



# Unveiling Post-Colonial Perspectives: Primary Educators' Insights on Teaching English in Multilingual Malta

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## Abstract

*Situated in the Mediterranean, the island of Malta boasts a rich history marked by foreign occupation and British colonisation. This colonial legacy has played a significant role in shaping both its bilingual identity and education system. Recent demographic changes have brought about rapid and unprecedented shifts, where one fifth of Malta's population and over a quarter of Malta's workforce are currently made up of foreign nationals. This is transforming the country's linguistic landscape from bilingual to multilingual. Schools reflect the rich tapestry of society where our classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of language and culture. This paper briefly examines the history of English language teaching in Malta and subsequently explores how Maltese primary school educators perceive and approach the teaching of English within bilingual and multilingual settings. It also investigates teachers' perceptions of the current level of English proficiency among students, examining proposed solutions for enhancing students' language competence. Moreover, it delves into how Maltese teachers naturally employ cross-linguistic strategies in their English language lessons to accommodate the needs of all students in their classrooms. Additionally, this paper examines the evolving pedagogies necessitated by Malta's shift from bilingualism to multilingualism, providing guidelines aiming to promote inclusion and social justice for every student. This study offers valuable perspectives into the challenges encountered by educators and children on the island, which resonate on a global scale. It also offers insights into English language teaching in bilingual and multilingual societies, encompassing both English as a second language and English as a foreign language contexts.*

**Keywords:** *Bilingualism, codeswitching, English language teaching, multilingualism, post-colonialism, translanguaging.*

## 1. Introduction

Postcolonial theory posits that the effects of colonialism can persist in a country long after it achieves political independence. Although sovereignty marks a distinct political separation from the past, it is not so straightforward to disentangle the past from the present <sup>[1]</sup>. Colonialism has significantly influenced linguistic and discursive practices worldwide. By imposing languages on specific geographical regions, colonial rulers exercised control over local populations, forming "communities of speakers" while simultaneously creating "sociolinguistic hierarchies within and between languages" <sup>[2:27]</sup>. These practices have played a crucial role in assigning varying levels of prestige to languages and in generating linguistic forms that arose from colonialism <sup>[3]</sup>. Situated in the Mediterranean, the small island of Malta boasts a rich history marked by foreign occupation and British colonisation. Colonial legacy has in fact played a significant role in shaping both Malta's bilingual identity and education system. However, as a result of globalisation, Malta is currently experiencing rapid and unprecedented demographic shifts, hence transforming the country's linguistic landscape from bilingual to multilingual. This shift can also be observed in our schools, where linguistic and cultural diversity are becoming increasingly prevalent <sup>[4]</sup>.

This paper forms part of a larger, doctoral study focusing on bilingual teachers' identities, and how their linguistic backgrounds influence their views and pedagogical practices <sup>[5]</sup>. This study offers a unique lens into the teaching of English in bilingual and multilingual societies, providing a concise overview of the evolution of English language teaching in Malta, focusing on the perspectives and methodologies of Maltese primary school educators. It investigates teachers' views on students' current English proficiency levels and explores proposed strategies to enhance language competence. Furthermore, it highlights how Maltese educators naturally incorporate cross-linguistic practices in their English lessons to meet the diverse needs of their students. Finally, this paper addresses the



pedagogical shifts required by Malta's transition from bilingualism to multilingualism, offering guidelines aimed at fostering inclusion and social justice for all learners.

