Informing Educational Change: Research Voices from Malta

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Introduction

Malta as an EU member state
When in 2004 Malta joined the EU, Maltese became an official language of the EU. Due to this accession and for other reasons, such as economic prosperity, political stability, and archipelago safety, an ever-increasing number of foreign people have opted to live on the islands. Most Maltese are bilingual and speak both Maltese and English, so foreigners who speak English have little difficulty in practical communication. However, most foreigners who cannot speak Maltese feel disadvantaged, and prefer to learn the language to integrate into Maltese society. As Sammut (2004) indicated in his thesis, *The ‘Alien’ Experience: Returned Migrants in Gozo Secondary Schools:*

...in the Maltese culture, everyone speaks Maltese. You can’t sit there and babble in English and tell them how you feel. You do feel different. As much as you don’t want to be, as much as you want to get on with the other people, you are different (p. 48).

Additionally, for foreigners who do not speak English, the need to learn Maltese is greater, to survive within a community in which Maltese is the dominant language. Still others may want to learn Maltese for special or specific purposes such as occupational (Harmer, 2000) or academic purposes. It is noteworthy that nowadays certain foreign professionals who accept positions in Malta are bound to learn Maltese. Others such as refugee immigrants, who seek asylum in Malta, try to learn it to integrate within the Maltese community. Still others who may be interested in learning the language and improving their communication skills are emigrants or their kin, who have returned to Malta after long durations, without previously learning their native language. All these reasons lead to a demand for Maltese language courses, which is not fully satisfied, as such courses are not always available (especially in Gozo) or may not be in accord with a learner’s aims.

Directorate for Lifelong Learning Courses (DLL)
Under the education department of Malta, in 2012-2013, the DLL organised three courses for foreigners at the Lifelong Learning Centre or in specific local councils or schools around Malta.

1. Maltese as a Foreign Language (MFL)—Malta Qualifications Framework Level 1 (MQF-1);
2. MFL–MQF Level 2 (MQF-2);
(For more information about the MQF levels visit https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/Pages/MQF.aspx)

In this research, the MFL levels 1 and 2 were chosen, because, when compared to other institutions that teach Maltese to foreigners, these had by far the most participants. The reason for the popularity of these courses could be because they were offered all over Malta and Gozo, at different times and levels (DLL, 2017). Since the MFL-1 and MFL-2 courses claimed to teach learners four language
skills, I focused my research on these courses; the Maltese conversation course was excluded from my research since it is an independent course, and is unrelated to the MFL-1 and MFL-2 courses.

Statement of the problem
Responding to the increasing demand to learn Maltese as a second language (MSL), the DLL offers courses of various types and levels. However, courses are often taught by anyone who can speak and write Maltese, whether he or she is a qualified Maltese language educator or not. Despite the teachers’ best intentions, their lack of qualifications and resources inevitably lead to a certain degree of amateurism in the field, which undermines the educational value of this enterprise. However, this issue could be counterbalanced by using appropriate syllabi, learning materials and teacher training. Therefore, it is important to investigate whether the MFL-1 and MFL-2 courses offered by the DLL meet the learners’ expectations in terms of the course syllabi, teaching methods and learning materials. It is also essential to investigate the teachers’ needs, considering that teachers are a determining factor in the success of the courses.

Research Aims and Questions
This research addressed the following aims:

1. To obtain a snapshot of the conditions, attitudes and needs of learners and teachers attending or delivering these courses.
2. To compare the learners’ needs in terms of the syllabus, teaching methods and learning materials, through their perceptions of what is being offered in the course they are attending, and to determine if their needs are being satisfied.
3. To compare the teachers’ perceived needs in terms of the syllabus, teaching methods, learning materials (including the teachers’ perceptions of learners’ needs) and teacher training, with their perceptions of the courses being offered by the DLL.
4. To gain insights into the similarities and differences between the teachers’ and students’ perceived needs and suggestions.
5. To evaluate the entire system, and pinpoint what should be amended in the present teaching scenario.

