

The Challenges of Learning Maltese in Bilingual Malta A Study with Adult Learners Following the *I Belong* Language Integration Programme

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Abstract

Proficiency in the language spoken in the host country permeates all aspects of reception and integration for adult migrants who seek to relocate to and live in a new country. For the newly arrived adult migrant, acquisition of the host society's language will depend in part on the potential access to the language (including its teaching in the host society) but also on the extent to which it is used in everyday life. With Malta having two official languages, language integration acquires a new, more complex dimension. In this respect, the Maltese-English bilingual context can present several challenges, because both languages are important and because they vary considerably in respect to their function and to the domain in which they are used. In this study we look into the narratives of 15 adult migrants following the *I Belong* Maltese language integration programme by linking the classroom experience to their needs and actual exposure to the Maltese language in their everyday life. Results indicate that participants' experience of the programme is overall positive, with many showing how their interest in the Maltese language goes beyond a certificate which allows them to apply for long term residence in Malta, to a genuine interest in the Maltese language and way of life. Language needs and exposure vary drastically, with participants reporting varied levels of interaction within the community and factors such as locality of residence, type of employment, and reliance on the English language all playing a significant role in the challenge of learning Maltese in bilingual Malta.

Keywords: adult migrants, language integration, Maltese as a FL, *I Belong*

Introduction

In the last few decades, countries all over the world with a significant migrant population, have concentrated more effort than ever before on the integration of migrants into the host society. As complex as the concept of integration may be, a crucial element that is agreed upon by governments and other worldwide bodies is the importance of learning or becoming proficient in the language/s of the host country. The Council of Europe was pioneer in addressing migrant-related issues on the importance of learning the language of the host country, with the first resolution on migrants ever adopted by the Committee of Ministers concerning “the teaching of languages to migrant workers” dating back to 1968 (Beacco et al., 2014). It has since been highlighting the importance of migrants’ linguistic education over time particularly, but not exclusively through its Language Policy Division (Council of Europe, 2008; 2014) and numerous projects such as the *Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants* (LIAM) project (www.coe.int/en/web/lang-migrants).

Knowledge and proficiency in the language of the host country enable migrants to become independent members of that society and help them evolve a deeper understanding on a sociocultural level since languages are ‘carriers’ of social values and norms (Hammer, 2017). Participation is also necessary in order to have successful integration, and language is undoubtedly a precondition for participation. Moreover, whilst learning the language can be a requirement for residence or citizenship, this is to be regarded as an initial step that leads to social coherence:

The language proficiency and the knowledge of the host society needed by adult migrants to become involved and responsible social players should be designed to promote social coherence in the long run, since the obtaining of legal citizenship is just a further stage in an integration process that will continue. (Council of Europe, 2008 p.5)

The Council of Europe asserts that learning the language of the host country is a key component of integration (Beacco et al., 2014), and in order to obtain the required language skills needed for residence in a number of European countries, up to 250 hours of language courses are provided by nearly all member states. The courses are financed by the government in most of the member states, with half of these countries providing language courses completely free of charge (Council of Europe, 2020).

In 2017, Malta started implementing the *Integration=Belonging: Migrant Integration Strategy & Action Plan (Vision 2020)* launched by the then Ministry for European Affairs and Equality, with the intention of setting up a stronger framework for integration of migrants who were already working and living in Malta. Following the example of many other European countries, as part of this strategy, Malta introduced an integration programme for migrants called *I Belong*. The programme is part-requirement for third country nationals who wish to qualify for long-term residence status (Constitution of Malta, Legal notice 278 of 2006, as amended by Legal Notices 370 of 2010, 197 of 2014 and 366 of 2015 of subsidiary legislation 217.05). Migrants wishing to follow the programme must present a formal request for integration with an itinerary consisting of two stages: Stage 1, the Pre-Integration Certificate, and Stage 2, the Qualification for Permanent Residence Status (Ministry for European Affairs and Equality, 2017). The Pre-Integration Certificate or Stage 1 consists of Maltese and English language classes, and Cultural orientation classes, all of which are pegged at MQF Level 1. Upon successful completion of Stage 1, candidates may move onto Stage 2. Stage 2 has two specific components: i) a Cultural Component of at least one hundred hours having as its subject matter the social, economic, cultural and democratic history and environment of Malta, and ii) a Language Component with a pass mark of at least 65% in Maltese at MQF Level 2 (Ministry for European Affairs and Equality, 2017). The courses offered through the *I Belong* programme's (Stage 2) language and cultural components have been developed by the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta (Gauci & Mifsud, 2021).