## 2. Malta's Language History

The island of Malta is situated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, and the development of the Maltese language was mainly the result of this very strategic position. The national language of Malta is Maltese, which has its roots in a dialect of Arabic, evolving over time by incorporating elements from other languages. Maltese is the dominant language of most Maltese nationals, however the large majority of Maltese people are considered to be bilingual, notwithstanding the fact that mastery of the language/s varies considerably among individuals. Bilingualism is a situation which is a quintessential characteristic of Malta. Arabic was introduced into Malta in ca. 870 AD and this led to a sustained concurrent existence of at least two languages, which included Arabic, Latin, Italian (Sicilian), French, English, and Maltese. The prevalence of English in Malta is attributed to the island's colonial past from 1914 – 1964, where English was employed as a means of colonisation. The language situation in postcolonial small countries has been described as follows: “so deep, thorough and lengthy was the colonial experience that, even after securing political independence, English lingers as one of, or the only, official language. Local languages must compete for status and prestige with English, jostle for use amongst local inhabitants, compete for space in the printed form, on the local radio and television airways, and on internet blogs and websites”<sup>[6:26]</sup>. Prior to the British arrival, Italian served as the official language in Malta and was commonly utilised for administrative functions. However, the British established English as a co-official language alongside Italian. The Maltese vernacular was at the time perceived to be the language spoken by the lower class and labelled as ‘*il-lingwa tal- kċina*’ “the language of the kitchen”. After a prolonged dispute known as the ‘Language Question’, English eventually supplanted Italian as Malta's official language. The conflict between the two languages proved to be fortuitous for Malta, since it culminated in the recognition of Maltese as an official language alongside English in 1934<sup>[7]</sup>. The colonisers’ language policies had enduring impacts on Maltese culture, creating an intricate relationship between English and Maltese that shaped national identity, literature, and social dynamics. Malta's linguistic landscape is characterised by a unique interplay between languages, with codeswitching deeply embedded in its cultural fabric. The implications of these policies continue to be felt in modern Malta, where both languages coexist as official languages, and enrich the island's diverse cultural inheritance. The Italian language is also widely used in Malta, with some individuals considering it to be a third language. This results from the countries’ close proximity, together with Italian media exposure, however its widespread use is diminishing due to evolving television consumption patterns<sup>[8]</sup>.

### 2.1 Bilingualism and Language Identity

The local linguistic context values Maltese as a recognition of local identity, while English serves as a means of survival in a globalised society, essential for maintaining a second world language within a small island community<sup>[9]</sup>. However, beliefs and values regarding language use vary among Maltese bilinguals; with some individuals prioritising Maltese, while others favour English. The tendency to prioritise English is often associated with elitism, whereas preference for Maltese is rooted in patriotism and language purism<sup>[10]</sup>. It is interesting to note that “already from the very beginning of education ... boys and girls are exposed to the politics of language, where there is an implicit hierarchy of language prestige, encouraged and inculcated by parents, school teachers and administrators, and fellow children”<sup>[6:27]</sup>. Given Malta's small size, it is peculiar that language has become an inherent source of division, likely stemming from historical, social, and cultural factors<sup>[10]</sup>. The linguistic situation in Malta holds a level of prejudice as English-speaking Maltese nationals are often perceived as “‘*tal-pepe*’ (snobs) or ‘*qżież*’ (show-offs)”, and attitudes towards individuals who are not proficient in the language are sometimes regarded with a level of disdain, being considered to be uneducated or pertaining to a low socioeconomic group<sup>[8:186]</sup>. This implied language divide is nonetheless dissipating as a result of demographic changes on the island where multilingualism is becoming more prevalent. Additionally, there appears to be a shift in the way the English language is viewed, as “it is now seen less as a product of a colonial past ... and more as a ‘window to the world’ ”<sup>[11:7]</sup>.

### 2.2 Dynamic Language Practices

The vast majority of Maltese individuals use both languages interchangeably, organically employing fluid language practices in their daily communication, adapting according to context, audience, topic,



and task. This linguistic behaviour is evident across various domains, including media, families, and schools. Although Maltese is the predominant language in most households, codeswitching is ubiquitous, and English influence is noticeable even in young children's communication, especially in numerical vocabulary. English is the preferred medium for written communication, with a higher readership of English-language newspapers and textbooks.