My main research question was to investigate whether there were discrepancies between the current MSL courses offered by the DLL, and the learners’ and teachers’ perceptions of what and how they should be taught. My secondary questions were as follows:

- To what degree does the current programme meet the needs and expectations of its adult learners in terms of the syllabi, teaching methods and materials?
- What are the learners’ perceived needs and suggestions regarding the MSL courses for adults in terms of the syllabi, teaching methods and materials?
- What are the teachers’ perceived needs and suggestions concerning the MSL courses for adults in terms of the teacher training, syllabi, teaching methods and materials?
- To what degree does the current situation meet the teachers’ needs and expectations in terms of the teacher training, syllabi, teaching methods and materials?
**Literature Review**

*Adult learners’ characteristics, needs and motivations*

The human capacity for language acquisition is impressive, and can be exemplified by the ways in which children acquire their native languages (L1), and many adults learn their second (L2) or third languages through everyday experience. However, occasionally language acquisition is a source of frustration for those who are striving to learn or teach a second language (SL) in a classroom setting. Although the classroom environment helps in the learning process and is generally handled by competent teachers and equipped with instructional methods, textbooks and resources, not every learner who attends these classes learns the skills needed to cope with the language demands of the outside world (Pica, 1987).

Language input is an essential part of learning a language. Children acquiring their L1 receive long hours of exposure (Lightbown and Spada, 2006), while adults learning an SL, especially those learning it as a foreign language (FL), have limited language exposure. In the latter case (which may hold true for English-speaking foreigners learning Maltese as an SL), as Malta is bilingual, learners are only exposed to the language as it is taught in the classroom setting, which is often more formal than the language used in social settings (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Thus, learners need exposure to authentic language in the classroom, and the teaching materials they use should contain authentic texts so that they are introduced to a range of discourse types. As Lightbown (1985, p. 265) stated, ‘the virtual absence of a particular form or structure in the input makes its acquisition impossible’. Thus, recently many teaching resources and activities have been designed to reflect the ‘authentic’ language that the learner will encounter in the real world, to enhance success in SL acquisition (Pica, 1987). This reflects SLA theorists’ agreement that to acquire a language, learners must be exposed to its spoken or written form in natural settings or through formal instruction (Klapper, 2006).

Adult SL learners are more developed cognitively, possess greater problem-solving abilities, already communicate in their L1, have a mental picture of a language, and have different motivations for learning a language (Klapper, 2006). One of the motivations for learning a new language is migration to a new country. McKay and Tom (1999) stated that some adults move to a new country to learn the language and culture, but the majority come to work, study, accompany their families or friends or escape from difficult conditions at home. Others learn languages so that they can find better jobs or advance in their careers. Adult SL learners may have different backgrounds, languages, cultures and aims, but all share a common goal – to ‘function successfully in their new environment […] and […] be able to speak to and understand the people around them as well as read and write’ (McKay and Tom, 1999, p. 2).

Criteria, such as exposure to a naturalistic environment, motivation, personality, amongst others influence a person’s success when learning an SL. However, many adult learners end up with lower than native-like levels of proficiency, because some ‘fail to engage in the task with sufficient motivation, commitment of time or energy, and support from the environments in which they find themselves to expect high level of success’ (Marinova et al., 2000, p. 27). Hence, motivation affects learners’ success because ‘it provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process’ (Csizér and Dörnyei, 1998, p. 203). Learners’ motivation can be affected by other factors, including curiosity, desire for a new experience (Littlewood, 1984), the learning place conditions, the methods used to teach the target language, the challenges faced in the activities and the success obtained (Harmer, 2000), the lessons’ content relevance to the learners’ respective ages and abilities, a supportive atmosphere (Lightbown
and Spada, 2006), enthusiasm of the tutor and an (un)favourable time slot (Klapper, 2006). Moreover, Cszék and Dörnyei (1998, p.215) proposed what they call the ‘10 commandments’ for motivating language learners, as follows: setting a personal example; creating a pleasant atmosphere; presenting the tasks properly; developing a good relationship with the learners; increasing the learners’ linguistic self-confidence and goal-orientedness; making lessons interesting; promoting learner autonomy; personalising the learning process; and familiarising learners with culture. Littlemore (2002 cited in Klapper, 2006) also provides a list to help language practitioners create interesting teaching materials to accommodate different learning styles, as follows: use visual aids; encourage visualisation; provide concrete examples; make use of metaphor, analogy and paradox; employ language that makes a topic come alive; help students make connections between ideas; link the materials to students’ lives; provide opportunities for hands-on learning; make use of graphic organisers; provide opportunities for multi-sensory learning; encourage creative writing; use music; employ creativity; use video interactivity and the total physical response approach. The foregoing concepts lead to the conclusion that to increase the learners’ motivation, tutors have to present their students with adequate learning experiences and materials to meet ‘their needs for competence, relatedness, self-esteem and enjoyment’ (Ehrman et al., 2003, p. 320).

