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Italian nationals in Maltese schools: a case of 'so near but yet so far'?

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Abstract
Italians represent the largest community of foreign learners in our schools. In this paper we provide some background regarding the recent migration of Italians to Malta and we present and discuss language-related issues which affect the inclusion of learners in local schools. We refer to data provided by educators who responded to a questionnaire and to semi-structured interviews included in a Master in Teaching and Learning dissertation (Palazzo, 2020). Our analysis reveals that the inclusion of Italian learners is conditioned by their levels of competence in Maltese and English, and that this could determine their active participation in class, even during lessons of Italian itself. Although their experience in Maltese schools is generally positive, there are instances where adapting to a new educational system is the cause of demotivation which leads to absenteeism, as well as other cases where they are victims of bullying. Furthermore, some Italian learners show signs of distancing from their mother tongue, although many of them reveal a sense of pride towards their cultural heritage.

Keywords: Italian migrant learners. Language education. Language maintenance. Inclusion.

Introduction

Migration is an integral part of Italy's history, as Gabaccia (2000) refers in her aptly titled work, *Italy's many diasporas*. Historical emigration led to mass displacement of Italians, especially from regions in the North-East, to South

America at the turn of the twentieth century followed by post-war mass emigration, mainly from Southern Italy to the USA and Australia. Over the course of the recent years the economic instability in several African and Eastern European countries, among others, has led to the opposite phenomenon, and today Italy is the destination of migrants of different nationalities. Emigration from Italy, however, has not ceased although the characteristics of this migration have changed compared to the past: examples include the so-called '*fuga di cervelli*' or 'brain-drain', with highly qualified youths leaving Italy, often because they do not find satisfactory career prospects in their field of specialisation (Ferrara, Gallo & Montanari, 2018), as well as the relocation of whole families in search of a better work-life balance.

Within this scenario, Malta represents an attractive destination for many Italians. In this paper we first provide some background in relation to the recent diaspora of Italians, before focusing specifically on Italians in Malta. Our main objective is then to provide insights in relation to the presence of Italian learners in our schools, on language-related issues and on their inclusion. Insofar as this is concerned, it is important to keep in mind the following caveat: the data we collected and the studies we refer to were carried out before the Covid-19 outbreak. While it is too early to ascertain the extent of the impact of the pandemic on the presence of Italians in Malta and of Italian students in our schools, unofficial information provided by the Embassy of Italy in Malta indicates that around 3,600 Italians took flights from Malta to Italy between March and the end of June 2020. One cannot exclude that some of these returned to their homeland permanently.

Recent emigration from Italy

Recent reports regarding Italian migration (Fondazione Migrantes 2018 & 2019) reveal that Italian nationals moved to 195 different destinations worldwide. The United Kingdom is the preferred destination of Italians followed by Germany and by France. The case of Malta, in this regard, is especially revealing as it is in the sixteenth place, ahead of Luxembourg, the Scandinavian countries, Poland, Rumania, Tunisia, just to mention a few. Italian migrants in Malta are more numerous than in several other Mediterranean countries, including those in North Africa.

2019 Eurostat figures[1] indicate that foreigners[2] constitute 14% of Malta's population, placing it in the 5th place in the EU (preceded by Luxembourg, Cyprus, Austria and Estonia). In the following table, we list the six EU countries which registered more than 1,500 persons in employment locally in December 2019. This provides clear evidence of increasing trends, which are especially marked in the case of Italian nationals:

Rank	Country	Dec-10	Dec-13	Dec-16	Dec-19
1	Italy	726	1,972	5,989	10,393
2	United Kingdom	1,991	2,881	4,399	5,496
3	Bulgaria	453	894	2,212	2,605
4	Romania	262	556	1,477	2,158
5	Hungary	190	669	1,419	1,649
6	Germany	482	723	1,115	1,530

Table 1: EU nationals in Malta (JobsPlus, Ministry for Education & Employment[3])

Italian nationals working and residing in Malta have increased to the extent that they have now overtaken the number of British, historically the largest foreign workforce in Malta.

