



# Exploring Challenges and Perspectives in Teaching and Learning a Third Language in Contemporary Contexts: A Case Study of Malta, a Bilingual Nation

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## **Abstract**

*In Malta, a bilingual nation where Maltese and English are official languages, the endeavor of teaching and learning a third language presents both challenges and distinctive perspectives. The evolving landscape of globalization, increased mobility, and diverse communication platforms has significantly influenced the linguistic dynamics of the country. Factors such as economic growth, cultural influences, demographic shifts, social issues, and technological advancements directly impact the educational framework, particularly language learning.*

*For decades, foreign language (FL) instruction has been integral to both compulsory and post-compulsory education. However, despite concerted efforts, there has been a noticeable decline in the popularity of FL learning, particularly in post-compulsory education, since the turn of the century. This decline has raised concerns about the proficiency levels among youth at the conclusion of compulsory education, as well as the future of language education, drawing attention from stakeholders including employers, educators, and policymakers.*

*Conversely, there has been a contrasting trend among adult learners, with a significant rise in enrollment for FL courses at Lifelong Learning Centers (LLCs) across the Maltese Islands. This trend underscores not only the shifting educational landscape but also the pressing need for a comprehensive review of FL instruction beyond formal compulsory schooling. It highlights the necessity for diverse educational opportunities that better motivate students to engage with language learning.*

**Keywords:** Foreign languages; language teaching and learning; third language acquisition.

## **1. Introduction. The Maltese Linguistic Context**

Malta's linguistic environment is both unique and complex, characterized by the official bilingualism of Maltese and English. Maltese, a Semitic language with significant Italian, Arabic, and English influences, is deeply rooted in the island's history and culture, reflecting its long-standing connections with neighbouring Mediterranean and European regions. English, on the other hand, was introduced during the British colonial period and has since become an integral part of the Maltese identity, serving as a key language in government, education, business, and international communication.

The coexistence of these two languages has created a society where bilingualism is the norm, and most citizens are proficient in both. This bilingual environment not only enriches the cultural fabric of Malta but also provides a strong foundation for the acquisition of additional languages. The linguistic diversity of the island is further enriched by the presence of various immigrant communities and the influence of tourism, which contribute to the presence of languages such as Italian, French, German, and Arabic in everyday life.



Historically, Malta's strategic location in the Mediterranean has made it a crossroads of cultures, and this has fostered a multilingual ethos among its people. The island's connections with Italy, the Arab world, and the broader European continent have traditionally encouraged the learning and use of multiple languages. This multilingual heritage is reflected in the country's educational system, where foreign language (FL) instruction has long been a key component. In fact, all students who begin their secondary education at age 11 are not only given the right but are also required to study at least one foreign language other than English and Maltese. The specific language options may vary depending on the school, but the most common choices often include widely spoken languages such as Spanish, French, German, or Italian.

However, the current educational framework in Malta is facing significant challenges. These challenges arise from the shifting dynamics of society, influenced by rapid changes in technology, economy, and global communication patterns. As Malta integrates more deeply into the global economy, the pressure to prioritize English as the language of international business and communication has increased. At the same time, the role of Maltese as a marker of national identity remains strong, creating a complex linguistic environment where the learning of a third language may not always be seen as necessary or relevant.

This dual linguistic identity, while providing a strong foundation for multilingualism, also poses challenges for the acquisition of additional languages. The need to maintain and develop proficiency in both Maltese and English can sometimes limit the space available for the introduction of a third language within the formal education system. Furthermore, societal changes, such as increased immigration and the growing influence of global media, are introducing new variables that complicate the traditional approach to language education. These factors underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of Malta's linguistic context when considering the future of foreign language education on the island.