Moreover, a syllabus is vital in providing transparency, since it clarifies the course objectives, contents and teaching methods to the parties concerned, and helps in regularising teaching and learning, and in providing uniformity and guidance by offering the methodology for the content to be taught (Newby, 2000). According to Breen (1987, p. 82) a syllabus would ‘provide an accessible framework of the knowledge and skills on which teachers and learners [would] work’ and would offer a plan for teaching and learning, thus giving its learners direction and continuity. Further, McKay and Tom (1999) suggested that teachers should use applications, formal tests and interviews to collect information about the students, to help teach them as individuals. This information can serve as a basis for further development of learning programmes, learning activities, teaching materials, etc. (Brown, 2009). Moreover, Dublin and Olshtain (1986) recommended that before developing a new language programme, it would be crucial to assess the one currently in operation because new programmes would be created either to expand and improve the present ones or remedy their shortcomings. Nevertheless, although needs analysis is a key step for effective course design, ‘it would seem that most language planners in the past have bypassed a logically necessary first step’ (Schutz and Derwing, 1981, p. 30).

In needs analysis, it is vital to survey the teacher population because they are a determining factor in the success of a course, new syllabi or learning materials. Brown (2001) echoed this point, asserting the importance of involving teachers, because they ‘are the people who will have to deliver the [syllabus] and live with it long after the current students (and perhaps the needs analysts) have moved on. [Moreover,] we must never forget that teachers have needs, too’ (p. 287).

Since the study participants comprised adult learners, this literature survey described the characteristics and motivations of adult language learners. Moreover since this study consists of a needs analysis of adult learners and their teachers, this process was briefly defined. The literature also shows that when developing new programmes, it is essential to assess, improve on or remedy shortcomings in those currently used.

(For a more comprehensive literature review visit: http://theses.whiterose.ac.uk/8658/)
Research Design and Methodology

In this study, the two primary sources were the learners and teachers attending and teaching both courses at the DLL. An education spokesperson from the education department of Malta, in charge of the DLL courses, was also interviewed to corroborate/contradict/supplement the data retrieved from the other sources.

Two paradigms guided this investigation: the positivist which is more objective, in which one truth exists, and the interpretative view, where many truths and realities exist, with different persons having various needs and perceptions, thus providing an opportunity for research participants to be heard (Weaver and Olson, 2006). Thus, this research simultaneously employed quantitative and qualitative methods, with limited interactions between the two sources of information during the data collection stage, but the findings complemented each other at the data interpretation stage (Morse, 1991, cited in Burke Johnson et al., 2007). The mixed methods were not aimed at triangulation in any positivist sense, and there is no claim to the research being able to arrive at ‘objective truths’. Thus, this work offers indicative data and the purpose of the analysis was ‘to obtain a snapshot of conditions, attitudes, and/or events at a single point in time’ (Nunan, 1992, p. 140), thus helping to evaluate the whole system. This needs analysis was conducted with two sets of instruments; in the first stage a questionnaire for teachers and another for learners was administered, and for the second stage the questionnaires were complemented by semi-structured interviews.