For many Italians Malta does not fall short of what they might expect to find in geographically larger countries. Recent research (Caruana, forthcoming) indicates that Italians are attracted by the Anglophone context present in many workplaces locally, as this offers several advantages and betters one's prospects for the future, also in terms of employability in other countries. There are also cultural affinities between Malta and Italy, as well as established ties which lead to mutually beneficial economic and commercial exchanges.

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[1] Information retrieved online from the 2019 edition of "People on the move. Statistics on mobility in Europe": https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/digpub/eumove_2019/, published by the European Commission. Although there is a 2020 version of this publication, data regarding Malta is marked as 'not available'.

[2] Although terminological issues will not be discussed in this paper, we point out that it is necessary to problematise several labels which are often used especially in relation to immigration. The very term 'foreigner' has, for example, a number of interpretations and while it is often placed in opposition to terms like 'natives' or 'nationals', it is not as clear-cut as it is often made out to be, also when it is used on the media. See, for example, Caruana & Klein (2009) for a discussion regarding this.

[3] https://jobsplus.gov.mt/resources/publication-statistics-mt-mt-en-gb/labour-market-information/foreigners-data#title1.3

A number of Italian migrants residing in Malta follow courses organised by the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) at the Lifelong Learning Centres, in various towns and villages across the island. During the scholastic year 2019-20, a total of 836 Italian nationals living in Malta followed one or more of the many courses offered in these centres, with the clear majority opting to learn a foreign language, as seen in the data presented in Table 2:

Lifelong Learning Centres 2019-20	**English FL**	**Maltese FL**	**English for SEC**[4]	**Other languages**	**Other subjects**
No. of Italian nationals	250	164	201	108	113
%	30	19.5	24	13	13.5

Table 2: Italian nationals who follow courses at the Lifelong Learning Centres (data provided by the Directorate for Research, Lifelong learning and Employability, Ministry for Education & Employment)

In her study on Italian migrants in Malta, Iorio (2019: 2012) reports that 19% are aged between 0-18, thereby indicating that there are several children and youths who are within the compulsory education age bracket and who, therefore, attend schools in Malta. This is also evident through the numbers in Table 3 regarding the presence of Italian children in Maltese schools (2017 till 2020), from kindergarten to post-secondary sectors:

School sector	**2017-18**	**2018-19**	**2019-20**
State (public) schools	628	758	802
Church schools	25	23	22
Independent (private) schools	275	273	232
TOTAL	928	1,054	1,056

Table 3: Italian migrant learners in Maltese schools (data provided by the Ministry for Education & Employment, Malta)

[4] This course is based on the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) English examination syllabus, and is different from the 'English FL' course, which is directed towards attaining levels included in the CEFR.

Today Italian learners represent the largest foreign community in Maltese schools. The above figures show that there has been a 16% increase of Italian learners in our schools between 2017 and 2019 and that these numbers did not change in 2019-20. In 2018-19, 721 (65%) of these learners were either attending kindergarten or primary schooling.

Although most Italian students are placed in mainstream classes, some of them are referred by schools to receive 'induction' support. This normally occurs when learners, irrespective of their age, have limited competence in both English and Maltese and are therefore placed in an 'induction hub', sometimes prior to mainstreaming. The induction programme lasts for a whole scholastic year, but learners who join from February onwards may be required to stay on during the following scholastic year too. Information retrieved from the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU) indicates that very few Italian learners repeat the induction programme. They generally attain the required competence in English and/or Maltese, after following lessons for a full scholastic year, also having been immersed in the local context. Further to the above, support is also provided to some mainstreamed learners within their own school, on a so-called 'pull-out basis', when they are given special support in either or both languages in classes organised purposely for this during school hours. This is especially the case when these learners can communicate well in English. In Table 4 we provide information pertaining to Italian learners who have received support via the MLU in the past three scholastic years:

Scholastic Year	Italian learners supported by MLU - Total	Learners in full induction	Learners receiving support on 'pull out basis'
2017-18	82	80	2
2018-19	102	55	47
2019-20	88	43	45

Table 4: Italian migrant learners supported by the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU) (data provided by the Ministry for Education & Employment, Malta).

