"Issa open your books għax ser nibdew il–lesson tal–English…": The Impact of Maltese Primary School Teachers' Language Backgrounds on Linguistic Identities, Language Use, and Pedagogical Practices

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Abstract

Bilingualism is a quintessential feature of being Maltese, as speaking multiple languages is an integral part of the island's culture and history of foreign occupation and colonisation. Bilingual identities are shaped by language acquisition and socialisation, and educators construct their own linguistic identities and pedagogies through personal, educational and professional experiences. Maltese teachers believe that they organically use fluid language practices such as code–switching and translanguaging in their classrooms; however, they are uncertain about the benefits of these practices, and how they can utilise them in a structured manner, especially in view of the increase in linguistically diverse classrooms as a result of recent demographic shifts. This paper focuses on the way that Malta's socio–cultural context shapes teachers' linguistic identities, and how this may in turn impact their pedagogy. This study also supports previous research advocating the use of hybridised language practices as the way forward within linguistically diverse classrooms.

Keywords

Teacher Identity, Linguistic Identity, Multilingual Education, Code–switching, Translanguaging, Crosslinguistic Pedagogy

Introduction

Teacher identities and pedagogical views are constructed through educators' own personal, educational and professional experiences. Hence, educators' language ideologies are often linked to their biographies and may be rooted in language purism, thus favouring strict language separation, or otherwise embracing fluid and flexible language practices. This research study

focuses on bilingual teachers' identities and the way in which their language backgrounds impact their attitudes, views and perceived pedagogical practices. This was achieved through endeavouring to answer the following research questions:

1. Have Maltese primary school teachers' own personal and professional experiences related to bilingual identity and language use shaped their pedagogy in any way?
2. What are the participants' current perceived practices and perceptions of using fluid language practices such as code–switching in their bilingual classrooms?

Bilingualism is an inherent part of Maltese identity, and bilingual education as practised in Malta may be defined as teaching children both Maltese and English simultaneously, with both languages also being used as languages of instruction (Camilleri Grima, 2013a, 2013b; Milton, 2016; Panzavecchia & Little, 2019; 2020). Flexible language practices, such as code–switching and translanguaging, are replacing previously advocated ideas promoting a rigid segregation of languages (Otheguy et al., 2015).

This study focuses on Malta and its unique bilingual situation which forms part of its historical legacy, also taking into consideration the current demographic shifts which are transforming Malta into a multilingual society (Facciol et al., 2015; Farrugia, 2017; Ariza et al., 2019; Caruana et al., 2019; Paris & Farrugia, 2019; Bonello, 2020). The participants in this study were all born and raised in Malta, and therefore their language biography, educational history and professional experiences are inherently moulded by Maltese culture, traditions, ethnicity and heritage, all of which give the Maltese society its unique essence.

Malta and Its Linguistic Background

The island of Malta is situated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Maltese is the national language of Malta, whilst the Constitution of Malta states that both Maltese and English are official languages on the island. The majority of Maltese people are classified as bilingual; however, the level of proficiency varies substantially among speakers (Vella, 2012). Malta's strategic position has contributed to the development of the Maltese language, which merges borrowed elements from mainly Arabic, English and Romance (Fabri, 2010; Vella, 2012). On the other hand, the widespread presence of English in Malta is a

result of the island's colonial heritage which lasted until 1964 (see Panzavecchia & Little, 2019). The attitude towards the English language in Malta is generally a positive one with no pro- or anti-imperialistic undercurrents, as is the case in some immigrant and indigenous minority or postcolonial multilingual groups (Camilleri Grima, 2013b). Nonetheless, the linguistic situation in Malta is still tinged with prejudices and preconceived notions towards those who choose either Maltese or English as their first and dominant language (see Caruana, 2007). These prejudices often include covert undertones related to social class, status, education, elitism and nationalistic language purism, and notwithstanding the small size of the island, these ideas vary substantially depending on the area of residence of the inhabitants. Notwithstanding such largely implicit attitudes towards the two main languages spoken on the island, bilingualism is an age-old and quintessential feature of being Maltese and as a result of our history of foreign occupation, speaking two or more languages forms part of the cultural fabric of the island (Panzavecchia & Little, 2019, 2020). The level of language exposure in each language varies, depending on the family and community environment; however, it is extremely difficult for a child to be monolingual in Malta (Grech & Dodd, 2008; Vella, 2012; Camilleri Grima, 2013b). This is because both languages are in constant interchangeable use in most environments and situations. The media uses both English and Maltese, and local discussion programmes, talk shows and advertising on TV and radio stations usually contain a naturally occurring mixture of both languages, through language mixing and code-switching (Camilleri Grima, 2013a, 2013b). Both Maltese and English are present in Malta's linguistic landscape, with a predominantly English dominance (Sciriha, 2017; Camilleri Grima, 2020). The constant interplay of both languages often results in the endemic practice of code-switching, combining two completely different languages: Maltese, with its largely Semitic roots, and English, which has Germanic origins. Rather than being the result of poor competence in either or both languages, code-switching "involves skilled manipulation of two (or more) grammars" (Wei, 2007, p. 15). The sociolinguistic situation in Malta is thus one of a widespread societal bilingualism without diglossia since neither of the two languages is assigned a High or Low function and both are used in most domains (Camilleri Grima, 2013b). Additionally, Malta is currently experiencing a sudden shift in migration patterns which is leading to a rapid and unavoidable linguistic shift from bilingualism to multilingualism (Farrugia, 2017; Scaglione & Caruana, 2018; Ariza et al., 2019; Caruana et al., 2019; Panzavecchia & Little, 2019, 2020; Paris & Farrugia, 2019; Bonello, 2020).

