

## **Language Proficiency, Use and Attitudes among University Students in Bilingual Malta**

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### **Abstract**

The context of this study is Malta, the smallest but most densely-populated country in the European Union and one of a handful of officially-bilingual member states. The focus of this study is the student population at the University of Malta, often viewed as Malta's elite and the country's future leaders. It seeks to discover three main aspects: (i) their self-assessed proficiency in Maltese and English; (ii) their declared language use in different domains, and (iii) their attitudes towards Maltese and English, Malta's official languages. This study's findings evidence unequal proficiency levels in the two languages, particularly in speaking and writing. They also reveal that spoken use of Maltese language is prevalent in the family while English dominates communication with university lecturers and to a lesser extent with the university's administrative staff. Furthermore, of note are students' attitudes towards the official languages and of a selection of foreign languages (Italian, French, German, Spanish and Arabic) taught in Maltese schools: their perceptions differ from Sciriha and Vassallo (2006). Though university students still rank Maltese as the most important language for a citizen of Malta, yet from a global perspective, English and other languages are all ranked higher than Maltese.

### **1. Introduction**

Malta is miniscule and barely visible on the world map. Notwithstanding such unremarkable physical dimensions, it has had a turbulent history of foreign rule because of its strategic position at the centre of the Mediterranean. Of the more recent colonisers who ruled Malta in the past, three tower over the others because of their connections with the current linguistic situation: (i) the Arabs (870-1090), from whom present-day Maltese emerged as a variety of Arabic; (ii) the Knights of St John (1530 -1798) who mainly spoke European languages, among which Italian, French, German and Spanish; and (iii) the British (1800 -1964) who accorded English co-official status with Italian in 1921, and who were instrumental in elevating Maltese from 'the language of the kitchen' to co-official status with English in 1934. In doing so, they removed Italian as one of the official languages, despite acrimonious debates and stiff opposition by the pro-Italian group. Later, when Malta became an independent state within the

Commonwealth in 1964, both Maltese and English were retained as official languages. However, in the new Constitution, Maltese was given national language status: it also received preferential treatment since the use of Maltese was promoted as the language of parliament and the law courts. Thus, it would seem that Malta's governance is monolingual in Maltese despite the parallel official status of English.

Another important historical event occurred in 2004, four decades after Malta's Independence from Britain. Malta became a full member of the European Union and Maltese was conferred official status within the EU, much to the amazement cum satisfaction of the overwhelming majority of the Maltese: 71.4% of the sampled population in the survey conducted by Sciriha and Vassallo (2006) admitted that they had never expected Maltese to be given such a status. Some of the reasons for their incredulity revealed deeply rooted prejudices. Interestingly, the inclusion of Maltese as one of the EU's official languages for a while shifted to some extent the perceived importance of English in Malta since all EU documents started to be translated into Maltese.

In view of their constant interactions with invaders and colonisers the Maltese historically were almost forced to develop a dual identity and felt the need to learn foreign languages. The findings of large-scale sociolinguistic surveys carried out in the past two decades among the Maltese population (Sciriha 1999, 2012; Sciriha and Vassallo 2001, 2006) confirm this. They are not just proficient in the official languages, but often in another one or two foreign languages.

The present study examines the students' language use and self-assessed proficiency in the microcosmic setting of the University of Malta – the oldest Commonwealth university outside Britain – currently attended by around 11,000 students. In the last three decades, the university campus has been the venue for studies investigating university students' use of the official languages (e.g. Darmanin et al. 1989; Cassar 1990; Kmetova and Sciriha 1992; Caruana 2006; Micallef 2006), but these have been small-scale studies that are not scientifically representative. The present study is an attempt to fill this void in linguistic research. It reports on the results of a language survey in response to the following set of research questions:

- (1) What are students' self-assessed proficiency levels in the two official languages?
- (2) In which domains (family, education, services) are Maltese and English employed and what is the frequency of their use?
- (3) What are the students' attitudes towards the two languages? Are Maltese and English given equal importance when students report their own proficiency on their dual identity, namely as 'citizens of Malta' or as 'citizens of the world'?