The schooling of migrant learners

Migrant learners represent a source of richness which is beneficial to all learners, especially insofar as language awareness and plurilingualism are concerned. However, they generally face a number of challenges when they

attend school in a country which is not their own. These include getting accustomed to a new educational system and familiarising themselves with the language/s of instruction. Janta & Harte (2016:15) argue that "limited or no command of the host society language is the most common barrier for migrant integration and educational success; poor language skills limit migrant parents' opportunities to support their children in their learning".

In relation to this, over the recent years language policies and practices have underlined the value of developing plurilingual competences. The Council of Europe (2007: 107) for example, in conclusion to its *Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe*, mentions the following principle and purpose: "to develop the plurilingual competence of every individual throughout life so as to demonstrate to all citizens the economic, social and cultural value of plurilingualism". More recently the *CEFR Companion Volume* refers to the development of areas such as mediation, plurilingual/pluricultural competence as means to "contribute to the quality inclusive education for all and to the promotion of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism" (Council of Europe 2020:11). The development of tools to heighten language awareness, together with practices such as translanguaging, provide a holistic approach to language education, by stressing their commonalities, for instance, rather than their differences. Garcia (2017: 24) refers specifically to the integration of adult migrants when she explains that translanguaging "focuses on the available features and practices of people and especially migrants to make meaning, free of the constraints and defined boundaries of named languages".

Caruana, Coposescu, Scaglione (2013: 368-374) found some analogies between migrant learners in primary schools in six Southern European countries, including Malta. Among their findings they report an interest towards foreign languages, language learning and language diversity also among very young pupils. Nevertheless, especially in the case of teachers and parents, interest towards foreign languages is largely limited to languages which are taught in schools and it concentrates heavily on English, even in contexts (such as Italy, Spain and Slovenia) where traditionally the presence of this language is not especially strong. There is hesitancy, even in the response of parents of migrant learners themselves, when asked whether schools should play an active role in the maintenance of migrants' languages. Eisenchlas & Schalley (2019), with regards to Australia, also refer that parents of migrant learners fear that raising

children in their non-mainstream L1 may impact negatively on their ability to learn English, thereby influencing their academic prospects.

This maintenance of one's heritage language[5] represents one of the main challenges for migrants, and whether such languages should be available as part of their education is an issue in itself, not least because of practical implications[6]. One might postulate that this should not constitute a major problem with regards to Italian learners in Malta: as mentioned earlier there are several cultural affinities between the two countries, and even more so with Sicily from where most Italian migrants originate (Iorio, 2019; Caruana, forthcoming). Italian is spoken reasonably widely in Malta, despite the recent decline of this language (Caruana & Pace, 2015) and Maltese lexicon itself is replete with Italianisms (Brincat, 2011: 401-415)[7].

Nevertheless, the very limited research presently available on this suggests that many Italian learners in our schools face considerable difficulties. Caruana (2020) suggests that many of them do not involve themselves actively in lessons and that linguistic difficulties in both English and Maltese affect their attainment in other subjects. Baschiera & Caruana (2020) interviewed Learning Support Educators in kindergartens, primary and secondary sectors of the Maltese educational system and suggest that while inclusion occurs quite effectively when learners are young, a number of problems are encountered when they join classes in secondary school, with bullying and segregation highlighted as being the most serious of these. Palazzo (2020) provides a narration of her own personal experience, starting from when, as a 12-year old, she arrived in Malta with her family – her mother is Maltese – after having spent her childhood in Sicily. Palazzo (2020: 2-6), who has since graduated as a teacher of Italian, explains that the struggles she faced were often the consequence of linguistic difficulties. At the time when she started attending school in Malta, in 2008, she was one of the very few Italian students on the island and she felt more included, especially by her peers, once she gained proficiency in both Maltese and English. This was not short of difficulties, since she had to repeat one year of her studies at secondary school. In her research

[5] "Many first, second or third generation migrants may live or grow up with a language within the home which is different to the language of the community they now live in. These heritage languages (HLs) may be learned from birth, or later in life, and vary in terms of the official and institutional recognition and support they are accorded" (Diskin, 2020:2).