Questionnaire and semi-structured interview design

The questionnaire for the learners was divided into three sections: Background Information, Current Course (with the Syllabus, Teaching Methods and Materials subsections), and perceived needs and suggestions (with the same subsections). The teachers’ questionnaire contained the same sections to enable comparison, plus the Teacher Training section. For the interviews three sets of questions were created; one for learners, one for teachers, and one for an education spokesperson. A schematic diagram (Figure 1) represents the study design.
Figure 1. Study design

Data collection: Questionnaires and Interviews

In this study, a group administration of the questionnaires to the whole population of teachers and learners in both courses was chosen. There were 12 groups of MFL-1 learners which together had 60 learners. From these, 58 respondents participated in the survey questionnaire. There were nine teachers for the 12 MFL-1 learning groups. When the study commenced, there were two groups of MFL-2 learners, totalling nine students, who all participated in the study. Initially, there were three groups; however, one class was cancelled in May 2013. Nevertheless, all three teachers participated in the survey.

When conducting interviews it was not possible to sample the entire population of learners because ‘interviews might be used effectively with a few of the participants in a language programme’ (Brown, 2001, p. 6). Thus, for the learners’ interviews only, stratified random sampling was used, where in the case of MFL-1, a learner from each group was interviewed; for MFL-2, two learners from each group were interviewed, since the former course had 12 groups, whereas the latter only had two groups. When conducting interviews with the teachers, although the aim was to sample all of them, two teachers of the MFL-1 did not show any interest in participating. On the other hand, of the three teachers teaching the MFL-2 course, only one agreed to be interviewed.

Data analysis

In this research, descriptive statistics were used to analyse the nominal and ordinal data in the questionnaires. As the term implies, descriptive statistics ‘describe and present data in terms of [the]
summary of frequencies’ (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 503). Since the last question in the second section was an open one (What would you change in the course that you are currently taking?) and contained qualitative data, statements were coded, grouped by similarity, and a theme was identified. Thus, themes were generated \textit{a posteriori}, and then plotted in a table with the themes and the corresponding participants’ codes, indicating which theme each one chose. Although with certain limitations, this system made comparison possible between what the learners or teachers had and what they needed. This statistical approach was used because this study did not aim to look for different variables but to obtain descriptive snapshots of the courses, together with the learners’ and teachers’ perceived needs. Additionally, due to the limited number of participants in courses such as MFL-2, presenting the data as variables would have jeopardised the participants’ anonymity; in cases such as the MFL-2 teachers’ population, the approach was impossible to consider due to insufficient numbers and was thus eliminated. Unlike inferential statistics (which need to be tested for statistical significance), ‘simple frequencies and descriptive statistics may speak for themselves’; however, these ‘make no inferences or predictions [but] simply report what has been found’ (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 504).

The interviews recordings were transcribed and analysed manually, and the data were presented as per individual responses. These were then amalgamated or contrasted with what emerged from the questionnaires’ tables and the responses to the open question.

\textit{Validity and reliability}

Although attaining absolute validity and reliability is an impossible goal for any research model (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982), measures were taken so that data would be both reliable and valid, externally and internally. Amongst these were the piloting of the instruments, the use of questionnaires and interviews as, ‘the more the methods contrast with each other, the greater the researchers’ confidence’ (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 141); questionnaires and interviews were also administered consecutively at the various centres, and the response rate was high, thus increasing validity, and eliminating what Belson (1986) calls ‘volunteer bias’.

\textit{Ethical issues}

Since this research involved human subjects, it entailed ‘an intrusion into the life of the participant, be it in terms of time taken to complete the instrument, the level of threat or sensitivity of the question’ (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 317). Thus, after clearance was obtained from the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee, and permission was secured from the education department of Malta to conduct the research, concrete steps were taken so that participants could be identified, approached and recruited with their consent.