### **2.3 From Bilingualism to Multilingualism**

Malta's bilingual dynamic is rapidly evolving into a multilingual one due to significant demographic changes on the island. Since 2002, Malta has been regarded as a symbolic gateway to Europe, resulting in an increase of asylum seekers and refugees in search of a prosperous life. Additionally, Malta joined the EU in 2004, which increased transnational migration. Malta's demographic landscape has also been impacted by the government's recent initiative to import foreign labour to sustain economic growth. All these factors put together, currently see one fifth of the island's population, and over one fourth of its workforce made up of non-Maltese nationals, making Malta the most densely populated country in the EU. Italians and British residents respectively constitute the largest portion of migrants in Malta. Other prevalent foreign communities include those from India, the Philippines, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Libya <sup>[12]</sup>. At the same time, the number of Maltese births has been steadily declining, as Malta currently holds the lowest fertility rate in Europe, and among the lowest in the world <sup>[13]</sup>. This situation is also reflected in Maltese classrooms, which are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of language and culture.

## **3. Malta's Educational System**

Malta's educational system is largely a product of its colonial heritage, hence its foundations are built on the British educational system. The choice of language for instruction, the design of educational curricula, and the selection of textbooks have been significantly influenced by colonial practices and their enduring effects in the post-colonial era <sup>[6]</sup>. Both Maltese and English are mediums of instruction, whilst also being subjects in their own right, and educators frequently engage in codeswitching during lessons. Both languages are taught in tandem. Written English remains the predominant language in Maltese educational institutions, with comparatively fewer resources available in Maltese. Bilingual and multilingual development in schools is supported by language policies aimed at encouraging young learners to cultivate positive attitudes towards Maltese, English, and other languages.

### **3.1 The Teaching of English in Malta**

The teaching of English in Maltese primary schools is founded in the concept of a bilingual education system, which places importance on the country's two official languages. English is formally introduced in the first year of primary education. The national curriculum encourages primary school teachers to use the English language for subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science, and Technology, while acknowledging the benefits of codeswitching when necessary to ensure comprehension, with a minimum of 90 minutes per day dedicated to language and reading instruction. The teaching of English as a second (ESL) or foreign/additional language (EFL/EAL) is becoming increasingly essential in Maltese primary schools due to the influx of non-Maltese students. However, not all schools are offering these classes, due to a number of factors, among which are a lack of human resources, and complex issues related to inclusivity. There seems to be a current shift to an all-English medium of teaching in Maltese schools, where the predominant use of the English language makes education more accessible to non-Maltese students. The impact of demographic shifts on language use has resulted in 23.4% of Maltese children under the age of 10 growing up speaking in English as their mother tongue <sup>[12]</sup>.

## **4. Methods**

This qualitative study focuses on the views of nine purposively selected Maltese primary school teachers with over ten years of experience. Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed verbatim to avoid bias from translation, selection, or paraphrasing. In bilingual societies, language use during interviews may be culturally embedded, hence meaning may often be lost in translation <sup>[14]</sup>, therefore Maltese meanings and nuances were retained, generally avoiding literal translations. In order to capture the emotional context and non-verbal communication, field notes were also taken throughout the interview process. Member checking was used to crosscheck the data and its interpretation within and across participants. Thematic analysis was chosen to identify key themes and derive meaning from the rich data collected <sup>[15]</sup>. The study was



designed to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, guaranteeing reliable and valid results <sup>[16]</sup>.

## 5. Participants

The participants were chosen to represent different school contexts, language, and schooling backgrounds, which enabled a comparative exploration of patterns linked to family context and educational experiences. The sample included primary school educators with experience in both early and junior years, allowing an inquiry into potential variations in teaching methods and perspectives based on year group taught. The gender distribution (eight females, one male) reflects the imbalance in primary school teaching in the EU. Participants ranged in age from thirties to fifties. They hailed from various localities in Malta, which is pertinent to the study, since despite the small size of Malta, locality usually plays a part in the dominant language of the family. All participants expressed that their families' attitudes towards the two languages played a fundamental role in shaping their communicative skills, language preferences, and perspectives on language usage. Language dominance varied, with three participants using both languages equally and interchangeably, three favouring Maltese, and the rest being dominant in English. Nearly all interviewees prefer to read in the English language as opposed to Maltese and they also opt to use English when emailing, texting, or writing.