## **2. Globalization and the Evolving Educational Landscape**

Globalization has had a profound impact on Malta's linguistic landscape, altering the way languages are perceived, learned, and used. As a small, open economy heavily reliant on international trade, tourism, and foreign investment, Malta has become increasingly interconnected with the global community. This interconnectedness has brought about greater mobility, with more Maltese citizens traveling, working, and studying abroad, and more foreigners coming to Malta for similar purposes. In this regard, as stated in the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025, entitled *Fostering language learning and multilingualism*: "Being able to speak different languages is a condition for studying and working abroad, and fully discover Europe's cultural diversity. It enables learners and teachers to benefit from a genuine European learning space. Valuing and mobilising learners' linguistic backgrounds" [1]. Yves, Renard and Milt (2023) also insist that foreign language competence is regarded as one of the basic skills that all EU citizens need to acquire in order to improve their educational and employment opportunities [2].

The widespread use of digital communication platforms has further accelerated these trends, enabling instant communication across borders and making global media readily accessible. As a result, English, already one of Malta's official languages, has become even more dominant, reinforced by its status as the global lingua franca. This has led to a situation where proficiency in English is often seen as sufficient for both local and international communication, potentially reducing the perceived need to learn additional languages.



The blending of cultures, facilitated by globalization, has also influenced language learning in Malta. Exposure to diverse cultures through media, travel, and social interactions has broadened the horizons of many Maltese, creating an awareness of the value of multilingualism. However, this same exposure can also lead to a preference for learning languages that are perceived as more 'global' or 'useful' in a globalized world, such as Spanish or Mandarin, rather than traditional European languages like Italian or French, which have historically been more popular in Malta.

In addition to these global trends, local factors such as economic growth and demographic shifts have reshaped the linguistic landscape. Malta's economy has experienced significant growth in recent years, driven by sectors such as financial services, information technology, and gaming. These industries often prioritize English, further reinforcing its dominance. Moreover, the demographic composition of the island is changing, with an increasing number of immigrants bringing new languages and cultural practices into the Maltese society.

These shifts have important implications for language education in Malta. The traditional emphasis on European languages, rooted in Malta's historical and cultural connections, may no longer align with the needs and aspirations of the younger generations, who are more globally oriented. Additionally, the crowded curriculum in schools, where students must balance the demands of learning Maltese and English with other subjects, leaves limited room for the teaching and learning of a third language.

As a result, the value and relevance of foreign language skills in Malta are being re-evaluated. While there is still recognition of the importance of multilingualism, particularly in the context of the European Union and international diplomacy, the realities of globalization mean that language education needs to adapt to new demands. This may involve rethinking the languages that are taught, the methods used for instruction, and the overall goals of language education in a rapidly changing world.

### **3. Decline in Foreign Language Learning: Analysing the Trends.**

FL teaching and learning has long been a cornerstone of Malta's educational system, with Italian and French being the most commonly taught languages, followed by German and Spanish, reflecting the nation's historical ties to Europe and its strategic position in the Mediterranean. Over the years, various initiatives have been implemented at Secondary level to make foreign language instruction more relevant to students' needs, aiming to reverse the declining trend observed in the past decade. This decline is evidenced by the decreasing number of students taking FL exams at the end of compulsory schooling, which has subsequently led to fewer students pursuing FLs at the post-compulsory level. This trend indicates a waning interest in FL learning among students in Malta, with many completing their secondary education without earning any certification in a FL (Pace, 2015) [3]. Despite efforts to address this issue, the overall popularity of FL learning in post-compulsory education has continued to decline since the early 2000s. Several interconnected factors contribute to this trend, raising concerns among educators, policymakers, and employers about the future of language proficiency in the country. Such a trend is also in stark contrast to the various EU and Council of Europe documents. For example, in its resolution of 11 November 2021 entitled 'The European Education Area: a shared holistic approach', the European Parliament underlined the importance of learning foreign languages. It underscored the need for Member States to take action to support the development of linguistic competency at all levels, especially in primary and secondary education, to embrace the Council of Europe's goal of 'plurilingualism' and to achieve the benchmark of all pupils having a sufficient knowledge of at least two other official languages of the EU at the end of their lower secondary education at the latest.

Notwithstanding this, Malta has witnessed an overall decline in the number of learners of foreign languages, especially at post-secondary level, as shown in Table 1.



