

Why not study languages? Reasons explaining
language student number trends at Post-Secondary
level in Malta.

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*To my mother Joyce and my father Massimiliano;
the two most valuable pillars of my life.*

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Abstract

This study investigates Post-Secondary students' perspectives on foreign languages (FLs) and foreign language learning (FLL) and it aims to find out the factors leading to a decline in the number of students studying FLs at Post-Secondary level in Malta. A particular reference is made to the students' perspectives on French and to the studying of this FL at Advanced level. This research adopts a quantitative methodology and is carried out through an online Google Forms questionnaire distributed to Post-Secondary students attending 4 Sixth Forms in Malta. Previous research highlights the importance of FLs, the decreasing number of FL students at varying levels in Malta, the factors influencing students' decisions to avoid or to persist with FLL, and the negative attitudes held towards French.

Results obtained show that very few Post-Secondary students are studying FLs in Malta, the majority of which are girls. Participants mostly agree that FLL in Secondary Education (SE) is of an average experience, is highly demanding and entails a moderate amount of workload. Success in this domain depends on personal aptitude to learn new languages and students who specialise in FLs do so due to their passion for languages. Most students who are not studying FLs feel no regret for their decision and they have no plans to study one at University. The main factors leading to the avoidance of FLs at Advanced level are preference towards other areas of study, previous poor performance in FLs, bad FLL experiences in SE, and low perceived importance of FLs for the students' planned career. Students are not always encouraged by career guidance counsellors (CGCs) to take languages at Post-Secondary level - another possible factor leading to a decline in the number of FL students.

French is mainly perceived as a beautiful sounding language which is difficult. Respondents think that Advanced level learners of French are not being subjected to unrealistic demands and the Secondary French language curriculum prepares them for the Advanced French program. Paradoxically, they maintain that a gap between French at Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) and at Advanced level exists, and hard work is necessary in order to obtain desired grades at the Advanced examination. The main factors which are believed to lead to a low number of students studying French at Post-Secondary level include: the perceived difficulty of this language, low grades previously achieved, past demanding workload and the unpleasant experience of learning it in SE.

Keywords: foreign languages, foreign language learning, French as a foreign language, Post-Secondary level, subject choice motivations.

List of abbreviations

AM – Advanced Matriculation

Bachelor of Arts – B.A

Bachelor of Education – B.Ed

CGC – Career guidance counsellor

EC – European Commission

ECA – English Communicative Aptitude Programme

FL – Foreign language

FLA – Foreign language acquisition

FLAP – Foreign Language Awareness Programme

FFL – French as a foreign language

FLL – Foreign language learning

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

IT – Information Technology

ITS – Institute of Tourism Studies

LA – Language acquisition

LL – Language learning

LLC – Life Long Learning Centre

LPA – Language Proficiency Assessment

MATSEC – Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Examinations Board

MC – Matriculation certificate

MCAST – Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology institution

MEDE – Ministry of Education and Employment

MFL – Modern foreign languages

MQF – Malta Qualifications Framework

NCF – National Curriculum Framework

SE – Secondary education

SEC – Secondary Education Certificate

SME - Small and medium-sized enterprise

TL – Target language

UM – University of Malta

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1 Introduction

The low number of students pursuing language education in Malta, has recently given rise to concern. In fact, Malta seems to have lost an important asset; its tradition of tri- or even multilingualism. Pace's (2019) statistical data demonstrates that the number of Maltese students choosing to study languages as their area of specialisation has undergone a major decline as they engage in Post-secondary and Tertiary education, the point at which studying a FL is no longer compulsory. According to Pace (2018), this phenomenon has been occurring for several years, however it has reached its peak over the last decade.

One could say that the number of students enrolling in FL courses in Malta is pyramidal in form given that as the level of education increases, the number of students learning languages lowers (Lambert, 2001). According to Pace (2015a), few are those school leavers in Malta who are officially certified in a FL after 5 years of compulsory language learning (LL). Besides, in these past 4 years, the number of students taking FLs for pre-university Advanced level decreased significantly. This dramatic downturn reaches its climax in Tertiary education, where the total number of students specialising in languages in the academic year 2019/20 was below 50, a really small figure compared to the large number of students entering University annually (Pace, 2019). It is noteworthy that French at Tertiary level also experienced a major downfall since the number of students choosing this language as their main area of study is below 10 (Pace, 2019).

However, it should be underlined that Malta is not alone in this concern. In fact, this decline in FL students is a worldwide phenomenon which is taking place in many other countries including the US (Graham, 2004) and the UK, notably England (Fisher, 2001, Williams, Burden & Lanvers, 2002, Graham, 2004), which are all experiencing a decline in language students, particularly once LL is no longer compulsory. As Williams et al. (2002) state, such a situation will lead to undesirable outcomes given that nowadays, the need of multilingualism is increasingly growing. This also compromises the future of modern foreign languages (MFLs) in our education, not to mention the risk of having a declining availability of young future language teachers and linguists who wish to have a career, something which would cause long-term challenges to our island (Pace, 2018).

As Graddol (1997, p.29) states, "Speaking English alone will not be enough to ensure a full and productive participation in the 21st century". This means that the acquisition of one common language is not sufficient nowadays (European Commission, 2004). Hence, this study focuses on the situation of FLs, especially of French, in Maltese schools. The aim of this research is to analyse the complex factors leading to this drastic decline of language students in Malta after compulsory FLL with a particular reference made to the low number of French students.