## 6. Results

The participants unanimously agreed that they instinctively codeswitch throughout their daily communication, considering it a spontaneous and intuitive trait of being bilingual. They also stated that it is sometimes more convenient to draw from their lexical repertoire in one language rather than the other. Within Malta's postcolonial bilingual context, both Maltese and English have undergone a process of linguistic hybridisation, where each language has been influenced and transformed by the other.

### 6.1 Language Pedagogy during English Language Lessons

The majority of the participants admitted to inherently favouring full immersion practices during language teaching, acknowledging that the way in which they had been taught languages themselves was greatly influential on their pedagogical beliefs. Since all participants were required to have over ten years of teaching experience as part of the recruitment criteria, their initial teacher education programmes were built upon the educational guidelines of time, which advocated for strict language separation. Most interviewees acknowledged that throughout the course of their studies they were explicitly instructed not to mix languages in the classroom, however, they believe that this is becoming increasingly difficult, and they often have to resort to language mixing in the form of codeswitching, translanguaging, translation or repetition to mitigate language barrier challenges. One participant referred to language mixing during English lessons as "detrimental", however, admitted that this has become a requirement, thus consenting to the use of native languages during certain parts of the English language lessons "*such as brainstorming and discussion for example, or for comprehension purposes, or when starting a new topic or the introduction to the lesson .... as long as the final product is in English*".

While the participants agreed that language mixing is natural and instinctive, most experienced an internal conflict, questioning the appropriateness of these practices. Recent local policies have begun to shift guidelines on using plurilingual learning tools, however, entrenched habits are difficult to shift, and teachers may require further professional development to align with contemporary research and effectively harness cross-linguistic practices. School policies are also often an influencing factor on language use in the classroom. Regardless of their schools' language policies and their own predominant languages, all participants reported using different languages in class and employing codeswitching and/or translation practices, albeit to varying degrees, mainly when reinforcing a point, providing instructions, clarifying concepts or directions, emphasising key points, and for effective classroom management. These educators also claimed to be using a variety of visuals, games, and hands-on resources, including digital resources, together with peer-tutoring as pedagogy during English language classes. Participants raised concerns about assessing children in the target language when language mixing is legitimised. In this respect, a distinction must be made between assessing skills in language, to assessing skills in a language <sup>[17]</sup>. Pedagogical language mixing



distinguishes the language of the curriculum in which students are examined and assessed, and the entire language repertoire which students utilise in order to learn and communicate <sup>[18]</sup>.

## **6.2 The Level of English as L2 (Second Language) in Malta**

Paradoxically, although more Maltese children are adopting English as their L1 (first language), and notwithstanding the fact that English is fast becoming the main medium of instruction in schools, the majority of participants voiced their concerns on the declining level of English. The educators believe that this is due to a lack of reading together with an increase in the use of technology, claiming that many young students nowadays spend an unhealthy amount of their free time on social media, gaming, or on YouTube. As one participant put it, *"I think in general the level of English leaves a lot to be desired. It shouldn't be that way, even because of the influx of foreigners we have in Malta, we have to use English more often and yet the level is going down. I think it's due to the Americanisation of everything. Plus reading is practically non-existent."* Another participant shared the same sentiments, stating, *"I think that students' writing and spelling skills are regressing every year. Children do not read anymore, and they are not getting any food for their ideas. They just watch YouTube or go on Facebook or Instagram. Most of their oral skills are Americanised now. Their spelling is atrocious. They cannot express themselves properly, it's 'like' this and 'like' that ... they are not articulate ..."*. In this respect, merging linguistic forms are often enabled by digital and mobile technologies <sup>[19]</sup>, whilst popular culture not only provides young adults with entertainment but also serves as "a means to borrow voices," enabling youths to express "various meanings and intentions" <sup>[20]</sup>. The participants in this study believe that due to the influence of popular culture, a growing number of Maltese children is adopting an Americanised style of speaking and writing English. In the words of one participant, *"maybe due to over-exposure to games, television, etc. there is a lot of American slang influence ... which is affecting both their spoken English, as well as their written English."* This data supports the notion that while both American and British English are legitimate language models, there appears to be a European academic bias favouring the British model <sup>[21]</sup>. The economic and political influence of the United States, along with the significant presence of American media in Malta and globally, underscores the potential impact of American English dialects on European varieties <sup>[22]</sup>. Similarly, there is a growing American influence on the English language, specifically highlighting the media's role in shaping language varieties <sup>[21]</sup>. Nevertheless, standard British English remains prominent in Malta, particularly as a written medium in education. From a sociolinguistic perspective, evolving linguistic patterns are associated with the formation of youth cultures influenced by globalisation. A notable example is the use of American-origin discourse markers such as "like," which are distinctive communicative features among young people <sup>[23]</sup>. One also needs to take the variation of English spoken on the island as a contributing factor to the perceived decline in English proficiency in Malta. The pure, native form of the English language is often tainted by contemporary multilingualism <sup>[24]</sup>, and these variations are commonly misjudged as poor examples of the language <sup>[22]</sup>.