**Table 1.** Students studying a foreign language at Post Compulsory level in Malta and Gozo.

Students studying a foreign language at Post Compulsory level (1st Year) in Malta & Gozo		
	“Advanced” level	“Intermediate” level
Scholastic Year 2017-18	163	324
Scholastic Year 2018-19	129	259
Scholastic Year 2019-20	145	284
Scholastic Year 2020-21	113	135
Scholastic Year 2021-22	101	230
Scholastic Year 2022-23	80	218
Scholastic Year 2023-24	87	281

One of the primary factors driving this decline is a decrease in student motivation to learn foreign languages. In a rapidly globalizing world, where English dominates as the primary language of international communication and commerce, students may perceive less need to acquire additional languages. The strong emphasis on English, both within Malta and globally, has led many young people to view proficiency in English as sufficient for their academic and professional aspirations. This shift in perception has diminished the perceived relevance of learning other languages, particularly those that do not offer immediate or obvious benefits in the job market.

Moreover, the crowded curriculum in Maltese schools has exacerbated this decline. As educational demands increase, with students required to achieve proficiency in both Maltese and English, along with core subjects like mathematics and science, the time and resources available for FL learning have been squeezed. In this competitive academic environment, foreign languages often compete with other subjects for attention, and they may be deprioritized by students who are focused on subjects deemed more critical for their future careers. The pressure to perform well in standardized tests and exams further marginalizes FL education, as students and teachers may focus on subjects with direct implications for academic progression and university entrance.

In addition to these structural issues, the current teaching methodologies and curriculum designs may also be contributing to the waning interest in FL learning. Traditional approaches to language instruction, which often emphasize grammar and writing skills, may not be engaging enough for today’s students, who are accustomed to more interactive and dynamic forms of learning. Furthermore, despite the abundance of modern technology in classrooms, foreign language instruction is hindered by two critical issues: insufficient teacher training in cutting-edge teaching methods and inadequate funding for up-to-date language learning software and resources. These shortcomings often result in lessons that feel obsolete and disconnected from students’ lives, ultimately diminishing their motivation and engagement in language learning. This contrast between the availability of technology and the lack of support to use it effectively highlights the urgent need to address these challenges to improve language education.

The decline in FL learning raises important questions about the adequacy of the current educational framework in meeting the evolving needs of Maltese students. If this trend continues, there could be long-term implications for Malta’s multilingual heritage and the ability of its citizens to engage effectively in a multilingual global environment. Addressing this issue will require a comprehensive



review of how languages are taught, with a focus on making FL learning more relevant, engaging, and aligned with the aspirations of today's youth.

#### 4. The Rise of Lifelong Learning Centres: A Contrasting Trend

While the interest in FL learning has declined among younger students in formal education settings, a contrasting trend has emerged among adults. There has been a significant increase in the enrollment of adult learners in foreign language courses offered at Lifelong Learning Centres (LLCs) across Malta. This rise in adult engagement with language learning presents a compelling counter-narrative to the decline observed in post compulsory education and highlights the diverse needs and motivations of different learner groups as can be seen in Table 2.

The growing popularity of FL courses among adults suggests that many individuals, particularly those who enter the world of work, recognize the value of language skills for personal and professional development. For adults, learning a new language may serve various purposes, such as enhancing career prospects, enabling travel, or simply as a means of personal enrichment. Unlike younger students, whose language learning is often driven by curriculum requirements, adult learners tend to be more intrinsically motivated. They may choose to study a language because they see a clear and immediate benefit, whether it be for job advancement, communication in a multicultural work environment, or even reconnecting with their cultural roots.

The appeal of FL courses at LLCs can also be attributed to the flexible and learner-centered approaches these institutions often adopt. Unlike traditional school settings, where students are required to follow a standardized curriculum, LLCs typically offer a variety of courses tailored to different levels, interests, and practical needs. This flexibility allows adult learners to pursue language studies at their own pace and according to their own goals, making the learning experience more relevant and personalized.