Defining L1 And L2 Within the Maltese Context

The ways in which members of a community choose to communicate may be heterogenous (see Farrugia, 2013). This is even more evident in countries like Malta, where demographic changes are occurring, leading to increased linguistic diversity as a consequence. Maltese is the dominant spoken language, although a large number of Maltese nationals do choose English as their mother tongue. However, it is important to emphasise that there is a constant interplay between the two languages through the prevalence of code–switching and the use of "Manglish" (Rix, 2010), or "Mixed English Maltese" (Borg, 1980), or "Maltese English (MaltE)" (Bonnici, 2010; Grech, 2015), where both languages are used in parallel, interchangeably, or in a blended manner. Vella (2012) describes this "rich and complex" situation where English and Maltese are regularly used alongside each other as "a continuum of use along which speakers shift as a function of different variables" (p. 548). Camilleri Grima (2003, p. 56) sustains that "the average Maltese person lives daily with two languages, moving from one to the other as the context demands". In essence, Maltese speakers organically switch between languages depending on "the context, the person being communicated with, the topic of conversation and the task at hand" (Camilleri Grima, 2003, p. 56), and "the Maltese bilingual person learns two languages from infancy, and uses both languages in most situations as circumstances demand" (p. 34). This distinct bilingual scenario is apparent in the media landscape (Camilleri Grima, 2013a, 2013b), within families and the community (Sciriha, 2001; Scerri, 2015; Sciriha, 2017), and within educational institutions (Farrugia, 2016). Maltese is predominantly utilised as a means of communication within Maltese families; however, code–switching is a common linguistic practice where speakers tend to shift between the two languages as a natural part of their communicative practice. According to the Language Education Policy Profile, "even those who claim to use Maltese or English exclusively are likely to use forms of code–switching" (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 13).

An instance exemplifying the significant influence of the English language is the way in which young children naturally pepper their early conversations with vocabulary from both languages, thus code–switching is practised at the very early stages of language acquisition and development. Maltese children, for instance, usually prefer to count and use vocabulary related to numbers in the English language despite the existence of a Maltese equivalent (Farrugia, 2003, 2018; Camilleri Grima, 2013b). English is also preferred as a written medium since readership of English language newspapers and books is in fact generally

preferred over Maltese, whilst the majority of textbooks used in schools are in English (Camilleri Grima, 2013b). Caruana (2007, p. 188) states that designating either Maltese or English as the L1 (first language) in Malta poses a challenge due to the intricate linguistic landscape influenced by the historical and political permutations of the past. While the majority of Maltese–born people are generally bilingual, there are segments of society that are categorised as either Maltese–speaking or English–speaking. These labels are in line with what is considered to be L1 or L2 in Malta, hence there is a preference or dominance in one language over the other, despite a level of mastery in both.