While the concept of mandatory integration programmes for migrants has long been a debated subject in academia, empirical research on the implementation of such programmes which specifically considers migrants' perspectives is rare, representing a lacuna in the literature. Established less than four years ago, the *I Belong* programme has not yet been formally researched, and although language education for adult migrants in Malta has been explored in a few research studies (Bugre & Chana, 2018; Brown et al., 2020; Żammit, 2021; Żammit 2022), this programme has not enjoyed the same treatment, with the exception of the study conducted by Sonne (2021) which focuses on the cultural orientation component. Within this scenario, the *I Belong* Maltese language programme represents uncharted territory and our main objective in this paper is to provide insights that emerge from the lived experience of 15 adult migrants on their individual journeys to integration through the *I Belong*

Stage 2 programme while learning Maltese, one of the two official languages spoken in Malta.

The Local Bilingual Context

The Constitution of Malta recognises Maltese as the national language and gives English co-official status. Therefore, as official languages, “the administration may for all official purposes use any of such languages” (Constitution of Malta, p.7). In a national census conducted in 2011, people aged 10 and over were asked to indicate how well they spoke a number of languages, including Maltese and English. 93.2 % of participants said they could speak fluently in Maltese. As for English, nearly two-thirds said they could speak it well, while another 16.3 % claimed to have an average standard (National Statistics Office, 2014). According to a more recent survey conducted in collaboration with the National Statistics Office entitled *The State of the Maltese Language* (2021), 97% of Maltese citizens aged between 18 and 80 consider Maltese as their first and preferred language even though, living in a bilingual country, they are also frequently exposed to English.

Whilst the Constitution appears to indicate Maltese and English as officially equal in terms of policy, the reality is that usage of these two languages differs according to domain, and thus both languages are not mutually exclusive (Bugre & Chana, 2018). Maltese and English are used in different situations, with Maltese being predominantly preferred for the spoken modality than it is for writing (Camilleri Grima, 2016; *The State of the Maltese Language*, 2021). Maltese is the language preferred for most local television and radio stations as well as for religious services. On the other hand, English “predominates in spheres such as tourism, industry, entertainment, commerce and the mass media” (Council of Europe, 2015, p.13). Perception in the use of the two languages offers another important dimension into the language situation in Malta; social stigma is a reality that exclusive speakers of Maltese or English face. Whilst English is seen as an important language for communication and for improving economic prospects, Maltese is seen as a symbol of national identity (Council of Europe, 2015).

Categorising Maltese and English according to domains in which they are most frequently used is a helpful, yet very general and tentative way of looking at the complex linguistic situation in Malta. Since a strict separation in the use of the two languages does not always apply, a speaker who seeks to truly understand and be involved in Maltese society will need to know both

languages (Camilleri Grima, 2013). Moreover, even those who claim to use Maltese or English exclusively, usually code-switch and code-mix from time to time in their interactions. Therefore, as in any other bilingual country, being able to switch from one language to the other is key (Council of Europe, 2015).

As official languages, and as stated in the Constitution, Maltese and English should in theory both be used in official government correspondence. However, the reality is that there is often “a division of labour between Maltese and English in the same written document” (Camilleri Grima, 2013, p. 49). This means that the two languages may be used on separate pages within the same document, with each language used for different information, and readers who are not familiar with both the Maltese and English register may struggle to understand and “find themselves excluded and disadvantaged at one point or another” (ibid) which further demonstrates that proficiency in both languages is desired. *The National Policy for the Teaching of Maltese as a Foreign Language in the Framework of Bilingualism and Plurilingualism* (Ministry for Education, 2019) and the *National Literacy Strategy for All (2021-2030)* (Ministry for Education, 2021) further support the strong political and societal desire to maintain balanced bilingualism and aim to ensure that all people living in Malta are provided with opportunities to develop bilingualism in Maltese and English. Both documents stress the importance of Maltese and English as bilingual assets for children and adults alike.