\textbf{Findings}

\textit{Addressing the main research question}

The various sources and research instruments revealed discrepancies in the syllabi, teaching methods, learning materials and teacher training between the MFL-1 and MFL-2 courses and the learners’ and teachers’ perceptions of their needs. The teachers and learners were aware of the problems, and their needs analysis showed that in most the cases they shared similar desires concerning improvement. These are discussed in more detail in the following sections addressing the secondary research questions.
Learners’ Responses (MFL-1 and MFL-2) to the Secondary Questions - Syllabus

Both the questionnaire and interview responses demonstrated the failure of the existing MFL-1 syllabus and the ‘adapted’ MFL-2 syllabus to meet the learners’ needs and expectations, for various reasons. Mainly, the syllabus was vast in scope and vague; thus, it did not offer a standard guide for all the groups. It did not focus on speaking skills as much as most learners wanted, and the course content needed more revision. In fact several MFL-1 interviewees expressed dissatisfaction:

[It] is very advanced for beginners…I cannot [yet] express myself naturally in Maltese (Interview Participant 1 (IP1)).

The problem of course is that [it] goes too fast…we start out [with] 24 [students in class] and end up [with] seven (IP3).

[It] is too advanced. I don’t think it has been sufficiently revised…the drop[out] rate is alarming (IP5).

You learn something but it’s difficult. [This course is] not [intended for] begin[ners] (IP7).

MFL-2 learners also elaborated on these issues:

The [scope of the] syllabus is too much for the length of the course; course 1 [MFL-1] starts with the alphabet till verb forms, and it is impossible to learn all that. [These lessons] are repeated at the higher level [MFL-2], [but] I [still] can’t talk Maltese. (Interview Participant 2 Advanced (IP2-A)).

For someone who is a beginner…it’s like squashing five years into one…There is too much grammar, rather than emphasis on everyday things (IP3-A).

Ideally, an effective syllabus should include ‘the specification of aims and the selection and grading of content to be used as a basis for planning … courses’ (Newby, 2000, p. 590).

Thus, the learners expressed their need for a standard syllabus at different levels, practice in the four skills (especially speaking), inclusion of day-to-day topics while retaining grammar and vocabulary lessons, and enhanced content with more tasks and repetitive lessons for reinforcement.

Teaching methods

Both research instruments indicated that for the teaching methods, the programme did not meet the learners’ needs and expectations in some instances; the main issue (which also emerged in the syllabus section) was that the course did not emphasise on speaking skills as much as most learners wished; rather, it was heavy on grammar. In fact MFL-1 interviewees elaborated on this:

[The course] does not focus on speaking the language (IP1).

My main goal is speaking [Maltese]. I am not reaching that goal…I’ve learned much more than when I started, but I am not happy enough with the speaking [part] (IP8).

[Maltese] is a very difficult language…and I want to speak it, not particularly write it (IP9).
It is heavily on grammar, reading and writing, but I live in Malta and what I want to do is speak to people around me (IP1-A).

MFL-2 interviewees elaborated on these points too:

You don’t expect someone to come three hours a week during a scholastic year to learn a language in two years. I think…with the first year, they [should] introduce…something of the culture, some basic words, some basic grammar structure, how to put sentences…[they should simply] focus on that (IP2-A).

[It must be split into] three or four levels…which is our level?…we don’t speak Maltese…we are intermediate but that doesn’t [mean] anything, so if we were to say when I did my [MFL-1] exam, I [had] a school certificate, which in my mind [equates]…me to a senior in Maltese who has spoken Maltese all his life…I don’t have that level (IP3-A).

Thus, teachers should ‘ensure sufficient opportunities for communication exchange in small, non-threatening groupings and to impress on students the crucial importance of eliciting FL input at every opportunity from, in particular, native speakers of the FL’ (Klapper, 2006, p. 79). The learners perceived that copying from the whiteboard was the learning method used most often during the course; however, it was their least preferred one. Moreover, the European language portfolio, which was used in this course, was the least favoured assessment method.

The learners suggested various ways to compensate for these deficits including: more speaking and listening activities without ignoring the practices already used, more homework and tests, less copying from the whiteboard, and more engagement with the teacher.

Learning materials
The questionnaire and interview responses revealed that, except for the teachers’ notes, the learning materials did not meet the learners’ needs and expectations. The learners suggested that the teachers’ notes be retained and reinforced in a coursebook, word lists and extra listening resources. In fact MFL-1 interviewees elaborating amongst others that “I think I need 20 good sentences on tape that I can use in everyday life and practice” (IP3); “a word list with 2000 to 5000 Maltese words” (IP1-A) and a coursebook (IP4-A) because “[although] the teacher puts together her own notes … it’s not a standard thing” (IP2-A). Another participant said,

A textbook would be more structured…the teacher asked us…[‘Have you done this last year?’]
Because last year we were all in different classes, the level was a bit different for everyone.
Some of us [said] yes; some [said] no (IP3-A).