Current Demographic Shifts on the Island

As a result of globalisation and rising migration trends, asylum seekers and refugees have been flowing into Malta at unprecedented rates. Ever since 2002, due to its geographical location, Malta has been considered a symbolic gateway into Europe. Furthermore, following Malta's accession to the European Union in 2004, transnational migration is on the increase as more EU citizens are exercising their right of free movement within the European member states (International Organization for Migration, 2016). Data collected from the 2021 census indicates that Malta's demographic makeup has also been impacted by the importation of foreign labour by the government over the past few years, as one fifth of Malta's population and over a quarter of Malta's workforce is currently made up of foreign nationals. As a result of such unparalleled and rapidly changing demographics on the island, the many threads of additional languages are being interwoven into the linguistic fabric of our society, as Malta finds itself shifting from bilingualism to multilingualism, effectively becoming a cultural and linguistic melting pot of sorts. This state of affairs is also mirrored in our schools through the arrival of a number of non–Maltese children speaking a variety of different languages (Farrugia, 2017; Panzavecchia and Little, 2019, 2020; Paris & Farrugia, 2019; Bonello, 2020). This has inevitably impacted our schools both culturally and linguistically, and Maltese teachers are increasingly faced with having to teach young students who do not speak either English or Maltese (Grech, 2015; Ariza et al., 2019; Panzavecchia, 2020). Linguistic and cultural diversity in our classrooms is also having an evident impact on various aspects of policy, such as curriculum development, assessment practices and teacher training (see Panzavecchia, 2020).

The Relationship Between Teacher Identity and Language Teaching

Human beings' identities include both individual characteristics and external influences (Reeves, 2018), and these are "constructed, not ready–formed … the process of construction is a social one that takes place in social settings" (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 37). Additionally, identities are dynamic, hence may be transformed as a result of new experiences (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Reeves, 2018). Teachers' own personal training, together with their previous educational, personal and professional experiences all have an influence on the classroom learning environment. Pennington and Richards (2016) sustain that the teacher persona is a combination of the educators' perception of the institutional role of a teacher and their individual identity shaped by personal experiences. Therefore, one can conclude that a teacher's identity is multidimensional, bringing together emotions, beliefs, external influences, the context within which the identity is being formed, and teacher education programmes (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Shapiro, 2010). Additionally, personal biographies, culture, age and gender also play an important role (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Karimi and Mofidi (2019) describe this construct as "a kaleidoscopic understanding of self, constructed when teachers' personal characteristics, including their past experiences, and cultural, historical, social, institutional and environmental factors interact" (p. 124).

Methodology

The current paper focuses on the views of nine Maltese teachers in relation to their bilingual classrooms. Qualitative studies are seldom based on random participants since the researcher often requires information–rich participants to provide in–depth data which would in turn enable them to answer research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2016; Van Rijnsoever, 2017). Data for this study was hence collected through an in–depth semi–structured interviewing process with nine purposively selected primary school teachers who each had over ten years of experience in the field. Four teachers were chosen from state schools, three from church schools and two from a private independent school. These volumes are proportionate to the number of schools in Malta in each category. State, church and private independent schools were chosen to collate teachers' perspectives depending on the school context, which is distinct in Malta. Participants also had different language and schooling backgrounds, which enabled a comparative exploration of patterns linked to family context and educational experiences. The selected participants also had experience

with different year groups in both the early and junior years, which facilitated an inquiry about whether and how teaching methods and perspectives may or may not vary depending on year group taught. Participants comprised eight females and one male, which is reflective of the gender imbalance among primary school teachers in the EU, where teaching at this level is, so far, a predominantly female occupation (Eurostat, 2017). The ages of the participants varied between thirties to fifties, and participants hailed from different localities in Malta.

The full interviews were transcribed verbatim to avoid any possible injection of bias as a result of translating, selecting, or paraphrasing any parts of the data (Poland, 1995; Silverman, 2017). In addition to the audio–recorded interviews, field notes were made highlighting the emotional context and non–verbal communication. Thematic analysis was chosen as the methodology most suitable for this study since it enabled the identification of key themes and the derivation of meaning from a large amount of data collected from a number of participants. The aim of the study was to identify common themes within participants' rich accounts of experiences related to teacher identity and language teaching. This study was designed on the foundations for Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, which ensures that the results are reliable and credible.

Results

Out of the nine participants, six hailed from Maltese–speaking families, whilst one stated that her family uses both languages interchangeably. The other two participants were brought up in English–speaking families. The participants tend to adhere to their family's dominant language; however, they all believed that both languages are used equally and interchangeably in their daily communication. With regard to schooling, six participants attended church schools throughout their primary education. One participant attended a government school, whilst two attended private schools. One participant made a transition from primary church to secondary state school. All participants stated that their primary and secondary school's language policies, together with the views, skills, pedagogy and proficiency of their former teachers were all influential in their own attitudes and proficiency in Maltese and English, albeit to varying extents.

For the purpose of this paper, key verbatim quotes were selected from the

interviews, and excerpts will be provided in this section to give participants a "voice", thus further validating the study through triangulation, where the audience is privy to what the respondents expressed, without any concerns of misinterpretation. Each participant has been given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Family Background and Language Use

Family attitudes towards language use emerged strongly during the data collection, since all participants claimed that their family's views towards Maltese and English influenced their own communicative skills, language preference and ideas about language use. These findings validate the links between families' and offspring's views on language (Bartram, 2006; Caruana et al., 2013; Vella, 2019), where parents may transfer their own positive or negative ideas on language value and status (Bartram, 2006). One example is that of one participant hailing from an English–speaking family which she believes never gave much importance to the Maltese language, thus transmitting to her an implicit dislike towards it. Laura partly attributes her lack of proficiency in the Maltese language to this.

