to triangulate data measuring values, judgments and beliefs (Cohen et al., 2011); however, this method was only applied with in-service teachers to compare and contrast the quantitative findings with less quantifiable data on the process of learning the curricular languages. Focus groups were useful to triangulate data. Thus, testimonies on the characteristics and specific features of these beliefs on the difficulty of learning these languages in the classroom were gathered.

Four focus groups were held (one in each of the four provinces: Araba, Bisacy, Gipuzkoa, and Navarre) two of which took place before the end of the 2017/2018 academic year in Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia. The other two were held at the beginning of the 2018/2019 academic year Navarra and Alava. Four educational centres, one per province, were invited by e-mail to the focus group and all agreed to participate. The participants were active primary school teachers. The gender of all teachers was balanced. The focus groups were of approximately one hour's duration, were held outside school hours, and when it was most convenient for the centre's teaching staff to avoid any discomfort or teaching adaptation that might make them uncomfortable or harm the research. After transcription of the recordings, the analyses were carried out with Atlas.ti software (8th edition). To ensure anonymity excerpts were coded as in the following example: FGG4. The first two letters refer to the Focus Group, the third one to the province (Gipuzkoa, in this case), and the number given to the identity of these in-service teachers participating. The research project received a favourable report from the ethics committee of the University of the Basque Country, and all research tools, procedures, data collection, and analyses were carried out under its supervision and consent (identification code: M10_2017_143).

5. Results

This section describes the main findings of the questionnaires and the focus group discussions. By calculating mean scores, we show the data on teachers' beliefs regarding the degree of difficulty in learning the four languages of the curriculum: Basque, Spanish, English, and French. ANOVAs were then conducted to determine whether there were significant differences between the three groups under study and report the perceived degree of learning difficulty for each language. Additionally, a selection of excerpts from the focus groups conducted with the in-service teachers will also be presented for deeper analysis.

5.1. Quantitative results on the teachers' beliefs regarding the perceived difficulty of learning the curricular languages

In this section, four comparisons of means were conducted using analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare each group regarding the perceived degree of learning difficulty for each language. From the results obtained in the comparison of means, statistically significant differences were observed between the three groups and the four languages: Basque [$F(2, 1090) = 4.119, p = .019, \eta^2 = .008$], Spanish [$F(2, 1090) = 8.081, p = <.001, \eta^2 = .015$], English [$F(2, 1090) = 3.897, p = .021, \eta^2 = .007$] and French [$F(2, 1090) = 31.037, p = <.001, \eta^2 = .115$]. The results of these analyses are shown in detail in Table 5. The data concerning the means, on the other hand, indicate divergences and common patterns. The quantitative results suggest that, among the four curricular languages, university teachers believe that the minority language is the one with the greatest degree of learning difficulty, considering French and English to be of similar difficulty and easier than Basque, and placing Spanish in a position of no difficulty. Similarly, in-service teachers show similar results to university teachers. However, the trend changes in the case of pre-service teachers since the data show that they consider French to be the most difficult language, followed by English and Basque, placing Spanish in a neutral position.

Groups were compared by applying Tukey's HSD for determining the differences between groups and languages (see Table 4). The objective of this analysis was to check whether statistically significant differences existed between groups of teachers and the curricular languages. The results revealed significant differences between groups in all languages. In the case of Basque, the data show that in-service teachers and pre-service teachers show significant differences with a low effect size ($p = .015, d = 0.18$). For Spanish, the university teachers differed significantly from in-service ($p = .013, d = 0.31$) and pre-service teachers ($p = .000, d = .4$) with a low effect size in both cases. Regarding English, pre-service teachers differed significantly from university teachers with a low effect size ($p = .035, d = .24$). For French, pre-service teachers differed significantly from university ($p = <.001, d = 0.52$) and in-service teachers ($p = <.001, d = 0.45$) with medium and low effect sizes, respectively. These findings can be summarised as follows: French was considered the hardest language for the majority of the teachers, then Basque, English, and Spanish. In a more rigorous examination of the group comparisons, findings in Tables 4 and 5 report similar results for university and in-service teachers: Basque is perceived the most difficult language to learn, then French and English, and finally Spanish. However, what is revealing in Table 4 is the change in that trend among the pre-service teachers. The statistically significant differences between the

Table 4. Tukey's HSD post hoc comparison between the groups and the mean scores on the beliefs regarding the difficulty of learning each language for the three groups of teachers.