Thus, more resources could be amalgamated with the present reading, listening, writing and speaking activities, which the learners thought should be continued, strengthened and used more effectively so that adequate learning experiences and materials meet ‘the [learners] needs for competence, relatedness, self-esteem and enjoyment’ (Ehrman et al., 2003, p. 320).

Teachers’ Responses (MFL-1 and MFL-2) to the Secondary Questions - Syllabus
Both the questionnaire and interview responses showed that for various reasons, most of the teachers thought the syllabus did not meet their needs and expectations. The MFL-1 syllabus was vast in
scope, vague and based too much on grammar. In fact, one MFL-1 teacher encapsulates all of this in his/her comment:

The syllabus is not adequate because it is too vast...I feel that I am taking learners for a ride...the grammar syllabus for Maltese natives and that for foreigners are the same...the syllabi for MFL-1 and MFL-2 are the same...Starting with] a group of 19, I finished with seven (Teacher Interview Participant 7 (TIP7)).

Moreover the teachers were aware of the learners’ desires to concentrate on speaking lessons. Thus, this syllabus failed to provide the necessary information because it was too generic, and left teachers and learners without a specific direction, which led to ‘a lack of cohesiveness in materials and examinations used within the system’ (Dublin and Olshtain, 1986, p. 28). For MFL-2, the sole teacher interviewed indicated that speaking was not given importance and needed to be enhanced:

I believe that oral practice should be given more importance. Basically, we are instructed that they should be taught grammar, writing and also a bit of literature, and we don’t give much attention to speaking (TIP1-A).

The teachers also expressed the need for a standard syllabus for different levels, practice in the four skills, inclusion of day-to-day topics while retaining grammar (to a lesser extent) and vocabulary topics, and enhancing content with more tasks:

[I would include] realistic situations in which [learners] find themselves because these [are the] sort of things [they] want (TIP2).

[The way the syllabus is], I can cover certain [grammar] topics, e.g., the first form [of the trilateral verb], and when I speak with [another teacher], he/she says, ‘I have covered all the forms [of the trilateral verb]’ (TIP3).

I would split it into different levels because it seems that there is one syllabus for everyone, and I would also include more realistic things (TIP4).

It is important to limit [the grammar] and cover the [basic things] ... [this syllabus] binds the teacher to teach everything, but [one] could not cover the things in detail (TIP5).

[I would] eliminate a lot of grammar. I would emphasise conversation (TIP7).

Students should be more active ...I give students a topic, and they conduct a very basic presentation about the subject...to hone their speaking skills in Maltese (TIP1-A).

Teaching methods
Both the questionnaire and interview responses revealed that in relation to teaching methods, the programme did not meet the teachers’ needs and expectations in a few instances. For MFL-1, the teachers noted problems with the European language portfolio as used in this course with one teacher (TIP5) elaborating, ‘I don’t feel that the portfolio is that important’, while some of the MFL-2 teachers perceived that learners needed less copying from the whiteboard.

The teachers suggested that engaging in more interactive methods, without ignoring the practices already used, would help students achieve their aims. Interactive methods give learners the
opportunity to activate their knowledge as language production helps them select from the input they have received, and rehearse and receive feedback especially in a classroom setting; such methods in turn allows learners to adjust their language based on the fresh perspective offered to them (Harmer, 2000).

Learning materials
Both the questionnaire and interview responses indicated cases in which the learning materials did not satisfy the teachers’ needs and expectations. Leaving the production and usage of learning materials in the hands of individual teachers leads to different standards amongst learning groups.

Thus, the teachers suggested retaining the notes they provided, supported with a custom-made coursebook, word lists and audio-visual resources. As the literature shows, coursebooks are generally an inexpensive and attractive resource, saving teachers time because it provides ready-made teaching texts and materials (Ansary and Babaii, 2002). These resources could be combined with the present reading, listening, writing and speaking activities, which the teachers agreed should be retained, reinforced and used more effectively.