> My family hardly ever spoke in Maltese. Maybe to the vegetable man *u hekk* [and similar]– ... I think they disliked Maltese ... they regarded it as a lower language ... it was as if there was us [the English–speaking people] and them [the Maltese–speaking people]. There was this ... like ... how can I put it ... a divide somehow. This did not help me. (Extract 1. Laura – Language divide)

Conversely, although Liliana's family are English–speaking, she feels that they did not hold negative views on the Maltese language. As a result of this, Liliana believes that she is relatively proficient in both Maltese and English. However, it is interesting to note that this participant made it a point to state that her family "didn't mind" her speaking in Maltese. This may have connotations in itself since it may be perceived that Maltese may be considered a less desirable language to communicate in, and that her family were making allowances for this. Liliana, who is the oldest of the participating educators, learnt Maltese mainly from the domestic help (which was a typical feature of Maltese middle–class families at the time), the community and the media. Jonathan, another participant, was brought up in a family who held negative views of the English language, which he believes impacted his proficiency.

> We always spoke Maltese at home. English–speaking people were considered *tal–pepe* [*Note:* a culturally embedded expression which essentially means a minority in society who are considered to be snobs or pseudo high–class]. My dad used to say "kemm ghandhom krema" [Note: another culturally embedded expression which essentially means pretentious], making fun of them. So I grew up thinking that English–speaking people were all snobs and usually belonged to a higher social circle than us … I thought they were … like … *speċi ta* … [kind of] out of my league. I could never be like that. (Extract 2. Jonathan – Family's views on language use)

Another three participants believed that their families played a very important part in their acquiring proficiency in English. This is because although their families are Maltese–speaking, they strived to provide them with opportunities to master the language.

> My parents made an emphasis to speak more English at home so that I would improve … so we picked one day during the week and it was like our English day and we would speak English on that day. I didn't enjoy it then. I was against it because I felt I needed to speak English at school, then I go home I have to speak English as well? It was annoying. But now I'm glad I did. (Extract 3. Cynthia – English–speaking day)

Another participant mentioned how her parents spoke Maltese at home, but held positive attitudes towards both languages and attributed equal importance to them. However, it is interesting to note that her family preferred to speak in English outside the home, which she feels was perhaps because they considered it to be more "polite" and socially acceptable to do. The Maltese linguistic situation is one which does not place either language as low or high function; however, English is valued for its importance within the educational and professional sectors (Camilleri Grima, 2013b). There is also an implicit perception that English is a language of high stature, which may stem from the time when Maltese was regarded as the language spoken by the lower–class members of society (Camilleri, 1996; Sciriha, 2002; Francesconi, 2010; Milton, 2016; Panzavecchia & Little, 2020), and to our postcolonial heritage (Frendo, 1988). The English language is often valued "for utilitarian purposes and related to prestige, [whilst] those who find difficulty in associating themselves in English are associated with lower socio–economic groups and with low levels of

education" (Vella, 2019, p. 175). This local language divide is distinctly unique, where a preference for the English language is generally elitist in nature, whilst that in favour of Maltese is partially nationalistic and rooted in language purism (Panzavecchia & Little, 2019).

Notwithstanding the fact that the English language is positively viewed, the linguistic situation in Malta may still be tainted by prejudices where English–speaking Maltese nationals are sometimes

> perceived as tal–pepe` 'snobs' or qżież 'show–offs'. On the other hand, in certain circumstances, these English speakers are also prejudiced towards those who find difficulty in expressing themselves in English or are unable to do so, as they automatically consider them to be uneducated or pertaining to a low socioeconomic group. (Caruana, 2007, p. 186)

The linguistic divide between socio–economic classes is waning, also as a result of the demographic changes on the island; however, attitudes towards language are still relatively linked to socio–professional backgrounds and language use within the community, in particular within one's town or village. The fact that the three participants who preferred to speak in English were born in or had relocated to Sliema/St. Julian's areas, considered to be localities with a high dominance of the English language (Camilleri, 1996; National Statistics Office, Malta, 2012, 2023; Fenech, 2014) is indicative of this state of affairs. The subtle language divide on the island emerged from the study's findings as the labels "Maltese–speaking", "English–speaking", "tal–pepe" came to the forefront. Language choices and views are heavily linked to family attitudes, which in turn influenced the participating educators' language use and proficiency.