Multiple comparisons						
Language	(I) Target group	(J) Target group	Mean difference (I-J)	Std. error	Sig.	Cohen's d
Basque	Pre-service teachers	In-service teachers	0.19*	0.07	.015	0.18
Spanish	In-service teachers	University teachers	0.27*	0.09	.013	0.31
	Pre-service teachers		0.36*	0.09	<.001	0.4
English	University teachers	Pre-service teachers	0.19*	0.08	.035	0.24
French	In-service teachers	Pre-service teachers	0.39*	0.05	<.001	0.45
	University teachers		0.47*	0.09	<.001	0.52

*p > 0.05.

pre-service and the in-service teachers mirror a shift in the perceived difficulty of learning Basque for the future generations of teachers, as they believe learning Basque an easier process. It is reported in Table 5 that pre-service teachers consider French the most difficult language to learn, then English, Basque, and Spanish, being the latter a language with no perceived difficulty.

5.2. Qualitative analysis of the in-service teachers' beliefs regarding the difficulty to learn the curricular languages

In-service teachers were invited to share their beliefs about key aspects that play a crucial role on the perceived complexity to learn the curricular languages (especially Basque), and the challenges the minority language faces. Overall, teachers' beliefs were particularly similar in the BAC and Navarre, sharing many converging points and showing great complementarity. In this regard, we broke the ice by asking the teachers how they understood multilingualism, what inspired them about the coexistence of at least two languages and whether they perceived it as something positive. Extract 1 shows the in-service teachers' beliefs on these issues:

FGN1, 2, and 3: Yes, positive, without any doubt!

FGN4: Not at all; multilingualism is enriching for me.

FGN1: I also believe that multilingualism is secure in our school. The students work in Basque at all stages. Many bring Spanish from home, and with the methodology, we work with, they start communicating in English at an early age. Our students have this relationship with languages. I would say that they understand multilingualism as something natural.

Excerpt 1

In-service teachers explicitly stated that they regarded multilingualism as positive and natural, so it may be inferred that teachers do not consider multilingualism harmful for learning languages. Rather, they described a logical and common order that students share when learning languages at Pre and Primary Education levels. Likewise, teachers understand that their school has achieved the objective since students in the Basque language immersion

model (model D) work with the three curricular languages. Teachers imply students' positive relationship toward languages from early ages. As the conversation continued, teachers' words indicated concern about the use of the minority language, highlighting the obstacles the minority language finds when coexisting with a lingua franca. The teachers are aware of the specific weight of Spanish in Basque society and of the limitations and obstacles to expanding the use of Basque, even if in society the knowledge of Basque is more widespread than ever. This fact may have some impact on the perceived complexity about learning Basque, and teachers' view evoke a desire for learning the curricular languages in a multilingual context but based on an active and breathing minority language. Excerpt 2 may mirror this linguistic concern and evaluate the social initiative taken by Basque citizens to increase the use and presence of Basque in society.

FGA2: The students speak Basque at ease and without difficulty, but the environment leads them to Spanish. Objectively, we have better conditions than in the past, and we have a higher number of students who are familiar with Basque.

Table 5. Descriptive analysis of the beliefs regarding the difficulty of learning each language for the three groups of teachers.

Target group	n	Basque					Spanish					English					French				
		M	SD	F	p	η^2	M	SD	F	p	η^2	M	SD	F	p	η^2	M	SD	F	p	η^2
University teachers	111	1.48	1	4.119	.017	.008	2.01	0.87	8.081	<.000	.015	1.77	0.73	3.897	.021	.007	1.72	0.8	31.037	<.001	.115
In-service teachers	418	1.44	0.89				2.28	0.87				1.67	0.69				1.64	0.76			
Pre-service teachers	564	1.63	1.16				2.37	0.9				1.58	0.81				1.25	0.92			
Total	1093	1.55	0.77				2.30	0.89				1.63	0.76				1.51	0.88			

FGA4: That is true.

FGA2: But this is not reflected in the day-to-day life of families.

FGA1: That's what Euskaraldia³ was created for, wasn't it? To respond to the problem we have with the language and to change our linguistic habits, because the presence of Basque is zero in many environments outside of school.

Excerpt 2

The sociolinguistic conditions of Basque are theoretically better. Levels of knowledge of the languages are higher, but in the case of Basque, this has not been translated into a significant increase in its use. Given this sociolinguistic challenge, a new social event, Euskaraldia, was born to increase the use of Basque, and may be of some help in securing Basque socially in the construction of multilingualism in the Basque Country. This fact may also be related to the hampering belief that Basque is a language of some difficulty to learn. Indeed, FGA2's analysis about the status of the minority language may be critical to comprehend the limitations of current education system and the need of further elements and agents to break with past ideas adhered to Basque and bolster its use. With regard to the obstacles Basque is entangled, socially, the language has been labelled a 'difficult language' multiple times. Teachers were specifically asked about their beliefs on the difficulty of language use and learning, and they automatically and unconsciously alluded to this problem with Basque. Excerpt 3 shows the teachers' reflections.