In conclusion, the linguistic situation in Malta is complex and relies on the combined use of Maltese and English, and some codes in between. Thus, in order to permeate every part of Maltese society and culture, knowledge of both languages is essential.

The Study

In this study we explore the perceptions of a number of migrants following the *I Belong* Maltese Stage 2 language integration programme focusing on two main aspects, namely:

- i) Learners’ perceptions of the *I Belong* programme and their learning of Maltese;
- ii) Learners’ exposure to the Maltese language outside the language classroom.

The study is conducted with the third *I Belong* cohort, which completed Stage 2 in April 2021. A total of 15 out of 91 participants responded to the call to take

part in the study. Aside from being all third country nationals (TCNs) learning Maltese as a foreign language, the participants in the study have little in common, reflecting the heterogeneity that is synonymous with *I Belong* groups. Participants are aged between 26 and 45 and come from 10 different countries with the majority being from Serbia followed by Armenia, Costa Rica, Eritrea, India, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Venezuela, Libya and Cameroon. 10 out of the 15 participants are male and five are female. They come from diverse educational backgrounds, with all except two of them possessing a post-secondary or higher level of education. The majority of participants are either manual workers or working in the health sector. All participants can speak a minimum of two languages, with more than half of them speaking three, four or more languages. All participants have been living in Malta for longer than a year, with the large majority of them having lived in the country for more than five years.

For the purpose of this study, focus group interviews were chosen as the best method to capture the perceptions of participants. These allow for an emphasis on interaction between the participants about the topic set by the researchers, and the collective set helps reduce the risk of interviewee fatigue due to the somewhat strenuous nature of the “question and answer” approach used in individual interviews. A drawback of focus groups is that they may be “less-focused” in nature due to the number of interviewees, and may thus produce less data than interviews. However, the positives of this method are plentiful and, for this research, they outweigh the negatives since they empower participants to speak out, allow for the development of certain themes and topics, and also provide great coverage of issues (Cohen et al., 2007).

Since the course is of a six-month duration, it was decided that the best way to analyze developing and potentially changing perceptions and experiences was to hold three one-hour-long focus group interviews at three different periods of the course, namely at the beginning, mid-way and the end of the course. Participants were randomly grouped into three groups; six in the first group, four in the second group and five in the third group according to their availabilities for the first group interview. Interviews were held at a two-month interval, and due to the Covid-19 pandemic these were conducted online via Zoom which happened to be the same platform used to conduct the lessons. Interviews were conducted in English which was the language in which participants were most comfortable speaking.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature with mainly open-ended questions that enabled participants to discuss their interpretations in a flexible manner. This allowed for the avoidance of the rigidity of structured interviews, and for the researchers to interact and clarify responses with participants (Chadwick et al., 2008). In fact, during interviews participants often added to, clarified and even expressed agreement or disagreement with what other interviewees stated and the absence of rigidity and the “question and answer” approach enabled this. Prior to the interviews, participants were made aware of the purpose and conditions of the research, as well as their right to withdraw from the research at any point during or after the interview. They gave their informed consent in writing and in accordance with procedures stipulated by the University of Malta’s Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee, which approved the study. Each focus group interview was recorded, transcribed and anonymised.

Results

In order to provide insights regarding adult learners’ perceptions, thoughts, and opinions of the *I Belong* programme and their exposure to the Maltese language in the community, we will here present the data gathered from the three interviews held with each of the three focus groups. The data are presented chronologically, as collected from the three interviews, and thematically as the themes emerged, first in relation to the course and then to learners’ exposure to the Maltese language. The participants are referred to with pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity. Table 1 summarizes the main themes that emerged from the data.