Teacher training
In both the questionnaires and interviews, most of the teachers reported that the prevailing situation did not meet their training needs and expectations.

Teachers should be trained in SLA-related areas, to enhance their ability to determine the objectives of a proposed method and whether it is practical, adaptable and adequate to their teaching situations and the type of learners. This training can also help teachers assess their capacity to manage the demands of working with a specific method, depending on their teaching load (Rivers, 1981). However teachers from both courses indicated that:

We need realistic training, not too much rhetoric as [it is not] practical (TIP1).

I believe we need effective courses…[because] there is a difference between teaching a Maltese native student and teaching foreigners (TIP1-A).

Limitations of the study
Although the timing was one of the strengths of this research, its limitation was that conducting it in the last weeks of the course did not allow early dropouts the opportunity to complete the questionnaire or participate in the interview. Another limitation regarding the MFL-2 questionnaire was the small number of participants, comprising three for the entire teacher population at that time and, nine for the entire learner population. Thus, the data retrieved from these few numbers could only be indicative, and is not representative of the entire sample. Another limitation of the same course was that of the three teachers, only one consented to be interviewed. However, both the quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to keep the MFL-2 data coherent with the MFL-1 learners’ and teachers’ data, to enable comparison and contrast. Additionally, all the feedback obtained from the participants and thus the findings were based on their perceptions.

Contribution to knowledge
This research pinpoints the main issues that should be amended in the present teaching scenario, as follows:
- Problems related to the vast scope and difficulty of the syllabus,
- lack of a specific syllabus for MFL-2,
- speaking skill deficits in the courses,
- less focus on grammar (except MFL-2 teachers),
- less need of learners to copy from the whiteboard,
- problems with the portfolio,
- desire for teacher training,
- need for more resources to teach and learn Maltese,
- necessity for needs analysis and course evaluations.

**Recommendations: Policy, Practice and Research**

**Policy: Needs Analysis, Course Evaluation and Teachers’ Training**

For every MSL/MFL course, a short needs analysis questionnaire should be distributed to the learners before or during the first lesson to obtain information about their backgrounds, aims and teaching method preferences. If this step is not performed, the teachers should obtain oral feedback from the learners. A course evaluation should also be distributed at the end of the course, so the learners’ needs can be identified and translated into learning objectives to serve as a basis for further development of learning programmes, learning activities and teaching materials (Brown, 2009).

Further, many of those who teach Maltese to foreigners have never received any specialised training in the field. Teacher trainees and teachers need to be trained in SL areas.

**Practice: New Syllabi and Learning Materials**

While conducting this research, especially when analysing the data, I became aware of certain issues in the courses that needed to be amended. Thus, I was ethically bound to address these shortcomings so that future courses would have better resources and syllabi. One of the main problems at both levels involved the syllabi. For this reason, the information gathered in this needs analysis, together with new input from the learners and teachers was used to develop three syllabi for MSL courses based on the CEFR. The drafts of these syllabi were given to different learners and teachers attending or delivering MSL courses for their feedback, which in turn was used to refine them. Moreover, learning materials were produced to support the teachers and learners. These learning materials encapsulate the learning goals in the newly created syllabi for MSL courses, and the learners’ and teachers’ methodological preferences. The aim was to help in the learning and teaching process, in preparation for exams.

**Future Thinking and More Research**

Further research is needed to continually update these syllabi, and to create additional syllabi for students who want to advance to level C2. A checklist of the communicative aims, vocabulary and grammar lessons taken from each syllabus should be created, as part of the self-assessment process, which in turn could be integrated with the learners’ portfolio.

Like courses in other languages, learners could attend specialised courses when they reach the intermediate level. Through research, specialists in the field could produce customised syllabi for teaching Maltese for special purposes, such as commerce and industry, diplomacy, law and medicine. However, a prerequisite for these courses should be the learner’s attainment of a pre-intermediate level. A more ambitious project could be a two-year diploma in Maltese for Functional Purposes, to teach learners the appropriate use of the language in different sectors within the country. Once
learners have obtained this diploma and reached a certain level, they could proceed to the Bachelor of Arts in Maltese course, offered for Maltese natives at the University of Malta.