## **7. Implications for Policy and Practice**

The participants all believe that one main concern is the lack of training related to multilingual classrooms. They recommend that initial training and professional development programmes should focus on the current linguistic diversity in Malta's classrooms, offering hands-on, practical solutions for teaching and learning. Additionally, they believe that there is a need for a shift in the way the English language is taught in primary schools. One participant recommended *"more listening comprehensions, more oral component, more exposure to children's literature ... we need to put the fun into learning rather than obsess on examining everything!"* Another participant advocated the employment of *"play based lessons ... making the lessons interesting and fun."* Educators also mentioned the need for more physical resources, multimodal teaching, together with smaller class populations. They further recommend prioritising human resources, such as more classroom assistants to facilitate smaller group instruction and differentiated learning strategies. They believe that language teaching should focus more on the communicative aspect, and less so on grammar taught out of context. In this respect the participants of this study recommended reduced content, specifically that which children cannot relate to or apply in their daily lives. One participant commented that *"it doesn't make sense if you're doing four grammar lessons a week and then only one reading lesson."* Another participant also believes that we need to teach children functional language skills which will enable them to communicate effectively in their everyday lives: *"we need to stop focusing so much on grammar and on obsolete things ... children should be taught how to write to reflect the reality of today's world."* Similarly, another participant stated that that we need to *"give the children the*



*opportunity to practise the language in everyday situations. Practical stuff. Work on their interests ... what makes them tick!"* One participant also feels that children should be allowed to express themselves freely in the early years, *"don't focus on their writing too much ... more as a free writing exercise. Mux (not) focus on every word, every grammar point, every full stop, capital letter, testing everything."* This is in line with the idea of views of merging language and content in meaningful, relevant, and pragmatic ways <sup>[25]</sup>. Likewise, another participant stated that *"a lot of exposure to the language is about getting them to love the language ... stories, singing etc. ...I read to them sometimes, time permitting. They love it even though they are older. At least they're reading these books – for some children these are the only books they will read throughout the year."* Another educator stated that unfortunately *"children are not being exposed to nursery rhymes ... classic stories ... Snow White, Cinderella and the like."*

The participating educators believe that the importance of the English language in education cannot be stressed enough. One participant sustains that educators should work hand in hand with parents on this: *"to make parents realise how important it is for a child to grow up having a good command of the English language. It will not only help them in the language but also to pursue all their studies."* This is especially pertinent since the English language is the language of tertiary education in Malta. All participants voiced their concerns related to language barriers where children potentially face frustration when being fully immersed in a language they do not comprehend, pointing out that language transfer is beneficial to language learning. Other participants believe that native language or subject teachers could help mitigate problems related to English proficiency, stating that *"being bilingual as teachers helps us in ways because we can help speakers of both languages and promote values towards both languages. However, sometimes it can be a problem because many teachers don't use proper pronunciation, then it is very difficult for children to unlearn bad habits!"* The European Commission's (2017) report on Preparing Teachers for Diversity and the role of Initial Teacher Education, sustains that the diversity of student population does not match the diversity within the educator workforce, where *"the teaching population remains largely homogenous and lacks experience in teaching in diverse schooling environments"* <sup>[26:20]</sup>.