**Table 2.** Adults studying a foreign language at the Lifelong Learning Centres in Malta and Gozo.

	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
<b>Arabic</b>	37	54	59	60
<b>Chinese</b>	30	9	27	36
<b>English</b>	1542	448	817	988
<b>French</b>	199	136	256	205
<b>German</b>	225	130	181	186
<b>Greek</b>	35	17	31	43
<b>Italian</b>	573	223	359	392
<b>Japanese</b>	60	37	44	62
<b>Russian</b>	40	21	39	32
<b>Spanish</b>	637	228	378	461



<b>Turkish</b>	37	24	52	45
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b><u>3415</u></b>	<b><u>1327</u></b>	<b><u>2243</u></b>	<b><u>2510</u></b>
<b>Maltese FL</b>	834	643	514	439

The rise in adult enrolment in FL courses at LLCs also reflects broader social and economic trends. As the global job market becomes increasingly competitive, individuals may seek to upskill or reskill, with language learning being a key component of this process. The demand for language skills in sectors such as tourism, customer service, and international business is likely driving many adults to pursue language courses that can improve their employability or enable them to shift careers.

This contrasting trend between declining FL interest among older students and increasing engagement among adults underscores the need for a more nuanced approach to language education in Malta. It suggests that different age groups and life stages require different strategies and that the formal education system might benefit from adopting some of the successful practices used in LLCs. By understanding the factors that motivate adult learners and the methodologies that resonate with them, educators and policymakers can explore ways to make FL learning more appealing and effective for all age groups. This could involve integrating more flexible, technology-driven, and contextually relevant approaches into the school curriculum, thereby creating a more continuous and lifelong learning pathway for language acquisition in Malta.

### **5. Bridging the Gap: Toward a Comprehensive Language Learning Strategy**

The divergent trends in FL learning between younger students in formal education and adult learners at LLCs highlight the urgent need for a more cohesive and comprehensive language education strategy in Malta. These contrasting patterns suggest that while formal education systems may be struggling to engage students in language learning, there is still a strong interest in acquiring language skills among adults, indicating a gap that needs to be addressed. To bridge this gap, it is essential to develop more flexible and diverse educational opportunities that cater to learners at different stages of life, ensuring that language education remains relevant, accessible, and responsive to the needs of all learners.

One key approach to addressing this challenge is fostering closer collaboration between schools, universities, and LLCs. Such collaborations are crucial in creating a seamless continuum of language learning that extends beyond compulsory education and could involve joint initiatives, such as shared resources, cross-institutional teacher training, and coordinated language learning pathways that allow students to transition smoothly from formal education to lifelong learning. For example, schools and universities could work together to develop FL programs that build on the foundation established in compulsory education, while LLCs could offer advanced courses or specialized language training that align with the needs of adult learners and the job market. By creating a more integrated and flexible language education system, Malta can ensure that language learning is not just a phase of schooling, but a continuous process that evolves with the learner's needs and aspirations.

To make language education more accessible and inclusive, it is also important to consider the diverse needs and motivations of different learner groups. For younger students, this might mean incorporating more technology-driven and interactive methods of language instruction that resonate with their digital-native generation. For adults, this could involve offering more flexible learning options, such as evening classes, online courses, or workplace-based language training, that fit around their professional and personal commitments. By tailoring language education to the specific



needs of each learner group, Malta can create a more dynamic and responsive system that supports lifelong language learning.

## **6. Policy Implications and Recommendations**

Given the challenges identified in the current state of language education in Malta, it is clear that a comprehensive review of existing policies is necessary. To address the decline in FL learning among younger students and capitalize on the rising interest among adults, Malta needs to reform its language education policies to make language learning more engaging, relevant, and aligned with the future careers of students.

Reforming the curriculum is a crucial first step. This could involve introducing more modern, contextually relevant, and interactive language courses that connect directly to students' interests and career aspirations. For example, offering courses that focus on business language skills, digital communication, or intercultural competence could make language learning more appealing to students who see these skills as directly beneficial to their future careers. Additionally, integrating innovative teaching methodologies, technology-enhanced learning and gamification, can make language instruction more engaging and effective, catering to the diverse learning styles of students.

Professional development for educators is another critical area that requires attention. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping students' attitudes toward language learning, and equipping them with the latest pedagogical tools and techniques is essential for improving the overall quality of language instruction. Offering regular training and professional development opportunities focused on innovative language teaching methods can help educators stay current with best practices and more effectively engage their students in language learning.