[6] Krashen, Lu & Ashtari (2020), in a short article, provide a narrative regarding the maintenance of one's heritage language, underlining the importance of receiving 'optimal' input in it.

[7] Italian is the foreign language which around 60% of students opt for in secondary schools. It is therefore the most popular foreign language in local schools.

Palazzo (2020) explains how her findings, to which reference will be made at a later stage of this paper, indicate that the inclusion of Italian learners has improved today, although it is not easy for many of them to attain good levels of proficiency in Maltese and/or English.

Surprisingly enough, these studies carried out in Malta on Italian migrant learners are among the very few contributions which tackle the recent inclusion of Italian nationals in foreign educational institutions[8]. This is possibly also because until quite recently, and excluding the pre- and post-War historical diasporas, most Italians who attended school in foreign countries were children of diplomats, or those holding similar high-ranking roles, who therefore often attended private institutions, some of which would offer classes based on the Italian educational system. An exception to this is represented by Palumbo's (2017) research who provides didactic suggestions to '*oriundi*', Italian descendants of second, third and fourth generation, who would have experienced different degrees of attrition of their heritage language. Palumbo highlights the importance of including "linguistic features that are related to the expression of one's identity, on the basis of the level of the course one follows" (Palumbo, 2017: 107, *our translation*) while also referring to the heterogenous linguistic repertoire of Italian migrants, whose relatives' L1 is generally a regional or dialectal form of Italian, and not the standard variety. In a short article Cassese (2019) refers to the importance of the role of parents to ensure that their children are exposed to language resources in Italian when they settle away from their homeland. Very interestingly, a recent study by Camozzi (2020) reports how in Germany children of migrants, including Italians, are sometimes placed in vocational schools soon after they finish primary school, seemingly as a result of poor achievement. This schooling experience has a direct impact on their career paths and occasionally represents an obstacle for social mobility.

[8] Conversely, there are many studies on the inclusion of students of non-Italian nationality in Italian schools. The presence of Italians in different continents is documented in Vedovelli (2011), while specific works include Bettoni (1987) for Italians in Australia, Scaglione (2000), for an Italian community in San Francisco, among others. Fiorentini, Gianollo & Grandi (2020) provide a comprehensive picture of the many languages present in Italian schools today, with the aim of outlining how these constitute an important resource for the development of plurilingualism.

The Study

In order to provide insights regarding Italian learners in Maltese schools, on their inclusion and on language-related issues, in the following sections we provide data from the following sources:

a) Information provided by the Education Officer (EO) and teachers of Italian in secondary and post-secondary state schools, collected during the scholastic years 2018-19 and 2019-20, regarding the specific situation wherein these students follow lessons of their mother tongue (L1) which are, however, geared to suit the needs of Maltese students, who learn Italian as an L2[9]. This was collected via a set of questions sent to the EO and teachers in state schools by email, with the specific instruction of answering only if they teach or have taught Italian nationals. We received a total of 27 valid responses (25.7% of the total of teachers of Italian employed in the secondary and post-secondary state sector);
b) The same questions, answered by email, by one teacher in a private primary school, where part of the education of students of Italian nationality is held in Italian, based on a specific programme designed for their needs;
c) Data reported in a Master's in Teaching & Learning dissertation (Palazzo, 2020) collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews with eight Italian students, four from Year 7 classes (11-year-olds) and four from Year 8 (12-year-olds), as well as interviews with three teachers, respectively of Maltese, English and Italian.

Our data are presented after having categorised them into themes, following procedures used for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes presented are those which deal with the language-related issues discussed in the section of this paper entitled 'The schooling of migrant learners' and which feature prominently, whether explicitly or implicitly, in the responses we received. These are categorised as follows, although some comments included in the different themes inevitably overlap: the inclusion of Italian learners in

[9] For the purposes of this paper we subscribe to the following definition of a L2 (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017:2): "Second language acquisition (SLA) refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language. The additional language is called a second language (L2), even though it may actually be the third, fourth or tenth to be acquired".

schools and their participation during lessons of Italian; learning Maltese and English. We also add reflections on the maintenance of Italian learners' L1, but in this case we mainly report findings from the interviews included in Palazzo (2020: 50-54), since she delved into this issue more specifically than we did in our own data collection.