The findings of this study also indicate that bilingual speakers' language choices are often linked to language accommodation (Giles & Ogay, 2007), since communication varies in ways which are more accessible to, or appropriate amongst the participants in the conversation. In fact, identity negotiation related to language use is common amongst bilinguals, who often mediate differences between the home and the outside environment (Pavlenko 2006; Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Norton, 2013; Little, 2017) and who use different languages or change register for different purposes (Ariza, 2018). Baker (2011) refers to language switching as "a social event with particular others", "joining a social group", and "finding an accepted voice" (p. 133), which highlights the

influence language has on constructing social identities through interactions with significant others. In this respect, all participants spoke about the way they use Maltese and English interchangeably, depending on the context or company, which substantiates Baker's (2011) argument that code–switching may be a way for bilinguals to reduce social distance, improve relationships, connect informally and intimately with friends or family members, and be accepted within a peer group. Pavlenko (2004) describes this as a way to indicate closeness, familiarity and "we–ness" within groups and communities, where multilingual speakers "have one more resource at their disposal, linguistic juxtaposition, whereby affect can be signalled through language choice, code–switching, and language play" (p. 179). In fact, participants spoke of the divergences between their home and school language, which required them to negotiate language use in different environments.

> I speak Maltese mainly because I am surrounded by people who speak Maltese ... whose first language is Maltese, because if I'm in school or with English–speaking friends I automatically change to English mode and speak in English all the time. (Extract 4. Diana – Switching languages depending on company)

Code–Switching

All participants were in agreement that they organically code–switched throughout their daily communicative practices, stating that this is a spontaneous and instinctive trait of being bilingual. Participants stated that it is sometimes convenient to draw from their lexical repertoire in one language as opposed to the other (see Wei, 2007; Kreiner & Degani, 2015).

> I think that we tend to switch from one ... from Maltese to English ... or vice versa ... all the time. Maybe because it's convenient ... sometimes I can't think of the right word or phrase ... I think most of us do it. We even borrow words from other languages, don't we? And they become accepted. (Extract 5. Elaine – Language switch)

> But I tend to mix languages sometimes too ... some words are difficult to find in one language so you say them in the other ... (Extract 6. Cynthia – Mixing languages)

This data confirms that code–switching is a typical feature of bilingual and

multilingual speakers (Wei, 2007; Baker, 2011; Paradis et al., 2011), and that contemporary multilingualism often includes English, being a lingua franca (Cenoz, 2019), which becomes "everyone's language", resulting in it losing its pure and native form in the process (Kayman, 2004; Wei, 2016; Cenoz, 2019). The participants in this study also voiced their concerns related to the way the Maltese language is being "bastardised" due to English words and phrases being adapted morphologically and/or phonologically into the language (Camilleri Grima, 2013b), and stressed the importance of protecting the Maltese language, which may be in danger as a result of demographic changes on the island (Panzavecchia & Little, 2020). These findings indicate that within Malta's bilingual situation, both Maltese and English have been somewhat corrupted and contaminated by the other language.

> I think that Malta is definitely a bilingual country, but we tend to mix the two languages all the time … it's natural … I also love Maltese and think we should work hard to preserve it. It's a beautiful language and its history is amazing. I think we risk losing it and it is such an integral part of our identity. People in Malta speak so many different languages now … plus there's the media influence. (Extract 7. Mandy – Losing the Maltese language which is an integral part of our identity)

Language and Schooling

The data focusing on language and schooling evidences that school language policies are also influential in language choice, fluency and identity development (Camilleri, 1996; Aspachs–Bracon et al., 2008; Barnard & Burns, 2012; Reeves, 2018; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Vella, 2019).

> At school we were always expected to speak in English … the head clearly didn't like it if she happened to overhear us speaking in Maltese. Probably it was considered to be the equivalent of a minor offence! But I enjoyed my English lessons and I did very well. I passed my O Level when I was only in Form 3. English remains to be my favourite subject up to this day … (Extract 8. Elaine – School's strategies on enforcing language use)

One participant described her experience at school, where she felt she was thrown into the deep end as she was fully immersed in a language she was not quite familiar with.

> So I was always brought up speaking Maltese, but I remember when I was four years old, I was sent to an English–speaking school and I had to learn English to survive basically. I had to either sink or swim [laughs]. Almost knowing no English or very basic English … Especially since everyone else was English–speaking and didn't even know Maltese. *Tista timmaġina?* [Can you imagine?] But I had to adapt to the situation and I learned English from my friends. (Extract 9. Cynthia – Sink or swim)

Two of the participants attending English–speaking schools feel that the lack of exposure to the Maltese language may have impacted their proficiency in it, especially since they also came from English–speaking backgrounds.