## 2. Research Methodology and Sample Profile

This paper presents the findings of an ‘interviewer-administered’ (Pauwels 2016: 65) language survey of the student population: 500 students following courses in all 14 Faculties at the University of Malta during the academic year 2017-2018, were chosen to participate. The fieldwork was conducted by a team of bilingual interviewers and data collection was concluded in March 2018. The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The sample was stratified by gender and faculty to ensure representation.

Sending online questionnaires would have been much easier and much less time-consuming; nevertheless, this idea was discarded since the percentages of completed online questionnaires are usually very low which would have resulted in an unscientific representation of students by gender and by faculty.

During the interviewing process, all interviewers were specifically instructed to ensure that standardised questions were used, and they were not allowed to introduce any interviewer bias at any stage by expressing their own views on the issues being researched. They were requested to watch out for any clues which revealed that the answers given were not truthful. In the tabulation of the data prior to entering the data on SPSS program, a systematic check was made on the internal consistency of the replies.

Table 1 gives the sample profile by gender and by faculty. The highest number of students are females (N=295: 59% vs. males: N=205: 41%). This gender imbalance in their favour is found in virtually all the 14 Faculties except those in the Faculties of Built Environment (males: 55.6%; females: 44.4%), Engineering (males: 79.2%; females: 20.8%), Information Technology (males: 81.2%; females: 18.8%), Science (males: 54.5%; females: 45.5%) and Theology (males: 66.7%; females: 33.3%). Of the 14 Faculties, the ones with the highest percentages of students are FEMA (Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy) (17.4%) where the gender distribution is nearly equal (males: 49.4%; females: 50.6%), followed by Health Sciences (14.2%) (males: 25.4%; females: 50.6%), Arts (12.2%) (males: 32.8%; females 67.2%) and Medicine and Surgery (12.2%) (males: 45%; females: 55%).

**Table 1: Sample Profile by Gender and Faculty**

FACULTY	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL BY FACULTY	% OF TOTAL SAMPLE
	%	%	%	%
Arts	32.8	67.2	100.0	12.2
Built Environment	55.6	44.4	100.0	3.6
Dental Surgery	25.0	75.0	100.0	1.6
Education	17.4	82.6	100.0	4.6
Engineering	79.2	20.8	100.0	4.8
FEMA	49.4	50.6	100.0	17.4
Health Sciences	25.4	74.6	100.0	14.2
Information Technology	81.2	18.8	100.0	3.2
Laws	36.6	63.4	100.0	8.2
Media & Knowledge Sciences	43.8	56.3	100.0	3.2
Medicine & Surgery	45.0	55.0	100.0	12.0
Science	54.5	45.5	100.0	4.4
Social Well Being	26.0	74.0	100.0	10.0
Theology	66.7	33.3	100.0	0.6
TOTAL	41.0	59.0	100.0	100

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Linguistic Competence in English and Maltese

On entering primary school, the majority of children speak Maltese, as this is their mother tongue. Our university student participants confirmed this: for 70.6%, Maltese is their native language, when compared to a much lower 29.4%, for whom English is the first language.

In view of this dichotomous linguistic situation, university students in this study were asked to self-evaluate their proficiency in the official languages. Admittedly, such a method of reported self-assessment may not always be accurate since there is a tendency for respondents to over-rate

their proficiency levels, especially when a particular language is deemed to be a prestigious one. This notwithstanding, the rationale behind this exercise was to discover which of the two official languages, if at all, do students feel more competent in all four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing). A five-point Likert Scale was used to self-assess the respondents' skills in the two languages: 1. Very well; 2. Well; 3. Reasonably Well; 4. With Difficulty and 5. Not at all.

The findings in the following tables (Tables 2 to 8) are presented in the form of a 100-Point Index for each Likert Scale base used in the research instrument. The Index represents a global measurement whereby the different options available are aggregated through a weighted value for the different grades of agreement with the respective statement or level. The Index is used because it allows for a much easier mode of interpretation in comparison to what a series of 5 readings (one for each level) would involve. The Index can theoretically extend from -100 points, which represents the point of a completely negative evaluation of a practice (or a complete rejection of a statement) to +100, which represents the maximum level of maximum endorsement of a practice (or a maximum acceptance of a statement).