The inclusion of Italian learners in schools and their participation during lessons of Italian

Comments regarding the inclusion of Italian students vary considerably, and while some refer to difficulties they face, the feedback provided by others is more encouraging: for example, while one teacher (comment 1) is very positive, another one (comment 2) affirms that Italians feel included 'most of the time', but that a lack of knowledge of Maltese constitutes a barrier:

1. *Yes, very included. They obviously had to face difference in culture and a language problem but they adapted very quickly and both now can speak good Maltese.* (Secondary school teacher)

2. *They feel included most of the time. However, at times, students speak in Maltese amongst each other and the Italian students do not understand so they cannot fully interact with them.* (Secondary school teacher)

Another teacher (comment 3) refers to issues regarding the socialisation of Italian learners who do not mix with the Maltese, while the EO (comment 4) and another teacher (comment 5) provide some insights into difficulties that Italian learners face in order to participate in lessons of their L1, while also reflecting on the reasons for these and suggesting possible solutions:

3. *Unfortunately, they do not tend to mix with Maltese students. They tend to stay in groups with other foreigners or Italian counterparts.* (Secondary school teacher)

4. *The reluctance which I observed came also from the fact that some Italian native speakers are shy to speak in front of others and not because the teacher does not encourage them to. It seems like something which has to do with peer pressure, related to teenage years or with the need to integrate as students from another country.* (Education Officer – Italian)

5. *The two Italian students started to sit together and kept away from the rest of their peers. However, I encouraged them to participate in the lesson and with their peers through small group work. This helped them integrate more and eventually be accepted by their peers.* (Secondary school teacher)

In comment 6 below, a post-secondary school teacher explains that these learners 'feel welcome'. S/he then adds that other students of the same nationality help to 'adapt themselves'. This is quite similar to some of the statements in the comments above, in which reference is made to clustering among foreign nationals. This teacher also reports the experience of one learner who left school after finding difficulties to adapt herself to the local system:

6. *The majority of these students feel welcome at school and in class. At the moment, there is quite a number of Italian students in the school and in some way or another, they help each other to adapt themselves. Nevertheless, this year, I had a student in the 2nd year A-level class (from Sicily) who quit school after Christmas recess. She was a very diligent student but she was missing her home country and was finding it difficult to adapt herself to Maltese schooling.* (Post-secondary school teacher)

Some information, for which official data is not available, provides indications that Italian students in our schools are sometimes placed in lower tracks or bands, because of difficulties to follow some lessons due to limited competence in Maltese and English. This is also reported by Palazzo (2020: 50), as only two out of the eight students she interviewed are placed in high-ability tracks or bands. One comment from a secondary school teacher refers to this explicitly, and to how, absurdly, this also determines the group in which the student is placed during lessons of his/her L1 and how this leads to lack of motivation:

7. *This student was placed in a low band, since his marks were rather low in main subjects, which resulted in him being in a low band in Italian too. Of course, this made the simplified material and the exercises the other students found intellectually challenging very easy and boring for him so he was never motivated.* (Secondary school teacher)

Such issues explain why some students attend school 'unwillingly' or are 'absent most of the time', although in comment 8 below, the teacher also refers, somewhat vaguely, to learners' 'attitude'. Comment 9, refers to bullying – another problem which is mentioned quite often:

8. *There were other instances where Italian students did not cooperate... as I said it was due to their attitude: they came to school unwillingly and were absent most of the time so they were unreliable.* (Secondary school teacher)

9. *This particular student was victim of some bullying, his level of absenteeism is high. He does not participate if not asked to directly, he does not like attention and sits on his own at the back. He tends to be easily bored too that is why I still involve him, I ask him to read and give feedback on Italian culture and he contributes.* (Secondary school teacher)

Besides absenteeism, cases of bullying are also reported by five of the eight Italian students interviewed by Palazzo (2020: 65-66), generally as a consequence of lack of inclusion. Bullying towards foreign nationals is one of the major problems outlined by the LSEs included in a study carried out by Baschiera & Caruana (2020).