> I went to a church school where it was not allowed to speak in Maltese at all, plus my family are all English–speaking … I must admit that I wish I were more fluent in Maltese. I am not equally proficient. I don't feel confident enough. (Extract 10. Laura – Confidence in language use)

Conversely, two other participants attended schools where Maltese was the dominant language, which they feel impacted their mastery of the English language.

> I attended a church school that was Maltese–speaking at the time. I wasn't exposed to the English language. My peers were all Maltese–speaking. But we had issues with our teachers. … I still remember the word 'roster' for example … I used to say 'roaster' because this is what our teacher had taught us, and at home I didn't have much exposure to the English language either … so looking back it is still a heartache for me that I wasn't brought up with more exposure to English, especially at school. (Extract 11. Diana – Quality and level of language exposure)

Although there is a Maltese–English language divide in state and independent schools in Malta, with a more balanced language picture observed in church schools (see Vella, 2019), one must take into account that as a result of the recent population changes occurring on the island, there seems to be a shift to "an English–only medium of instruction" in Maltese classrooms, since teachers are finding it easier to use the English language predominantly and sometimes exclusively in order to reach out to the migrant, non–Maltese–speaking children in their care (Camilleri Grima, 2018, p. 38).

Language Use at School and in Class

The participants' personal histories, knowledge and views, their perceived fluency and proficiency in the language, together with a "hierarchical valorisation of different languages" (Rosiers, 2020, p. 11) all helped shape their pedagogical choices.

Two participants stated that the school where they are currently employed has a bilingual language policy, whilst another participant believes that bilingualism is also favoured at her school, although English seems to be taking precedence due to the increasing number of non–Maltese speaking children in class. Two other teachers feel that there are no strict rules about language use, and that teachers usually adapt depending on subject being taught. Four participants teach at schools which predominantly favour the use of English over Maltese. Whilst two educators teach in the private school sector, where the majority of children are English–speaking or non–Maltese, another two teach at church schools and believe the English language is being promoted precisely for the opposite reason, that being that the majority of children attending derive from Maltese–speaking households, and therefore their exposure to the English language is imperative. Notwithstanding language policies pertaining to each particular school and the educators' own predominant language, all participants believe that they utilise both languages in class and also employ code–switching practices, albeit at different levels and in different ways depending on the classroom context. A number of interviewees spoke about their concerns related to their mastery of their L2 during their early years of teaching, which they attributed to a lack of exposure to the language at home, at school, or both.

Code–Switching as Pedagogy

Although the participants in this study agree that code–switching is a natural and instinctive characteristic of Maltese speakers, most experienced a state of internal conflict as they found themselves questioning the correctness of these practices. Words and phrases such as "guilty", "it should not be encouraged" and "it's not right" were prominent in the data, indicating a negative stance related to language mixing.

> I don't encourage it but sometimes it has to happen. Like, for example when I'm speaking in Maltese and they're not understanding at all ... I think it depends on your aim ... sometimes it means that they're trying

to use Maltese even if it's just during code-switching. (Extract 12. Maria –
Sometimes code-switching has to happen)

I do code-switch sometimes, I guess, we all do. Even words like *"mela"*
[so] and *"hux"* [isn't it so?] … it is in our culture I guess. I don't think there's
anything so wrong with code-switching really as long as it does not
happen during lessons. It can be confusing and send the wrong message,
I think. But it's OK to code-switch when giving instructions sometimes or
when some children really don't get it. (Extract 13. Mandy – Sending the
wrong message)

Participants voiced their concerns related to children not distinguishing
whether a word is in Maltese or English and rather choosing to utilise language
according to their requirements at any given time. This indicates that "rather
than possessing two or more autonomous language systems, as has been
traditionally thought, bilinguals, multilinguals, and indeed, all users of language,
select and deploy particular features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make
meaning and to negotiate particular communicative contexts" (Vogel & García,
2017). Camilleri Grima (2013b) sustains that even when Maltese speakers use
either one of the two languages in what is perceived to be a monolingual code,
one can still observe influences from the other language at lexical, syntactic, or
phonological levels.