Table 2 uses this 100-Point Index method of reporting the data: the practice involved in the Likert Scale consists of different degrees of self-reported proficiency levels in the four skills in both languages.

The index scores for the English (94.80 points) and Maltese (92.0 points) listening skills are the highest for each language, though little differences are noted regarding spoken Maltese (86.0 points) when compared to English (84.9 points). Of note is the chasm between the languages in respect of reading (Maltese: 86.6 points vs. English 92.18 points) and much more so as regards their written proficiency skills: Maltese written language skills are the lowest in both languages (69.3 points) when compared to English (87.7 points) – a notable 18.4 point gap. Clearly the students assessed their written abilities in English to be superior when compared to Maltese. A further analysis of the data shows that females assessed all their four linguistic skills in both languages slightly better than males: this fact is in line with the general perception that females perform better than males in languages and a further endorsement as to why there are many more females studying in the Faculty of Arts where 12 languages (Arabic, Chinese, Greek, English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Maltese, Portuguese and Spanish) are taught at varying levels. In fact, while females registered a score of 88.7 points and 85.59 points for spoken Maltese and English respectively, males self-assessed their spoken skills at lower levels in Maltese (82.44 points) and English (83.90 points). This is an interesting development in the students' spoken assessment of the two languages as there is a general perception that males are more proficient speakers of Maltese when compared to females.

As regards reading, females outnumber males in their proficiency of both Maltese (females: 88.7 points vs. males 83.58 points) and English (females: 94.24 points vs. males: 89.29 points). Krashen (2004) extols the importance of reading because it facilitates writing and the fact that students' scores in written English are much higher than those in Maltese would logically derive from their higher proficiency in reading in English, something which is confirmed in this study. However, what needs to be highlighted is the considerable discrepancy in the students' written proficiency scores in English (87.7 points) when compared to a much lower score in Maltese (69.3 points). It is evident that though the students speak both languages, they are more at ease writing English than Maltese. Despite the fact that Maltese is the first language of most students, the findings clearly indicate that the educational system in Malta is inculcating better literary skills in English than in Maltese.

**Table 2: Self-assessed proficiency on a 100-Point Index by Gender**

	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Speaking MT	82.44	88.47	86.00
Listening MT	90.00	94.07	92.40
Reading MT	83.58	88.70	86.60
Writing MT	64.39	72.71	69.30
Speaking EN	83.90	85.59	84.90
Listening EN	93.90	95.42	94.80
Reading EN	89.29	94.24	92.18
Writing EN	87.07	88.14	87.70

### 3.1.2 Frequency of Use

Participants were also asked to give details on the frequency of their use of both languages in all four skills.

Table 3 similarly uses a 100-Point Index method of reporting the data: in this case the Index computes the frequency of use in the skills for both English and Maltese. The scores in this table show that students speak Maltese (81.50 points) more often than English (74.0 points) – a finding that one would expect since most students are native speakers of Maltese. Moreover, higher

scores are registered when listening to Maltese (84.40 points), the language of the community in Malta, when compared to English (80.9 points), the language of instruction at the university for all courses except for most of the language courses. Nevertheless, this difference pales when compared to the frequency of use when writing Maltese (50.30 points) as compared to English (83.20 points). These latter scores show that there is a huge gap of nearly 30 points between the two languages in respect of writing skills. Furthermore, a breakdown of the data in Table 3 by gender reveals that more females (84.07 points) than males (81.95 points) write frequently in English. Even when frequency of Maltese writing is taken into consideration, females (52.20 points) again outnumber males (47.56 points) in this skill. University students probably do not frequently write in Maltese either because they do not need to do so since the medium of instruction at university is English, or else because they are hesitant to do so for fear of making orthographical errors.