Learning Maltese and English

For all migrants, learning the language/s of the context in which they are immersed represents an important step for better inclusion. This is especially important as far as schools are concerned as competence in the language/s of instruction is fundamental both for scholastic attainment and socialisation. In this respect, the Maltese context can present several challenges, because two languages of instruction are used and because they vary considerably both according to their functions and to the context in which they are employed (e.g. school sector, subject being taught etc.), as recently reported by Panzavecchia & Little (2020). Code-switching and mixing between Maltese and English, both in teacher-talk and during interactions between students, can present additional challenges.

In the data we collected, Italian learners' disposition to learn Maltese and English was often praised, as in comment 1, in the previous section. Others provide similar comments to those referred to earlier (see, for example, comment 3) with emphasis on the fact that they 'speak well' in both languages (comments 10 and 11). One of these two teachers (comment 10) also states that Italian students cluster with "foreigners or English-speaking students" – a topic which cuts across all our themes:

10. *They know how to speak very well both in English and in Maltese. During break they mostly stay with other foreigners or English-speaking students.* (Secondary school teacher)

11. *Even though he does revert to Italian when he speaks, he has a sound knowledge of Maltese and English and so there are no language barriers with his peers, his other teachers and the rest of the school community.* (Secondary school teacher)

Comment 12 below is included in the response of a teacher in a primary school, and is very similar to Baschiera & Caruana's (2020) findings in relation to the fact that age is a determining factor in learning languages, with younger learners facing less difficulties than older ones. Nevertheless, in spite of some difficulties, even older students have the potential to adjust, as explained in Comment 13:

12. *The main challenge for Italian students regards their communication skills when they get here: many do not know either English or Maltese. Nevertheless continuous exposure to the new languages (…) helps them surmount this obstacle.* (Teacher of the Italian programme in an independent school)

13. *Yes, I can safely say that the students have adjusted well in Post-Secondary, where they feel at home and on the island in general (quoting some of them). I know one student had some trouble adjusting to Secondary School as she experienced some form of "culture shock". One of the challenges these students possibly face is when the class interacts in Maltese. Though this does not faze the Italian natives, I think it is almost expected. One in particular who has been here five years can also speak a bit of Maltese and understands much of it. The rest can cope well thanks to the daily routine that may entail a degree of repetition. Looks like they cope by predicting or assuming what will happen next. The Maltese students feel very comfortable around the Italians also because the latter can communicate well in English.* (Post Secondary school teacher)

Insofar as the induction hubs are concerned, students included in Palazzo's (2020) study state that these are helpful to learn the basics of Maltese and English, notwithstanding the fact that sometimes they miss a whole year of mainstream schooling in order to attend these classes, or they are 'pulled-out' of their mainstream classrooms. A similar consideration is also made by the students' parents, also interviewed by Palazzo (2020: 70-73), who speak

positively about these hubs in terms of their role in helping their children gain basic competencies in both languages.

The maintenance of Italian learners' L1

As previously outlined, the maintenance of migrants' heritage language/s concerns their personal and social identity. Undoubtedly, the geographical proximity between Malta and Italy, the presence of Italian media locally and the large Italian community on the island create opportunities for Italians to keep contact with their L1. The knowledge of Italian in Malta is quite widespread, although this has decreased considerably in the recent years (Caruana & Pace, 2015).

Palazzo's (2020, 50-56) data provide insights regarding language maintenance, the first of which is that all her subjects chose not to study Italian at school as they opted for Spanish instead, with one going as far as saying that she does 'not like' Italian:

14. *l'ho scelto io…perché non mi piace l'italiano e mi piace la lingua spagnola*[10] (Year 7 student, in Malta for the past 6 years).