I am constantly code-switching! I don't enjoy doing it … I don't like to say
a sentence mixed up … but honestly I do code-switch because otherwise
half the class would sleep or drift off before I translate for them. Also, you
have to code-switch even though I feel it is confusing … some students
wouldn't know if the word is in English or Maltese, even Maltese students,
which is shocking for me. (Extract 14. Cynthia – Constantly code-switching)

We do tend to code-switch, we try as much as possible to use visuals so
if I am talking in English they understand but if you still have children who
look at you blankly, we do code-switch and we do translate. … During an
English lesson, I don't feel it is appropriate to code-switch at any time.
(Extract 15. Diana — Code-switching and translating)

Two participants stated that although their ideas stemmed from their own
teacher training, they are presently keeping an open mind on using code-

switching in class, following their many years of professional experience and the increasingly linguistically diverse classrooms they are teaching.

> I think code–switching gives the speaker ... whether it is the teacher or the student ... the opportunity to transfer information ... I feel that it can be effective to emphasise a point. I tend to code–switch because it helps me reach my students more. Before ... I mean when I was at uni and during my first years of teaching it was understood ... myself included *jiġifieri* [that is] that total immersion in a language was the best way to learn it. Even I used to feel very strongly about this. But I'm not so sure now. You see, based on my experience, I have come to believe that it is okay to use one language to teach another. I think it's easier, for both student and teacher. (Extract 16. Elaine — Better understanding)

> I'm not really sure about this. When I was at uni we were taught about how important it is to stick to one language. I remember we were taught to have the "English–speaking doll" and the "Maltese–speaking doll" present in class according to the language being taught. These dolls did not understand the other language *allura* [so] this meant that the children could not speak in the other language. So, I strongly believed in this and that's how I used to teach. Now I think the situation is changing. We need to adapt. I think switching between languages is not harmful really if it helps the children understand better. (Extract 17. Ingrid — The changing situation)

The oldest of the interviewees was not in favour of code–switching in class, stating that she makes sure to avoid this practice.

> It mixes up the children ... mixing English with Maltese and vice versa ... I don't think code–switching is ever appropriate ... in general English is English and Maltese is Maltese. Don't mix languages! (Extract 18. Liliana — Language mixing confuses children)

The findings of this research substantiate Camilleri Grima's (2013a) and Ariza et al.'s (2019) research, stating that code–switching is a naturally and instinctively occurring practice in Maltese schools. Although the interviewees felt unsure of themselves using this practice, they still admitted that it was a useful resource which enabled them to resolve pedagogical difficulties. Turnbull and Dailey-

O'Cain (2009) and McMillan and Rivers (2011) consider code–switching to be valuable within second language (L2) classroom interactions, since it may help mitigate cognitive, communicative and social challenges.

The participants in this study acknowledge that crosslinguistic practices could be beneficial when utilised during the brainstorming and discussion sections of a lesson, and they also feel that these could help students who are not comfortable with expressing themselves in class as a result of a lack of proficiency in one of the languages. This, they pointed out, is especially the case with migrant children.

> When it comes to brainstorming, I do that … I like to start off with whatever topic. Anything that comes to the students' mind I'll take it on board and they are allowed to express themselves in any way they want. In my opinion, as long as you're understanding the concept, it doesn't matter what language you're using, in fact I don't agree with the fact that some exams are only set in one language. And even if they brainstorm and give me words in Maltese, I end up eventually translating them, but to understand a concept I don't see a problem with mixing languages. (Extract 19. Cynthia – Understanding concepts through the use of different languages)

> During Maltese I allow them to write words in English to generate ideas … even if I have a foreign child … I give them time to brainstorm and jot down ideas in their language. So even though as instruction I am all for full immersion, then in some situations it can be beneficial because you're unblocking them. (Extract 20. Diana – This concept is already being practised)

It is interesting to note that as a result of purposive sampling, the participants in this study all have over ten years' experience in the classroom. This means that they were trained in accordance to the guidelines and recommendations made at the time in the Malta Ministry and Employment's Malta National Minimum Curriculum (1999), which promoted the strict separation of languages. The fact that educators develop feelings of guilt when using flexible language practices such as code–switching in the class often results in "missed opportunities" since intentional code–switching strategies are not being appropriately harnessed (Arocena, 2017, p. 252).