**Table 3: Frequency of English and Maltese Language Use on 100 Point Index by Gender**

	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
MT SPEAKING	74.39	86.44	81.50
MT LISTENING	79.02	88.14	84.40
MT READING	51.71	55.76	54.10
MT WRITING	47.56	52.20	50.30
EN SPEAKING	71.22	75.93	74.00
EN LISTENING	78.05	82.88	80.90
EN READING	83.90	84.75	84.40
EN WRITING	81.95	84.07	83.20

### 3.2. Language Choice in the Family, Education and Services Domains

In a bilingual situation, language choice is rarely random but there is usually a pattern in such choice which is governed by domains (Fishman 1965). As noted by Fasold (1974), domain analysis is closely related to Ferguson's (1959) notion of diglossia since, underlying the theory of domain analysis lies the assumption that the choice of one variety/language over the other varies

from one domain to another. Some domains such as the family domain are less formal than others with one language chosen in such a domain. Moreover, in domain analysis before choosing one language/ variety over the other, a speaker needs to factor in the informal or formal setting (home, school etc.), the interlocutors (parents, teachers) and the topic being discussed.

In view of university students' bilingualism and dual identity, they were asked to name the languages used with a select number of interlocutors in three domains: family, education and services.

### **3.2.1 Findings: Language choice in the Family Domain**

Table 4 presents the findings in the family domain where the respondents' interlocutors are parents, siblings and grandparents.

The 100-Point Index method of reporting the data used in Tables 4 to 6 summarises the frequency of language use among a set of interlocutors in different domains. It is important to note that the base on which this specific set of Indices has been computed, excluded those participants who did not have any interaction with the other interlocutor in the relative dyad because the interlocutor was inexistent (e.g. in cases where the parent/grandparent was diseased, or when they had no sibling).

In this domain, much higher scores are registered by student participants when interacting in Maltese with their mother (81.78 points) and their father (83.54 points). Concomitantly, significantly lower scores are registered in English interactions with their parents (mothers: 30.87 points and fathers: 26.71 points): these scores show that Maltese is the spoken language with parents, though slightly higher scores are registered when the parent is the father. Moreover, when compared with participants' Maltese interaction with parents, siblings and grandparents, Maltese interaction with the grandmother received the highest score (90.35 points) of all the family interlocutors.

Also worthy of mention is the discrepancy in students' Maltese language use with their brothers (males: 71.64 points vs. females: 80.64 points) when compared to their sisters (males: 70.03 points vs females: 72.87 points). Clearly, interaction in the family domain is overwhelmingly conducted in Maltese and not in English.

**Table 4: Frequency of Language Use with family: 100 Point Index**

	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
EN Mother	32.99	29.42	30.87
MT Mother	76.50	85.39	81.78
EN Father	27.78	25.99	26.71
MT Father	80.47	85.66	83.54
EN Brother	39.56	33.85	36.44
MT Brother	71.64	80.64	76.53
EN Sister	40.12	43.45	42.11
MT Sister	70.03	72.87	71.71
EN Grand Father	19.02	12.46	15.15
MT Grand Father	87.05	92.61	90.35
EN Grand Mother	18.52	12.55	14.99
MT Grand Mother	87.04	92.86	90.51

### 3.2.2 Findings: Language choice in the Education Domain

As noted earlier all children are formally introduced to Maltese and English on entering primary school. Though primary and secondary educational institutions are bilingual, the university setting is different because English is the default language during lectures except in the case of foreign language courses. Even though Statute 1, Article 1 of the Malta Education Act (Chapter 327) stipulates that the ‘University administration may use either language for official purposes’, the medium of instruction is English. This was unequivocally spelled out an email sent on 29 October 2019 by the University Registrar to all academic staff in which she emphasized the importance of lecturing in English since the student population includes non-Maltese language speakers.

In view of the foregoing, Table 5 gives a breakdown of the results on language choice in tertiary education and shows that the global score is much higher because students interact more

frequently in English with male (63.87 points vs Maltese: 44.87 points) and female (63.87 points vs. Maltese: 41.47 points) lecturers. A further breakdown of the findings by gender reveals that female respondents use more English with both male (females: 65.20 points vs. males 61.95 points) and female lecturers (females: 65.31 points vs. males 61.79 points).