## 8. Guidelines for English Language Teaching

The following is a selection of proposals developed through this research, specifically chosen for the purpose of the current paper. The proposed guidelines and recommendations are not exhaustive, but rather suggestions derived from the participants' perspectives. It is crucial to note that these recommendations serve as a starting point and potential catalyst for change, and that further research on the topic is highly advisable.

**Table 1. Recommendations for English Language Teaching**

KEY POINTS
English as a second language (ESL) requires a shift to incorporate EFL/EAL (English as a foreign/additional language).
Place students predominantly in mainstream settings, dividing them into smaller groups for specific tasks, with occasional pull-out classes.
Reconsider the roles of Maltese and English as languages of instruction, utilising flexible language practices to bridge language gaps.
Increase training and support in multilingual instructional strategies essential for teaching English.
Build bilingual and multilingual strategies on students' prior knowledge to facilitate language transfer.
Legitimise the use of students' L1 in the English language classroom to support students' identities.
Curricular and assessment changes, along with ITE and CPD training programmes, should reflect linguistic diversity.
Focus language teaching on communication, interest-based materials, and contextual grammar instruction.
Encourage self-expression in creative writing, thus fostering a love for the language.
Create literacy-rich environments through resources and engaging learning opportunities.
Reading aloud should continue into upper primary years.
Further explore the use of multimodal texts to enhance learning through various means.
Incorporate multicultural and multilingual resources in English lessons to foster inclusivity.
Provide authentic language learning materials to aid the contextual application of language skills.
Strengthen English proficiency and nurture a love for reading through diverse, high-quality texts.
Encourage parental involvement through meetings and educational sessions.
Inculcate a culture of self-reflection among educators to assess the impact of their practices on learners.
Promote language classes as safe spaces where students can use different languages; the final aim being proficiency in the target language.
Invest further in resources, alongside a more diverse teacher workforce.
Involve the community as a resource to assist with language challenges and cultural understanding.
Differentiate between general and language-specific achievements when assessing bilingual and multilingual students.

## 9. Limitations

Due to time constraints and a small sample size, the conclusions drawn from this study are not generalisable to all Maltese educators. Despite this limitation, the participants' viewpoints provide valuable insights into the current state of English language teaching in Malta, shaped by both the island's colonial history and its ongoing demographic changes. These perspectives can serve as a



foundation for recommending further research and suggesting future implications for practice. Finally, the findings can be selectively applied to inform practitioners, educational environments, policy-making institutions, and teacher training programmes to improve English language teaching practices within the current linguistically diverse climate.

## 10. Conclusion

In summary, this research focuses on the experiences of Maltese educators during English language lessons, in view of the changing demographic shifts on the island which are changing its linguistic landscape from a bilingual to a multilingual one. This necessitates the restructuring of language teaching pedagogies to be in alignment with the linguistic and cultural diversity in our classrooms. The results of the study present implications related to the Maltese educational system, English language pedagogy in multilingual classrooms, and teacher training. The research reveals that fluid language practices are organically utilised by educators within bilingual and multilingual environments in Malta. However, for educators to effectively harness these cross-linguistic practices as pedagogical tools, they require targeted support and training. This pedagogical shift necessitates a multifaceted approach, which includes inclusive teaching strategies, a revision of English language teaching programmes and methods of assessment, additional human and physical resources, the promotion of equity in education, and the provision of support systems for disadvantaged students and minority groups. There is a need for joint accountability in education involving educators, policymakers, parents, and the wider community. For Malta to reach its full potential, every stakeholder must play an active role in fostering a culture that values and supports learning. By addressing these implications and embracing a comprehensive approach to educational reform, Malta can enhance its education system and better prepare the diverse student population students for the challenges and opportunities of the future.

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