A Year 8 student, when speaking about Year 9 options, has a different point of view as he explains that he intends studying Italian:

15. *Poi, quando dovrò scegliere un'altra lingua, se la sceglierò, mi sa che sceglierò l'italiano, perché inizio già a dimenticarlo [ride imbarazzato] […] a casa parlo in italiano, però tipo stare 6/7 ore a scuola al giorno mi fa…devo parlare l'inglese*[11]. (Year 8 student, in Malta for the past two years).

There are also examples of Italian students who, while speaking in Italian[12], use English nomenclature to refer to school-related topics just like locals do, although there are corresponding forms for these in Italian. Examples include instances of intra-sentential switching such as: "*…durante il parents' evening*[13]"; "*quella di design e technology [l'insegnante] dà sempre…tipo detention. Solo perché*

[10] I chose it ... because I do not like Italian and I like Spanish.

[11] Then, when I'll have to choose another language, if I choose one, I think I'll choose Italian, because I'm already starting to forget it [laughs with embarrassment] […].at home I speak Italian, but staying 6/7 hours daily at school makes me ... I must speak English.

[12] The semi-structured interviews included in Palazzo (2020) were held in Italian, as evident also in some comments included in this section of our paper.

[13] During the parents' evening.

magari ti scordi l'apron[14]" and other sentences in which they use the words "*pitch*", "*gym*", "*timetable*" and "*locker*". One student also uses the English-based calque "*soggetto*" to refer to school subjects, although this is incorrect in Italian[15].

Although the above may be deemed instances of language attrition they are not necessarily accompanied by distancing from one's culture of origin. Although Palazzo's (2020) subjects acknowledge the importance of learning Maltese and English to feel included, and that they thereby limit their use of Italian in certain contexts, they still express a strong degree of attachment towards their culture of origin. This is also confirmed by the three teachers included in this study, and by some of the teachers from whom we gathered our own data. One teacher refers to how an Italian student marks his/her own identity by intervening during the lesson of Italian:

16. *Sometimes I say a word, and I am sure that it is correct, and he puts up his hand and tells me: Non si dice così da noi*[16]*. This also happens when we are doing some cultural aspect. At Christmas time, when I mentioned some typical Italian sweets, he said, Da noi non si mangia quello*[17]*. Obviously, he relates to what he is used to in the locality where he was brought up and where his paternal relatives still live.* (Secondary School teacher, referring to a Year 9 student, in Malta for the past three years)

The Italian classroom should also offer opportunities for maintenance of the heritage language, as shown in the following case where reference is made to how Italian learners can be an 'asset' to other students who are learning this language, especially if they overcome their shyness or reluctance to participate. This can be achieved if they are motivated adequately, also by being actively involved:

17. *To me and to his peers, this student is an asset to have in class. He participates during the lesson. At first, I was somewhat hesitant to involve him much because I was scared that his peers would feel intimidated by his level of proficiency, however, I was mistaken. Now he helps me set the pace during the*

[14] The one of Design and Technology [the teacher] always gives…like, detention. Only maybe just because you forget the apron.
[15] The correct form in Italian for this is '*materia*'.
[16] We do not say so.
[17] We do not eat that.

lesson and is a 'model' which helps me and the class, especially during speaking activities. (Secondary school teacher)

One of our teachers, however, also pointed out how regional language varieties characterise the production of Italian nationals, as two Sicilians did not find it easy to adapt their pronunciation to standard Italian:

18. *There were two Sicilian students and I asked them to help out during the oral part. It was not easy for them because they had to use standard Italian.*

Italian students generally speak highly of Malta, while also speaking in very positive terms of their home country and of the region where they were brought up, in very positive terms. Some express a desire to return to their homeland in due course, revealing a strong bond with their heritage culture. They inevitably use Italian limitedly in the school context, also because of the pressing need to learn the context languages. It is interesting to see how some technicisms related to school are used in English, thereby revealing their adaptation to school-life in Malta.