With other interlocutors on campus namely, the secretaries and the beadles, respondents register lower levels of frequency of English language use and more Maltese: the total scores in respect of students interacting with the employees of these two administrative universities evidence that higher instances of Maltese are employed with beadles (56.40 points vs. English: 31.00 points) and secretaries (Maltese: 62.67 points vs. English 42.33 points). However, in respect of the secretary – student dyad, more female respondents interact in English (44.86 points vs. males: 38.7 points) and in Maltese (females: 63.05 points vs. males: 62.11 points). This is, however, not the case as regards student interactions with university beadles: more male respondents interact both in Maltese (58.21 points vs. females: 55.14 points) and also in English (32.20 points vs. females: 30.17 points). These scores show that more males are comfortable communicating with beadles, while more females interact more with the secretaries.

**Table 5: Frequency of Language Use at University: 100 Point Index**

	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
EN Male Lecturer	61.95	65.20	63.87
MT Male Lecturer	44.88	44.86	44.87
EN Female Lecturer	61.79	65.31	63.87
MT Female Lecturer	38.86	43.28	41.47
EN Secretary	38.70	44.86	42.33
MT Secretary	62.11	63.05	62.67
EN Beadles	32.20	30.17	31.00
MT Beadles	58.21	55.14	56.40

### 3.2.3 Findings: Language choice in the Services Domain

The final domain which was investigated focussed on services which our student respondents obtain from various individuals – government employees, sales assistants and waiters. This section also includes services provided by ATM found on campus since these machines though inanimate, offer written instructions with a choice of languages.

As one would expect in an officially bilingual country, all government employees are proficient in both Maltese and English since they are required to interact in both languages with their clients. Though expected, this is not always the case in other dyadic service-related interactions such as with sales assistants and waiters, some of whom are foreign employees who can just get by in English but not in Maltese.

Table 6 presents the total scores on the frequency of use of both English and Maltese with different interlocutors. These scores show that student respondents as a whole interact more frequently in Maltese with government employees (67.80 points vs. English 35.13 points). More male respondents use Maltese (70.73 points vs. females: 31.71 points), while conversely, higher scores were registered by female respondents when interacting with government employees in English (37.51 points vs. males 31.71 points).

As regards the dyadic formation of respondent – shop assistant, the frequency of Maltese use (67.13 points) is higher than English use (42.47 points). As in the previous dyad, higher scores were again registered by female respondents who interact in English (45.54 points vs. Maltese 38.05 points). More male participants use higher frequencies of Maltese use (68.94 points) than females (65.88 points).

However, it is in the entertainment sphere when respondents go out for a meal that the total scores show a higher level of using English than Maltese (English: 57.87 points vs. Maltese: 54.54 points). Of all the results in Table 6, it is only in interactions with ‘waiters’ is the use of English more frequent than Maltese. The last category of service providers are often foreigners who do not even have an incipient knowledge of Maltese.

**Table 6: Frequency of Language Use in the Services Domain: 100 Point Index**

	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
EN Shop Assistants	38.05	45.54	42.47
MT Shop Assistants	68.94	65.88	67.13
EN Waiters	56.10	59.10	57.87
MT Waiters	53.98	54.92	54.53
EN Govt Employees	31.71	37.51	35.13
MT Govt Employees	70.73	65.76	67.80

Finally, the questionnaire also included a question regarding students' choice of languages in respect of bank ATM machines. In this case the selection of the language of their choice at the start of their transactions on the ATM screen was explored (Table 7).

Noteworthy are the results regarding such use: many more students use the English interface (68.87 points) when compared to Maltese (23.20 points). Interestingly, slightly higher scores were registered by males for frequency of English (males 71.06 points vs. females 67.34 points) and Maltese (males: 23.58 points vs. females 22.94 points). These high scores in English use further confirm the findings in Tables 2 and 3 where students declared better self-assessed proficiency skills in written English skills when compared to Maltese and the fact that they also write more in English than in Maltese.

**Table 7: Frequency of Language Use on ATM machine: 100 Point Index**

	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
EN ATM	71.06	67.34	68.87
MT HATM	23.58	22.94	23.20

### 3.3 Attitudes towards Maltese, English and other languages

The notion of 'belonging' is an innate element in any human being's identity (McCull Millar, 2005). One's mother tongue is often conceptualised in Whorfian terms as an inescapable part of individual identity (Coulmas, 2005). Due to the relationship that language has with group

membership, it can inspire deep group loyalties. The concept of attitude has been a core concept in sociolinguistics since, for example, Labov's (1972) seminal work on the social stratification of speech communities and how language change is influenced by the prestige and stigma afforded by speech communities to specific linguistic features. When two languages coexist within the same community, speakers of these languages can form different attitudes to each of these languages.