The programme	Exposure to Maltese
Motivations and expectations	Impressions and comprehension of the Maltese language
Reflections on the course programme and delivery	Practical applications of learning
Course experience	Interaction with the Maltese community

Table 1: Main themes emerging from the data

The programme

Motivations and expectations

During the initial interview participants were asked to give their reasons for deciding to take this programme. The most common motivation was the possibility of applying for the five-year residence permit with 12/15 participants stating this as one of their motivations. Nine participants expressed that one of their motivations to attend the programme is related to employment; many said they felt better proficiency in the Maltese language would lead to more job opportunities, whilst a few expressed that it would help them when working with their colleagues or clients:

1. *I want to improve Maltese so I can better understand some patients, particularly older people – this is a golden opportunity for us. (Ramon, healthcare worker)*
2. *All my colleagues are Maltese so I would like to learn Maltese to communicate with them. (Emilio, maintenance worker)*

Other participants indicated that proficiency in Maltese would help them meet more people, communicate with them and build better social relationships.

The vast majority of participants stated they were excited to start the course. Some participants made specific reference to Stage 1 of the *I Belong* programme in which they praised their teachers and the overall programme; they said that the fact they enjoyed the first part of the course generated excitement for the next part of their learning. A few participants, such as Julio, found the time between the first and the second part of the course to be too lengthy, and felt that they lost some of the progress made during the first part of the course:

3. *If you don't practise, you forget – my partner is from my country so I don't practise Maltese at all and now I've forgotten most of it. (Julio)*

Some participants made specific reference to the Covid-19 pandemic situation and the restrictions imposed by the Maltese government, which meant that lessons were to take place remotely. Some participants said they would have much preferred to attend classes physically, whilst others expressed apprehension around what would be a new modality of learning for most of them. Linked to this, some participants reported that the current situation meant that they had more time to dedicate to the course and to their learning,

while for others, finding the time for the *I Belong* programme (six hours per week – two hours for language and four hours for culture) proved to be difficult.

In terms of expected achievements, participants expressed largely similar ideas; yet, also a few which were context specific. Some listed goals which they deemed to be very realistic. For example, Marie acknowledged the short duration of the course and also spoke of her lack of exposure to the language, thus leading her to think she will not be able to hold a conversation at the end of the course but wanted instead to learn some things about Semitic grammar. Gary echoed this sentiment and said the course would be too short to learn to speak in Maltese but added that he hoped this course would encourage him to take further courses. Some other participants mentioned specific targets they wanted to achieve – for example being able to communicate with Maltese people, filling in application forms and read street signs and notices in Maltese.

Some participants talked about tangible goals they expected to achieve from the course and these were heavily based on a desire to communicate with the local community. Ramon, a healthcare worker, and Teodora, a hairdresser, stated that they are frequently in contact with Maltese people and they hoped that this course would give them the opportunity to improve their speaking skills so that they would be able to communicate with their patients and clients. They both expressed that on the job, communication with elderly people in particular, is especially challenging, and the participants' inability to communicate in Maltese and some of the elderly Maltese people's inability to communicate in English often results in a language barrier, which in turn leads to communication breakdown and the involvement of other people to "translate" between Maltese and English:

4. *I want to better understand some patients and speaking Maltese brings us together.* (Ramon)

The goal of feeling included and integrating with Maltese people through the Maltese language was a common theme that arose from the discussion. One participant who works with mostly Maltese colleagues shared an anecdote about when her colleagues used to watch a Maltese television series called "L-Għarusa". She said she loved hearing about the story but could never find the programme with English subtitles to allow her to follow and talk about the show along with the rest of her colleagues, leading to her often feeling excluded

from the conversation. Reflecting about this and her goals for achievement, she said:

5. *I know it's impossible to be able to watch and understand a movie by the end of this course but I hope this course can give us basic skills so we can build up on that. (Sonja)*