Conclusion

Contact with the Italian language in Malta has had peaks and troughs, with periods during which it was present very sparingly (e.g. the post-War years) to others when its popularity led to a considerable degree of spontaneous acquisition among locals (e.g. the years during which TV channels were very popular). Today, the growing Italian community represents a new phase of the island's contacts with Italy and with Italians. The nature of migration has changed today and it is often no longer a "a permanent, one-way settlement of people, but sustained movement into increasingly diversified spaces, resulting in a multilayering of different cultures, communities, and languages" (Diskin, 2020: 1-2). Albeit, since many Italian learners in our schools are very young, one can assume that quite a number of them will remain in Malta for a large portion of their life. Although it is yet too early to determine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on this situation, and while some Italian nationals have returned to their homeland in the past months, it is still likely that the presence of the Italian community in schools will be sustained in the future. These learners render our schools more multilingual and multicultural, thereby creating a 'pluricultural space' (Council of Europe, 2020: 114-115).

While the induction hubs provide a space for migrant learners to improve their competence of the context languages, adequate in-class support should also be provided and sustained. Effective provisions ought to ascertain that they attain adequate competence in both context languages, as underlined by Coste & Cavalli (2015: 62), among others: "Competences in the language of schooling, also the language of the host country in the case of migrants, obviously need to be developed in all cases: they are essential for effective and lasting integration in the society in question".

In relation to this, our contribution provides indications that the inclusion of Italian learners in local schools may not always be plain-sailing. While acknowledging the limitations of our work, mainly due to its small-scale nature, our thematic analysis leads to the following reflections: firstly, it is evident that learning the two context languages may prove difficult and that, in some cases, it delays successful mainstreaming. Baschiera & Caruana (2020) refer that difficulties are more pronounced in the cases of learners who join their class in secondary school. Support from linguistic and/or cultural mediators, professional figures which are still absent within our educational system, is urgently required in some cases, even though teachers and LSEs who speak Italian sometimes intervene to help Italian learners feel more welcome, especially during the initial stages of their schooling in Malta. This is especially important since the local educational system differs considerably from the Italian one (Caruana, 2020).

Secondly, although one might assume that studying their own L1 locally would be a relatively seamless process for Italian learners, a few difficulties were noted: for example, not all of them participate actively in classroom activities often because they do not feel motivated to do so. Initiatives taken by teachers, such as group work, collaborative learning and presenting materials which are of interest to native speakers, as well as to L2 learners, can resolve these problems.

Thirdly, some findings, including those of Palazzo (2020), indicate that some learners start exhibiting symptoms of language attrition, also as a consequence of not using Italian at school. Nevertheless, they retain strong ties with their homeland, expressing pride for their cultural heritage, which is generally associated with the town, province or region where they were born, rather than with Italy as a whole. This pride could be a means to create more awareness regarding Italy and Italian among all learners in our schools, while

also giving value to the intercultural dimension of language education[18] (Castro & Sercu, 2005).

Finally, reference was often made to in-class and out-of-class 'clusters', with students of foreign nationality who do not mix readily with the Maltese. In the case of contact with Italian, raising awareness that cultural and geographical 'nearness' involves similarities and differences, and that both can have their space in our schooling, is the first step towards better inclusion. This would also avoid problems that are the cause of segregation, such as attainment issues which could result from being placed in low tracks, in a similar vein to Camozzi's (2020) observations, and bullying. This awareness also includes language, especially if Italian is not limited to the lessons of this language, but is presented in terms of intercomprehension[19] (Dufour, 2018), for example by occasionally making explicit the several lexical items and syntactic patterns that it shares with both Maltese and English, and by asking students to focus on the local linguistic landscape which is rife with Italianisms. This would help all students realise that Italian is strongly present locally, while enabling Italian students to appreciate that Malta is 'so near' to their homeland, rather than 'so far'.

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[18] Camenzuli's (2020) research provides noteworthy insights and recommendations regarding a proposed 'shift' towards more dynamic and fluid language practices in local classrooms, starting from an early age.

[19] The resource available online provides an example of intercomprehension between Romance languages: https://www.eurom5.com/p/chisiamo/intercomprensione

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