FGA6: I have heard hundreds of times among adults, including the last time: 'Basque is a difficult language compared to Spanish.' Adults are the ones who make these value judgments. Students do not do that. They learn it from the time they are small. The reality is very different, but society has this maxim: 'Basque is a difficult language to learn.'

Excerpt 3

As the teachers testify, there is this burden of the language for adult society, but this is not the case for students since they learn it naturally from the early years of schooling. This belief is strong and deeply rooted in Basque adult society, and young learners appear to receive the belief that Basque is a hard language to learn, although data shows there might be a gradual shift. When teachers in other focus groups were directly asked whether, as society says, they believed Basque was an intrinsically difficult language to learn, almost all responded as follows (see Excerpt 4):

FGN4: I don't agree. All languages have their characteristics, and it depends a lot on your starting point and what facility you have.

FGN2: I don't agree either. For me, it's a question of motivation, what do you need the language for. That's all there is to it.

FGN1: For me, there are two main factors: on the one hand, motivation, and on the other hand, the possibility of using the language. It is not the same to learn Basque in Castejón⁴ or Azpeitia.⁵ Although motivation is necessary, the environment is decisive for practicing the language; it influences the difficulty.

Teachers are opposed to the idea that some languages are intrinsically more difficult to learn than others. They relate this circumstance to other factors, such as, the learners' L1, ability to learn new languages, motivation to learn and use the language and the chances to use the language. Teachers also valued language learners' starting point, and also alluded to the linguistic repertoire when referring to 'your starting point' and to the quantity and quality of the input the learners' have when FGN4 commented on 'what facility you have'. In fact, teachers seem to believe that the motivation to learn the language and the context providing opportunities for using it are key factors in learning languages, and have a strong effect on the perceived difficulty to learn any of them.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This research has explored teachers' beliefs about the perceived difficulty of learning the four curricular languages in the Basque context with a particular focus on the minority language. An analysis of variance was used to compare these languages and the groups of teachers, and to obtain the measurement and numerical assessment provided by quantitative analysis. Likewise, the data obtained from the focus groups have provided a deeper and more extensive understanding of the teachers' beliefs. In general, we can conclude that Basque teachers have positive beliefs toward Basque-rooted multilingual education, as they consider it an enriching condition and a natural and valuable trait, if the knowledge and the use of the minority language is secured. These findings are also compatible with the framework of Cenoz and Gorter (2019), in which they propose that multilingual views promote positive attitudes and actions that go beyond bilingualism to increase the recognition and status of the minority language.

The quantitative results of this study point to disparate beliefs related to language learning. Among the four languages under study, only Spanish is perceived by students to have no difficulty when learning it. Moreover, the quantitative data show that future generations of teachers consider it even increasingly easier. This finding may be related to the reality of minority languages explained by Urla and Ramallo (2022) in the Spanish context, where an imbalance exists between knowledge and use of the minority language. This finding can also be related to the hegemony of Spanish in such communities, in which all inhabitants master the lingua franca, and could have normalised and naturalised learning Spanish. A possible explanation for this can be somewhat related to Housen et al.'s (2016) explanation that native speakers of Spanish and even L1 Basque speakers can perceive the strong lingua franca with very reduced complexity, and therefore leave no room for any myth around Spanish being a difficult language to learn.

The data suggest that English and French are languages of considerable difficulty, particularly for in-service and university teachers. At the same time, they consider Basque to be a language of even greater difficulty. The reason for this is not clear, however this finding might be related to the complex, dynamic and multidimensional elements (Deutscher, 2009; Housen et al., 2012) adhered to the fact of learning Basque. Some of the most relevant explanations for this result can be linked to Anderson's (1998) contribution on the influence

of the linguistic distance between Spanish and Basque, and DeKeyser's (2005) overview on the main elements making the L2 language learning process more difficult, these being the learning goals, context and the effect of the L1, of great significance for Basque.

Similarly, this study also shows the negative beliefs of teachers of the BAC and Navarre adhered to the French language. The data on pre-service teachers is worrying since the results indicate a greater gap between current teachers and future generations since both groups of teachers consider it increasingly difficult. This fact could be due to the poor presence of French in the peninsular Basque society and that it is mostly learnt (if so) as an optional second foreign language. This fact may lead society and, hence, future generations of teachers to considering it an increasingly alien and distant language in everyday life, so that it has gradually become less integrated into their multilingual reality, and this prejudice toward French may be becoming bigger due to the even greater distance between the language itself and the pre-service teachers who evaluate the language (Kusters, 2003). Parallely, these results can also be attributed to various factors, such as identities, values and the environmental elements (Tawalbeh, 2019) of societies in the BAC and Navarre, that have a hampering effect on the perceived difficulty of French.