Reflections on the course programme and delivery

During the second focus group interviews, participants were prompted to reflect on the ongoing programme and their learning so far. Whilst reflecting on this some of the interviewees based their progress and expectations of this programme on prior learning of different languages and previous experiences of other language courses. Ramon stated that he had previously lived in Poland for a shorter time than his time in Malta and expressed a sense of frustration about the speed and rate of his learning of Maltese, especially since he felt he became quite proficient in Polish, whilst living in Poland, in a very short time. He acknowledged that he expected to learn Maltese in a shorter time since he is attending courses to learn the language as well as living in the country where the language is widely spoken. Similarly, Maria compared her language learning to that of her relatives living in Germany and the Netherlands. She said that they attended a similar language programme in Germany and learnt the language in 6 months and that other family members learnt Dutch in a year. She stated that at her current stage, she expected to be more proficient in the language of the host country. Reflecting on the competencies she feels she lacks, she said that:

6. *I wish I could make proper sentences and read documents – it's a bit annoying that I can't do this after all these months in Malta. (Maria)*

In the meantime, for most of the learners interviewed, half way through the programme their expectations of the course are being met:

7. *My expectations are being fulfilled and I'm seeing that it's possible, when you're actually doing it, you realise that wow, I can actually learn this language. (Gary)*

Gary reported that the course is giving him the confidence necessary to speak the language being learnt and revealed this was his preoccupation before starting the course, i.e., to “pass that barrier” to speak a foreign language. Similarly, Liliana said that her main expectations stemmed from her desire to

be prepared for practical interactions with the community, such as having a conversation in Maltese at the shops. She states that the course is meeting her expectations in this regard. Maria acknowledged the work done by her teacher and the organisers of the course and said that her teacher sends the participants a lot of additional information and is very patient with the learners and tries to engage all of them during the lesson and that her expectations are also being met.

Some *I Belong* participants reflected on the opportunities for genuine, life-like interaction during the course. Many compared this course with their previous experience of language learning in Stage 1, when lessons were not required to be held online due to pandemic restrictions. A key characteristic of online classes is the absence of the social aspect; in fact, almost all the participants stated that they were missing the social aspect of the programme as well as the peer interaction, which usually complement a course such as this. Gary, for example, stated that he lives with foreigners who do not speak Maltese, and that he misses the interaction with other participants before and after lessons and building friendships with peers. He said that he would like to have the opportunity to practise speaking the language with Maltese people since this would increase his engagement with the language. The participant felt that he was missing the opportunity to truly practise what he was learning and that an opportunity to speak to Maltese people in a classroom environment would help the participants with their confidence.

Almost all the participants noted the relative brevity of the language component of the programme. Some participants felt that the programme, which is around six months long, is too short for what they are expected to learn and that they were almost being rushed through the course:

8. *We need more months, 6 months is not enough – this is the only problem, we need more time.* (Teodora)

Some participants feel that the two hours of tuition time should be spread over two shorter sessions, held on different days in the week, to prevent fatigue during the lesson. In addition to this, some feel that the time spent on language lessons and culture lessons is rather imbalanced. They get four hours of lessons per week for the cultural component of the programme and only two hours for the language component; and some stated that they would prefer if it were the other way around. Elaborating further on this, Liliana added that whilst she

greatly enjoys the culture and history lessons, she would rather have more hours dedicated to language:

9. *I'd like more hours on language and less hours for history because history is not hard to learn, I can read some books but for language, you need classes and a teacher. (Liliana)*

The participants also reflected on the group sizes and the mix in abilities of the learners. Dimitri and David stated that the mode of learning, i.e., online, resulted in differences in ability becoming more pronounced. Dimitri said that at times the lessons feel “slowed down”, which, he feels is a result of the different abilities of the learners which is made more evident when lessons are held online. He said that under normal circumstances, the dynamic and flexible nature of traditional classroom lessons minimises this problem. Additionally, the two participants also stated that they felt the group size was too large; according to Dimitri, fifteen learners in the same group resulted in some learners losing attention, which once again meant the lessons were slowed down. Both participants stated that this issue was not evident in the classroom mode of learning and David added that having a mix of abilities in the traditional classroom is usually a positive as “people learn from each other”.

Course experience

The final group interviews were held at the end of April 2021, and as the course drew to an end the researchers attempted to prompt the participants using questions and discussion to talk about their overall opinions of the programme. Most of the learners interviewed acknowledged that their language skills have improved in different ways.