Several studies (e.g. Lambert et al., 1960; Tucker, 1968; Williams, 1974; Kristiansen, 1997; Ó Laoire, 2007; Laugharne, 2007) have been carried out in this area of research and there are two approaches to the study of attitudes and perceptions. The social-psychological approach obtains information regarding views and perceptions towards languages using an indirect method. The second approach obtains data in a direct way, namely through the use of a questionnaire as the instrument of research. In this study the latter approach was adopted.

Questions on language attitudes have been included in two large-scale surveys conducted by Sciriha (1999) and Sciriha and Vassallo (2006) whose participants were first asked to rank seven languages which are taught at school in order of importance as 'Maltese living in Malta' and subsequently, to rank the same languages as 'citizens of the world'.

Using the same direct method, the university students in the present study were also asked for their perceptions on languages, particularly the two official languages.

Tables 8 and 9 present the findings on students' attitudes as 'citizens of Malta' and those as 'citizens of the world' respectively. Maltese is accorded the highest ranking among the students, closely followed by English when considered as 'citizens of Malta'. Nevertheless, when compared to the most recent survey by Sciriha and Vassallo (2006), the percentage of students who ranked Maltese in 1st position is lower than the one conducted on the Maltese population by Sciriha and Vassallo (2006) where 88% of their respondents ranked Maltese in pole position, when compared to the present study's 70.8%. A further comparison of the two studies reveals another difference: more university students (28.6%) ranked English in 1st position when compared to 12% of the Maltese population in Sciriha and Vassallo (2006).

**Table 8: Ranking of Seven Languages in terms of importance as Maltese nationals living in Malta among UOM students**

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
MALTESE	70.8	27.8	0.6	-	-	0.2	0.6
ENGLISH	28.6	70.4	0.4	0.2	-	0.2	0.2
ITALIAN	-	0.8	89.0	7.8	1.6	0.6	0.2
FRENCH	0.2	0.4	5.6	53.4	27.8	10.4	2.2
SPANISH	-	0.2	0.2	12.0	26.6	36.6	24.4
GERMAN	0.2	0.2	1.6	5.4	26.6	39.4	26.6
ARABIC	0.2	0.2	2.6	21.2	17.4	12.6	45.8

However, students' perceptions regarding the importance of the seven languages as 'citizens of the world' change. While in the survey conducted by Sciriha and Vassallo (2006), Maltese was ranked in 5th position, effectively outranking Spanish and Arabic, two world languages, university students' perceptions do not dovetail the rankings given by the general Maltese population.

As shown in Table 9, virtually all students (97.2%) perceive English as the most important language. This is a much higher percentage than the one obtained in the Sciriha and Vassallo (2006) study in which only 80.6% considered English as so important. The relegation of Maltese to the 7th and final position shows that our students are aware of the microcosmic importance of Maltese notwithstanding its official status in the European Union. They are not as positive in their perceptions of Maltese as global citizens.

**Table 9: Ranking of Seven Languages in terms of perceived importance as citizens of global society among UOM students**

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
ENGLISH	97.2	1.8	0.6	-	-	-	0.4
FRENCH	0.6	43.8	27.4	19.0	7	1.6	0.6
ITALIAN	-	22.6	23.8	21.0	17.6	14.4	0.6
GERMAN	0.4	6.2	19.6	26.0	32.6	13.6	1.6
SPANISH	1.0	16.2	16	18.8	28.2	16.2	3.6
ARABIC	0.6	5.4	11.2	13.8	11	39.4	18.6
MALTESE	0.2	4	1.4	1.4	3.6	14.8	74.6

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

In the Maltese bilingual situation, the findings of this study are perplexing and ‘quasi-schizophrenic’ (Vassallo and Sciriha 2020: 39). They reveal that university students consider themselves to be predominantly literate in English: their declared self-assessments of their reading and especially their writing in this language are much higher than those in Maltese, even though for the majority of them, Maltese is their mother tongue (70.6% vs. English: 29.4%) which they use with varying frequency levels in particular domains and with particular interlocutors. Even when using the ATM machine, they prefer reading the instructions in English than in Maltese and this is a further confirmation of students’ declared reading self-assessment. They have better English reading skills when compared to Maltese.