The data from pre-service teachers shows that Basque continues to be perceived as a complex language to learn. In accordance with the present findings, previous studies have demonstrated the belief that Basque is a language of some difficulty to learn by Basque society (Amorrortu et al., 2009; Moreno Cabrera, 2013; Ortega et al., 2016). There are several possible explanations for this result. One of these could be related to the aforementioned Spanish linguistic predominance (Urla & Ramallo, 2022). Another possible explanation for this could be the main prejudices about learning the Basque language, commonly considered difficult by non-native speakers (Amorrortu et al., 2009). From an international scope, it can be seen that this phenomenon is not exclusive to the Basque Country. In the context of Lebanon, the study of Diab (2006) reports that university students' studying foreign languages find learning Arabic harder than French and English, an interesting finding as these students' L1 is Arabic. In Iceland, Thordardottir (2021b) reports that L1 speakers of Icelandic consider this language particularly difficult to learn, whereas L2 speakers do not. A parallel investigation in Iceland extends these findings and reports about the vulnerability of Icelandic to keep this language alive in this complex trilingual reality (Thordardottir, 2021a). The findings of the present paper and of previous investigations in the field provide further support to the idea of the complexity and fragility of languages in such contexts, and reinforces the importance of detecting and providing a secure ground to the elements that make possible knowledge and use of languages. These findings may partly be explained by Korzen's (2021) contribution describing that such perceptions on Basque being a hard language to learn are broadly common among students whose L1 is typologically distant from the L2, as in the case of Danish students learning Italian.

However, regarding pre-service teachers' findings, there also appears to be a significant changing trend, as future generations of teachers consider Basque to be a substantially easier language than English and French. This significant step forward from preservice teachers toward considering Basque a less difficult language to learn can be translated into making progress toward the normalisation of the minority language, as the prejudices seem to

reduce as its knowledge spreads. Interestingly, when inservice teachers are asked about this issue, they admit that society and families believe that Basque is a difficult language but do not share this belief. Instead, they argue that all languages have characteristics and realities that affect their learning, such as linguistic repertoire, motivation, or the possibilities of using the language. Moreover, the existing literature supports the idea that bilinguals have advantageous abilities and strategies for learning additional languages and that immersion in a minority language promotes the development of multilingual awareness (Cenoz & Gorter, 2019). Therefore, future research should focus on finding new strategies that exploit the capabilities of multilingual learners while promoting multilingualism. In this regard, Cenoz and Gorter (2017) propose that the translanguaging approach could be fruitful in multilingual contexts with a minoritized language if the following principles are respected: (1) creating breathing spaces for the minoritized language; (2) creating the need to use the minoritized language for essential communicative purposes; (3) developing learners' metalinguistic awareness; (4) developing their multilingual capacity; and (5) nurturing a link between pedagogical and spontaneous translanguaging that benefits the minoritized language. Recent research in this field has shown that teachers' beliefs can be successfully adjusted toward less rigid positions regarding the traditional separation of languages, the combination of languages in the same class, and the materialisation of these updated beliefs in multilingual methodological proposals (Gorter & Arocena, 2020).

The teachers make it clear that students acquire Basque, English, and Spanish at an early age, making them multilingual speakers who acquire the languages naturally. Nevertheless, teachers are unable to hide their concerns about the use of Basque. Today, families and young people are more literate in Basque than ever before, but its use is very limited due to the impact of majority languages and unfavourable linguistic habits. Teachers embrace multilingual education, if rooted in Basque – its defining feature – and without overlooking the linguistic needs and challenges of the other curricular languages. Future investigations should be conducted to measure the evolution and confirm the direction of these beliefs to create more efficient curricular updates and adjust pedagogical plans on the linguistic needs and demands of future generation of language learners and teachers to follow a secure pathway towards the normalisation of Basque within multilingual education.

Notes

1. It refers to the statue of autonomy given to the region recognizing the Basque nationality within the Spanish State and soil, providing legal framework for various matters, i.e. economy, taxes, linguistic policies and rights.
2. It refers to the statue of autonomy given to the region as in the case of the BAC with its own legal framework, status and competences in several subjects.
3. Euskaraldia is the official name of this social exercise premiered in 2018, planned to take place every two years, and based on two roles identified by wearing a badge: Ahobizi (mouth-ready) and Belarriprest (ear-ready). The event lasted for 11 days and aimed to change linguistic habits.
4. This village is located in the non-Basque speaking zone in Navarre, with almost total absence of Basque.
5. This village is located in the BAC, with an almost entire presence of Basque.

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