10. *My Maltese has improved, especially my vocabulary and most of all, my confidence to speak. (Dimitri)*

11. *I was never interested to learn the language, but now that I'm studying it, I can understand so much, it's amazing. (David)*

Gary repeated this sentiment and said that he had never thought it would be possible to learn even the basics of the language, and considers his experience of following the programme a great achievement. Teodora also reported that taking the course has been a momentous achievement for her and hopes that her persistence to juggle attending classes whilst working in a full-time job will inspire her children:

12. *I am learning because of me and my kids; I want to show them that if I can do this, they can do anything.* (Teodora)

Exposure to Maltese

Impressions and comprehension of the Maltese language

At the start of their learning journey, many participants stated that they are very exposed to the Maltese language:

13. *I hear it everywhere: shopping mall, street, bus stop.* (Emilio)

14. *Well, I hear it everywhere around here because I live in a small village.* (Maria)

Some participants claimed that they regularly watch/listen to Maltese television shows and/or radio programmes and many acknowledged that they are exposed to the language through their workplace. In fact, eleven of the fifteen participants indicated that they are exposed to Maltese at their workplace. Ricardo, who works in a warehouse, says that he hears the Maltese language “all the time” and expressed that his colleagues sometimes do not understand him when he speaks in English so he considers this to be a motivation for learning Maltese. Dimitri and Sonja also said that they are “extremely” exposed to the language and said that at their workplace, they are the only people who do not speak Maltese fluently, whilst their colleagues or clients are not fluent in English, which in turn, means that they try to find a ‘middle-ground’:

15. *So I realised that we can find a way to communicate if I speak very slowly in English and I can understand their question in Maltese.* (Dimitri, maritime worker)

16. *I work with Maltese people, I am the only foreigner there, and my clients are also Maltese.* (Sonja, office worker)

In terms of exposure to the language, there were some notable exceptions from participants who stated that they are not very exposed to the language through their workplace. Marie works in a bar in a busy, commercial area of the island and says that she never hears the Maltese language at her workplace, as all her colleagues are foreign. Similarly, Liliana, who works in hospitality, says:

17. *At my workplace, nobody speaks Maltese because they are all foreigners. But I want the opportunity to know how to use the language. (Liliana, works in the hospitality industry)*

Some of the participants acknowledged that one's locality of residence affects exposure of the Maltese language. Vlado and Teodora live in the same locality in the northern part of the island and they both stated that they do not ever hear the Maltese language in their community because of the number of foreigners that live in their neighbourhood:

18. *In my area, I hear more Serbian around me than Maltese. (Teodora)*

Liliana stated that she used to live in the same locality as Vlado and Teodora but she has since moved to a village in the south of the island. She stated that the limited exposure to the language frustrated her as she has been trying to improve her proficiency in Maltese for several years. Liliana added that her decision to move south was in part due to this frustration, and says:

19. *Where I live now, we don't have a lot of foreigners so I hear [the language] everywhere and now I can understand more than before – I moved here on purpose because I wanted to live with locals and be forced to speak in Maltese. (Liliana)*

From these first group interviews, the researchers set out to get a sense of what, and how much, of the language the participants already knew, so the participants were prompted to reflect on their comprehension of the language.

A few of the participants said that over the years, they memorised phrases, which they frequently use with specific people. These phrases are sometimes context specific. For example, Teodora, a hairdresser, said that Maltese people love it when she says some phrases like *xagħar sabiħ*. Similarly, Sonja said that when she says phrases such as *zomm il-linja*, her Maltese clients and colleagues appreciate it. Moreover, Maria has learnt how to talk about work shifts with her colleagues and ask questions such as *inti għada xogħol?* Liliana, a hospitality worker, also said that whilst she has only learnt the basics of Maltese so far, she has memorised phrases to pass on to potential foreign clients wishing to learn some words and practical expressions to use whilst visiting the island. Liliana also stated that people in the community have taught her how to ask for things.

Her butcher, for example, taught her how to ask for different meat and how to say, “good morning” and “good afternoon” in Maltese.