Under the direction of a university/institute, intensive MSL courses based on the CEFR levels should be organised. This is important for foreigners who want to learn Maltese within a short time, including those who come for a brief visit to learn the language. This need was suggested by various participants, and by a speaker at the Convention of Leaders of Associations of Maltese Abroad and of Maltese Origin. This speaker proposed that the children of Maltese people living in Australia be given an opportunity to visit Malta during their school holidays from December to January, to attend 8–10-week courses, covering the Maltese language and culture (Borg, 2000). The idea of using syllabi based on the CEFR is practical because a learner can prepare for the level that he/she requires (from any institution that offers such instruction, including private lessons; once ready, he/she can take the exam). Since universities have their examination boards, and could potentially produce exam scripts for these courses, the checks and balances of an academic institution would ensure that exams are conducted smoothly. Moreover, when the exam papers or aural/oral recordings are collected, the university/institute’s researchers could analyse these scripts for the common errors associated with each level, and for typical vocabulary used. This data could be used to produce a glossary of the vocabulary and phrases for each level.

The Maltese government was asked to provide resources for coordinating Maltese language and cultural courses in Australia (Borg, 2000). More than once, stakeholders expressed the need for a ‘syllabus and accompanying textbooks to teach Maltese as a FL appropriate for Australian conditions…and the adult learners’ (Borg, 2010, p. 165). For these reasons, and keeping in mind some Maltese-Australians’ desire to attend courses and take exams in Malta, having syllabi based on the CEFR system would improve standardisation in Malta and abroad. Schools in Australia could download the syllabi for free and use these to teach their adult learners. They would then have two options; once a certain level is reached, students could travel to Malta to sit for their final exams (Scerri, 2010). Another possible solution would be to partner with a foreign examination centre to which papers could be sent for printing; learners could take the exam there, and the written exams could be corrected in Malta. The aural/oral exercise could also take place in Australia, and the marks could be added to the corrected exams. Setting aside the courses for adults, which can be accommodated by the CEFR syllabi, the quotation above referred to ‘Australian conditions’ (Borg, 2010) thus including other exams available in Australia. As some Australian exams’ aims and methods of assessment could vary, the conditions should be analysed through contact with the future entity or persons in charge of MSL/MFL teaching, who would have to analyse the problems and suggestions and find solutions thus serving as a reference point for MSL/MFL teaching and learning. Thus, it is likely that Malta requires one or more specialists in this field (MSL/MFL), under the sponsorship of a university or an institute to perform the following tasks:

1. offer expert advice;
2. conduct further research on other MSL/MFL areas;
3. offer intensive courses at the same university/institute;
4. guide other Maltese institutions in the creation or use of available syllabi;
5. offer courses online or abroad to foreigners; and
6. coordinate or collaborate to teach Maltese in other countries.

These recommendations hint at further research to achieve the following:
1. obtain feedback on the needs of teachers and learners in other MSL courses held in Malta;
2. create the other levels of CEFR syllabi or other syllabi for specialised courses;
3. review all MSL/MFL published books and publish reviews so they are accessible to everyone;
4. develop a checklist to analyse existing coursebooks;
5. produce a glossary of words for each syllabus level; and
6. create a register of student error analysis, to note the learners’ mistakes at each level.

Final thoughts
Teaching and learning MSL/MFL is an interesting, emerging educational area within Maltese language and culture that has never been studied before at PhD level. Although the needs analysis included in this study has provided knowledge on certain issues that should be addressed, and has led to beneficial outputs, considerable work is still required in this academic endeavour.

If this promising field is given the necessary political attention by the stakeholders and authorities concerned, especially politicians and educational bodies, it will attain the professional status it deserves. In turn, this recognition will promote Maltese culture and language worldwide, thus attracting more participants to the sector, which will generate the necessary revenue for advanced research in this area of specialisation.
References


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