Nevertheless, spoken Maltese is used not only in informal domains such as at home, but also at university where they report high frequencies with interlocutors such as the beadles. The latter interlocutors are probably perceived as members of their in-group, unlike male and female lecturers who are spoken to predominantly in English. Furthermore, in the services domain, student respondents overwhelmingly interact in Maltese with government officials and shop assistants. Maltese is clearly the language in which they feel at ease to express their needs with most interlocutors and if possible, in all settings. They tend to prefer to switch language only when the interlocutor is a foreigner who does not know Maltese, as is the case with waiters in the

services domain. Only if it is absolutely necessary or in a formal setting such as when speaking with male and female lecturers, do the majority of university students speak English. This fact needs to be emphasised because it clearly shows that Maltese, the indigenous language is used as the main medium for informal conversations within a person's in-group, but that English is used to shrink the status bridge when students need to converse with lecturers and professors at the University. This is not surprising given the formal relationship.

This study shines a bright light on the chasm that exists in students' literacy skills in both official languages. Reading and writing in English seem as natural as listening and speaking in Maltese. This incongruity has repeatedly surfaced in other surveys (Sciriha and Vassallo 2001; 2006). The Maltese speak in one language and write in another even though both languages are given the same importance in primary and secondary educational settings. Clearly, over the years, this anomalous linguistic situation has not improved, and the educational system seems to be endorsing this, even though Maltese has been an official language for nearly a century.

The main difference that stands out in this survey among university students, when compared to other large-scale surveys whose sampled universe is the Maltese population, regards their attitudes towards Maltese and other languages. Students' positive attitude towards English is virtually universal: 97% perceive it to be the most important language as 'citizens of the world', while in Sciriha and Vassallo (2006), a lower 80.6% of the Maltese population declared having a similar perception. University students are all too aware that English is their passport for work and travel opportunities, while Maltese is relegated to their in-group membership as Maltese living on the island. Even with regard to the other foreign languages, students are not carried away by patriotic sentiments when ranking the languages as 'citizens of the world', unlike in Sciriha and Vassallo (2006), where the Maltese population then ranked their indigenous language in 5th position ahead of Spanish and Arabic – two numerically gigantic languages which are among the top ten most spoken languages in the world. The university students in Malta are acutely aware of the importance of these languages on the world stage and are not blinkered nor impressed by the fact that Maltese is also one of the EU's official languages. They relegate Maltese to the 7th and final position.

In a bilingual context, language choice between two languages is influenced by social factors, among them are group identity, status symbols and reference groups. Language does not only communicate messages, but it transmits cultural norms and values of a group. In fact, group membership is accentuated with the use of the group's language, especially since the members of the outgroup are excluded from the internal transaction. Languages carry social meanings which according to Fishman (1977) make language the symbol par excellence of ethnicity and group

identity. In view of this, what do this study's findings reveal about Malta's university students?

It transpires that spoken Maltese is their symbol of identity, but it seems that they do not further their language skills by reading and writing. In fact, when compared to English, students self-assessed lower proficiency levels in reading and more so when writing Maltese. They relegate Maltese to the spoken form used in informal domains with different interlocutors. Repeatedly, consecutive language surveys have shown that the Maltese do not feel at ease writing Maltese. These results are also confirmed in Vassallo and Sciriha (forthcoming) who computed their respondents' use of the official languages on social media platforms on a 100-Point Index. 'On this Index, the values for Maltese and English speaking are, respectively 91.60 and 86.95 points. Writing in English, however, supersedes writing in Maltese by 14.80 points, which is very significant' (Vassallo and Sciriha forthcoming). Even on social media, the written communication in English is preferred over Maltese.

The findings clearly show how students perceive English. It is a status symbol which provides elite membership with the global literate world, while Maltese is important as a marker of their identity as Maltese students.

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