I think we need to be informed more about this. There is so much research about language learning you never know what is wrong and what is right! It makes the teacher feel more comfortable using both languages within a lesson in reality, but sometimes it is what we are taught. We were taught that if we used another language it was a huge mistake, we would confuse the children ... That is the general perception, I think. As a teacher, I do allow it sometimes but I do question it. I feel guilty. I ask myself, is it OK? I think we need to be told that it is OK. Even for the new teachers doing the course at university. We need to tell them that it is OK to use both languages sometimes to a certain extent. In practice if you think about it, it is what we really do. We do code-switch, although we do encourage the use of one language, it is instinctive to use both sometimes. (Extract 21. Diana – The need for more information and training)

I think we should be informed more about the benefits of these practices, perhaps through our CoPE sessions at school. We mix languages naturally, I guess, but we are not sure if it's OK to do this as part of the lesson and how to do it. We were never taught about this at university, *anzi* [on the contrary] we were always told to never mix languages ... It goes against what I used to believe in. I think times are changing *hux* [isn't it so?], especially since there are so many foreigners in class. We need to be trained for a different education. (Extract 22. Jonathan – Professional training for experienced educators)

I feel I do not know enough about these methods. I follow what I feel is right. I would like to learn more about these teaching methods before I can actually implement them in class. I think the fact that more children are coming to school with different language backgrounds might require some changes really, but I'm not quite sure what is allowed and what isn't ... what works and what doesn't. There are so many different opinions on this. (Extract 23. Laura – Children with different language backgrounds)

The participants' lack of confidence and conviction about language mixing practices in class is in contrast with the current local positive views on crosslinguistic practices, such as the National Literacy Strategy's recommendations, referring to code-switching as "an essential element of a bilingual country", as it facilitates access to different languages and to a "wide and varied linguistic heritage" (Malta Ministry of Education and Employment,

2014, pp. 28–29). Other local policies and documents have also recently been changing guidelines on the use of code–switching as a learning tool (see Council of Europe, 2015; MEDE, 2016; MEDE, 2021). Code–switching is in fact now considered to be a widely shared practice within bilingual and multilingual environments, and therefore embracing the concept of language mixing as a pedagogical tool may effectively be the way forward for language education in Malta. Nonetheless, it appears that deeply ingrained habits persist, and educators who have received training following traditional approaches may potentially benefit from further professional development in this area, which should be in alignment with current research findings, addressing the complexities and challenges encountered in today's classrooms. Such upskilling should alleviate any mixed feelings educators might hold whilst employing multilingual language strategies in a natural and effective manner. Hence, teachers need to be "explicitly taught ways to incorporate heteroglossic ideologies" into their pedagogy (Goodman & Tastanbek, 2020, p. 1), since an educator's stance on crosslinguistic methods may evolve as a result of professional development and classroom practice (Menken & Sanchez, 2019; Gorter & Arocena, 2020).

Limitations

The aim of this study was to shed more light on bilingual and multilingual language pedagogies, since there is a research gap related to teachers' perspectives on the subject. However, this is being done within the limitations of the research, and therefore owing to time constraints and the small number of participants, conclusions drawn are not representative of all Maltese educators. However, these findings may be used as a valid and significant resource to recommend further studies and make suggestions for future implications. The findings of this study may also be selectively applied to make recommendations to educational environments, policymaking institutions, and initial teacher and professional development programmes to improve practice.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on the experiences of bilingual Maltese educators, particularly related to their viewpoints on language use, which are often rooted in their own family and educational backgrounds and their perceived pedagogical practices with regards to language use. The research questions concerning the personal and professional experiences of Maltese educators regarding bilingual identity and language usage, alongside their existing practices and perceptions of employing fluid language techniques, have been

addressed throughout this study.

The findings indicate that in Malta, the English language is highly valued for its importance in education and employment, and that this idea is often transferred into the classroom and transmitted to our students. The implicit notion of a language divide in Malta was also evident throughout the data collection, since participants generally held ideas related to an elitist preference for the English language, or a language purist preference for Maltese from their families and educational backgrounds. This legacy often influenced the educators' views on language, confidence and proficiency, which inevitably also shaped their pedagogy.

The results of the study present implications related to the Maltese educational system, pedagogy in multilingual classrooms and teacher training. Fluid language practices occur organically and instinctively; however, the findings of this research indicate that educators need to be supported in ways which would enable them to legitimately harness crosslinguistic practices as pedagogy. This necessitates training programmes and clear recommendations which would empower them to utilise bilingual and multilingual pedagogies advantageously, as opposed to viewing them as a last resort (García & Wei, 2014; Beres, 2015; Milton, 2011, 2016; García et al., 2017; Milton & Panzavecchia, 2019). The participating educators showed an openness and willingness to improve practice, given the appropriate support and training, since throughout the interviews their initiatives, proactiveness and commitment emerged strongly. It is also imperative that teachers are trusted with more agency (Mifsud & Vella, 2018), given ample opportunities to share examples of good practice, and encouraged to carry out further research related to linguistically diverse classrooms. Finally, our education needs to focus on shifting demographics on the island to meet the demands of Malta's increasingly diverse classrooms and to ensure an equitable and socially just education for all.

Notes on Contributor

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