When prompted to talk about their comprehension of Maltese, some of the participants referred to the English language and how sometimes this can hinder their learning of Maltese:

20. *I can often work out the meaning from context, but since English is very well-spoken on the island, that stops me from trying to speak it because I just use English. (Julio)*
21. *When Maltese people see you struggling to speak Maltese, they switch to English, which is why it's so difficult to learn. (Maria)*
22. *I try to speak in Maltese but people are usually very confused so I switch to English... perhaps English is our support so maybe we are a bit lazy and just revert to English. (Gary)*

For some of the other participants, the fact that English is very widely spoken among the Maltese community serves as a way to re-enforce comprehension and aid communication. For example, Teodora says she often code-switches between English and Maltese when she is talking to a Maltese person; she said: “I say things like: *jiena* need to go out with *il-kelb*”. In this case, learners like Teodora see English as a way to attempt communicating in Maltese without the pressures of needing to exclusively communicate in one language to guarantee effective communication.

Practical applications of learning

Participants were prompted by the researchers to talk about their exposure to the language to analyse whether any changes in this regard are reported as the course progresses. A general observation was that as the course progresses and learners become increasingly more exposed to the language through their lessons, the majority of them were making conscious efforts to continue to improve their language proficiency and showed an awareness of understanding and learning when interacting with people and going about their daily lives.

All participants seemed to be complementing what they were learning during the *I Belong* programme with additional learning taking place outside the language programme. For example, Dimitri said that as a father whose children

attend primary school in Malta, he tries to further gain proficiency and comprehension in the language by helping his children with their homework. He states that whilst his intention is primarily on simply helping his children with their homework, this has greatly helped him because it serves as a repetition of concepts and material that he has covered in his course.

23. I can't understand everything, but I think I can read well, especially because I am learning with my kids. (Dimitri)

Similarly, David said that he is actively trying to expose himself more to the language by doing two things: watching more Maltese television and writing basic messages to his friends in Maltese. Dimitri added that whilst he does not have much time to watch television, he listens to radio programmes in Maltese whilst commuting to and from work and reported that he understands around 30% of what he hears but is able to understand more when he is familiar with the context and topic.

Furthermore, all participants demonstrated an increased awareness of their own comprehension of the language and gave some examples by referring to specific episodes of learning as a result of an increased confidence gained from the course:

24. I speak a lot more in Maltese now – when you learn the grammar, the rules and how you should speak, you feel more confident because you know it's like that – you know what you're saying is about right. (Gary)

Interaction with the Maltese community

Participants demonstrated that as the course progressed, they increased their interaction with people in the larger community and recounted their experiences during the interviews. Liliana and Maria spoke about making efforts to use the Maltese language at work. Maria works in a care home for elderly residents and expressed that her residents have experienced periods of isolation due to pandemic restrictions on visits from members outside the care-home. She stated that throughout the last few months, she was often the only contact for these residents and that this really empowered her to speak in Maltese:

25. Sometimes I write down messages that my colleagues help me write so I can read it out to the residents; [the residents] are always very happy when I do this. (Maria)

She also added that she often tries to communicate with these residents in Maltese since they are sometimes not proficient in English, which has prompted her to further speak the language and improve her skills.

Liliana, who works in a hotel, states that in most cases the guests with whom she interacts are foreign, but because of the limitations on travel, during the pandemic most of her guests have been Maltese. She says that she used this as an opportunity to improve her Maltese by greeting them with “*bongħu, kif inti?*”. Expressing frustration that the guests quickly switch back to English when they realise she is foreign, she added that she explicitly asks the guests to communicate with her in Maltese, to which they most often happily oblige. Gary also said that he tries to communicate with his colleagues in Maltese much more than before he started the programme. He said the fact that he is surrounded by mostly Maltese colleagues, speaking the language, or at least trying to, allows him to feel more included in the conversations.