Promoting the benefits of multilingualism among students, parents, and employers is also vital. In a globalized job market, language skills are increasingly valuable, not just for communication but also for cultural understanding and international business. Educational campaigns that highlight the advantages of being multilingual, such as increased employability, enhanced cognitive abilities, and greater cultural awareness, can help shift perceptions and encourage more students to pursue language learning.

Finally, increased collaboration among educational institutions, policymakers, and employers is necessary to align language education with Malta's social and economic goals. By working together, these stakeholders can ensure that language education is designed to meet the evolving needs of Malta's economy and society. This might involve establishing industry-specific language training programs, creating incentives for businesses to support language learning, or developing national language proficiency standards that align with international benchmarks. Through these collaborative efforts, Malta can create a language education system that is not only responsive to the current challenges but also proactive in preparing its citizens for the demands of an increasingly interconnected world.

## **7. Conclusion: Embracing Malta's Multilingual Heritage**

The decline in FL learning within Malta's formal education settings presents a complex challenge that threatens to erode a key aspect of the nation's cultural and educational identity. However, the simultaneous rise in language learning among adults at LLCs offers a beacon of hope and underscores a continued appreciation of the value of multilingualism in the country. Malta's unique position as a bilingual nation, with Maltese and English deeply embedded in its societal fabric, provides a strong foundation upon which to build a more inclusive and effective language education system. By critically examining and addressing the factors that have contributed to these divergent



trends, Malta has the opportunity to leverage its rich linguistic heritage and global connections to create a language education framework that is both robust and forward-looking.

This paper calls for a multifaceted approach that includes policy reforms, the integration of innovative teaching methodologies, and the promotion of lifelong language learning as an essential component of Malta's educational landscape. By doing so, Malta can ensure that its citizens are not only proficient in Maltese and English but also equipped with the language skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and multicultural world. Embracing and enhancing Malta's multilingual heritage is not just about preserving cultural identity; it is also about preparing the nation for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

## **8. Future Directions for Research**

To ensure that foreign language education in Malta continues to meet the evolving needs of its society, this paper outlines several key areas for future research. First, there is a need to investigate the motivational factors that drive language learning across different age groups. Understanding what inspires younger (and older) students versus adult learners to pursue language studies could provide valuable insights into how educational strategies can be tailored to better engage each demographic. Such research could help educators and policymakers design more targeted and effective language programs that address the specific needs and motivations of learners at different stages of life.

Another important area for exploration is the impact of innovative teaching methods on foreign language acquisition across various educational contexts. As technology continues to reshape the educational landscape, it is crucial to assess how methods such as gamification and technology-enhanced learning influence student engagement and language proficiency. Identifying best practices in these areas could lead to the widespread adoption of more effective and engaging language teaching methodologies in Malta's schools and LLCs.

The role of digital platforms and online resources in supporting lifelong language learning is also a promising avenue for research. With the growing importance of digital literacy in education, examining how these tools can be leveraged to make language learning more accessible, flexible, and personalized for learners of all ages is essential. This could involve studying the effectiveness of language learning apps, online courses, and virtual exchange programs in enhancing language skills outside of traditional classroom settings.

Finally, assessing the long-term outcomes of foreign language education reforms on language proficiency and employability in Malta would be crucial in ensuring that these initiatives achieve their intended goals. Longitudinal studies that track the progress of students and adult learners over time could provide valuable data on the effectiveness of different teaching approaches, policy changes, and educational interventions. By analysing these outcomes, researchers and policymakers can make informed decisions about how to further refine and improve language education in Malta, ensuring that it continues to meet the needs of both individuals and society as a whole.

In conclusion, embracing Malta's multilingual heritage through a strategic, research-informed approach to language education can help the nation navigate the challenges of declining FL interest among youth while capitalizing on the growing enthusiasm for lifelong learning. By fostering a culture that values and promotes multilingualism, Malta can position itself as a leader in language education and prepare its citizens for success in a globalized world.

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