Similarly, some of the participants said that they try their best to communicate with their friends in Maltese. Ramon said that he had come to an agreement with his Maltese friends that when they meet, they try to communicate in Maltese and then switch to English whenever Ramon struggles to understand. Ramon also notes how the people outside of his circle of friends become very appreciative when he tries to communicate in Maltese. Speaking about the people he meets in the shop or on the street, he said:

26. *When we speak Maltese with them, they become friendlier with us because they see that we are trying.* (Ramon)

Conclusion

For the newly arrived adult migrant, learning the language of the host country represents an important step for better integration. Success in learning the language depends in part on the potential access to the language (including its teaching in the host society) but also on the extent to which learners are exposed to the language and actually use it in their everyday life. In this respect, the Maltese context can present several challenges, because both official languages, Maltese and English, are used extensively and in order to permeate every part of Maltese society and culture, knowledge of both languages is essential.

In relation to this, our contribution has focused on the experiences of a group of 15 adult learners following the *I Belong* Stage 2 Maltese language integration programme, completion of which is also part requirement for TCNs wishing to apply for long-term residence status in Malta (Constitution of Malta). While acknowledging the limitations of our work mainly due to its small-scale nature, our thematic analysis leads to a number of significant reflections.

Firstly, migrants do not fit in a single category of learners and it is evident that there is no “one size fits all” language programme. Apart from the fact that participants come with different language and educational backgrounds, they also have a variety of needs. The need to learn and interact with people in Maltese as well as the amount of exposure to the language they get are heavily dependent on a number of variables, most prominently being the learners’ employment and their locality of residence. Healthcare workers and service people working in an office or a hair salon report a much greater need to communicate in Maltese than people working in the hospitality industry. Similarly, learners residing in small villages had more opportunities to be exposed to and practise the Maltese language than those living in areas with a high population of foreigners. Notwithstanding this, all learners were perspicuous on the positive effects brought about from speaking and understanding the Maltese language. Amongst others, proficiency in Maltese helps them feel more confident and generally more aware of what is happening around them, and allows them to be involved in conversations and interactions with locals. Moreover, Maltese people are visibly more open and friendlier to them and appear appreciative of their efforts to speak the language.

Secondly, some participants said that because English is so widely spoken on the island, this stops them from learning Maltese. This happens particularly when Maltese people resort to English as soon as they realise that they are struggling with Maltese. When this happens, different positions are taken. Some just give up on trying to speak Maltese because they seem to get on well enough with English; others use Maltese with the reassurance that they can resort to English as needed to re-enforce comprehension. Others feel a sense of frustration because they are not given a chance to practise Maltese as they would like to and feel that this hinders and drastically slows down their learning process especially when compared to the speed in which they learned other languages when living in other countries.

Thirdly, there seems to be a common consensus amongst learners that the number of hours allocated are not enough to reach the desired level of proficiency. Already from the very first focus group interviews, some participants showed they did not have expectations for reaching high proficiency in Maltese due to the limited number of hours assigned to the language component of *I Belong*. The same sentiment prevailed towards the end of the course, when participants felt they were being “rushed” and that they required more time to grapple with the material they were presented. The brevity of the hours dedicated to the language course (50 hours) is admittedly of major concern especially when compared to similar language integration programmes offered in a number of EU countries, in which up to 250 hours of language courses are provided in a number of member states (Council of Europe, 2020). This certainly calls for a revision of the current requirement and provision of hours of lessons for the *I Belong* Stage 2 language component.

Finally, as the course progressed it clearly further triggered a genuine interest in the host country’s national language and culture for many of the participants. The vast majority of participants showed willingness to learn and use the Maltese language together with a commendable ability to reflect on their learning experiences. There was general consensus among participants that learning Maltese represented an opportunity for them to integrate with people in the workplace and in the community, which would allow them to build better relationships. Moreover, some of them acknowledged going to great lengths to learn the language, such as taking multiple language courses, dedicating a lot of time and effort, and purposely placing themselves in situations where they would be able to communicate in the target language. Despite the fact that the programme is a requirement on TCNs as a way of securing their residence status thus obtaining further stability and security in Malta, through the various narrations many participants showed how their interest in the Maltese language goes beyond receiving a certificate which allows them to apply for long term residence, to a genuine interest in the Maltese language and way of life.

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