The second chapter of this research gives an overview of the literature that has been produced on FLs and FLL, with a particular reference made to the local context. A description of the quantitative method of data collection used for this research will be given in the third chapter. In the fourth chapter, the results obtained from the questionnaires will be analysed, while in the fifth chapter, a discussion of these results will be presented. This will be followed by a conclusion which can be found in the last chapter.

It is believed that an understanding of the reasons why this decline in Post-Secondary FL students has happened, may be a first step towards finding possible solutions to improve the situation.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter we will take a look at the literature that has been produced so far on FLs and FLL. Three main aspects will be discussed. Firstly, a brief overview on FLs will be given, with a particular reference made to the situation of FLL in the local context. In the following section, some reasons behind the decline in the number of Post-Secondary FL students will be discussed, while the last section will focus on the situation of the French language, more particularly French in the local scenario.

2.2 The present situation of FLs.

2.2.1 *The importance of FLs in the international and local scenarios.*

As Pace (2015b) clearly states, nowadays “[...] multilingualism has become more than just ‘important’” (p.479). Unfortunately, the perspective that FL study opens up a limited range of careers, being just teaching and translation, is still persistent nowadays (Pace, 2016). However, FLL has many more benefits to offer. To begin with, one of the benefits of foreign language acquisition (FLA), surely concerns the ability to communicate with different people coming from all over the globe. In fact, Pace (2015a) perceives the world as a “global village” (p. 610) and thus argues that having good communication abilities in FLs has never been so beneficial and essential (Pace, 2018). As the European Commission (EC) (2017, p. 7) states: “A more connected world has brought with it new opportunities. People now travel, work, learn and live in different countries”.

However, in order to open and access these opportunities, FLs are the key. Europe holds more than 748 million people (“Worldometer”, 2021) coming from different nations, speaking different languages, and representing diverse cultures. Thus, FL skills are necessary in order for interaction between European citizens to take place (European Commission, 2004).

Gálová (2007) argues that because of our globalized economy, communication between white-collar workers and experts needs to take place in FLs. However, the success in doing so

only depends on FL skills which make these professionals able to surpass the barriers of language and culture. In fact, language and intercultural barriers are among the most common difficulties faced by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) when crossing the national borders (European Commission, 2006). While it seems likely that English will remain the most widely used language in worldwide businesses, the understanding and use of other languages will differentiate between an ordinary and an outstanding business (European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2008).

Knowing the language of nations on which the world's economy is based, will be a key factor which determines our future success (Pace, 2016). In fact, a large number of enterprises are being lost because of insufficient language skills, the size of the contracts being lost ranging from €1 million up to €25.3 million (European Commission, 2006). Such findings continue to support the claim that as global economies are on the increase, the need for FL skills is gradually growing (Pace, 2015b, European Commission, 2010) and will continue to grow significantly (European Commission, 2006, European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2008).

It is equally argued that knowledge in FLs gives people "a cutting edge" over others (Pace, 2018, p. 411). FLs are necessary in the majority of sectors and the success of young employees nowadays hugely depends on proficiency in this domain (Pace, 2015a, 2015b). Workers who are able to communicate in different languages are crucial for business (Pace, 2016). In fact, the CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey (2013) affirmed that 7 on 10 businesses consider language skills among workers to be crucial especially for professional relations.

However, despite the importance of languages and intercultural competences, companies are still struggling to find people who are competent in FLs other than English (European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2008). All this highlights the extent to which graduating in FLs nowadays is a requisite (Pace, 2015b). Limited language skills are also one of the key challenges faced by youths who wish to take advantage of youth programs for training and education within Europe (Pace, 2018). Hence, being skilled in FLs also facilitates studying in European countries (European Commission, 2004).

In brief, FLs not only serve as an instrument that unifies citizens coming from different nations, or as a tool that empowers professional and sentimental relationships (Pace, 2015a).

Proficiency in FLs is also an essential element that boosts economic growth and that enables employees to enhance their profession and career opportunities (Pace, 2015a). In other words, FLL is the key to improve one's own life, taste new ideas, discover what's beyond the local circles, and benefit from the rich cultural diversity of Europe (Pace, 2015a).

In the past, it was multilingualism that led to Malta's fortunes. The fact that the Maltese citizens were able to communicate using different FLs other than English and Maltese, has contributed a lot to the prosperity of the Maltese islands (Pace, 2015a). However, this is no longer the case especially among the new generation. This is very worrying considering the fact that the economy of Malta heavily relies on sectors which are highly driven by FLs notably tourism, digital gaming, foreign trade and human resources (Pace, 2015a, 2015b, 2018).

In fact, during the last decade, Malta has seen a high rate of employment in the tourism and digital gaming industries (Pace, 2018). Needless to say, being able to use and understand FLs is extremely important in order to maintain a top-quality service in these sectors (Pace, 2018). Besides, international communication is crucial for the Maltese Islands (Council of Europe, 2015). Consequently, not only has FLL been perceived as a key factor of the Maltese educational policy (Council of Europe, 2015), but it has also been steadily supported by the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) as it describes FLA as "a strength in our local system which needs to be sustained" (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p.58).

Over the last few years, thanks to various stakeholders such as University of Malta (UM), Ministry of Education and Employment (MEDE), Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology institution (MCAST), and many Embassies of foreign countries in Malta, local education has seen numerous initiatives at all stages of schooling which aim to provide other means, in addition to the examinations held by the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Examinations Board (MATSEC), of obtaining qualification in FLs (Pace, 2018). A brief overview of these initiatives following a description of the Maltese educational system, with special emphasis on the learning of FLs, can be found in Appendix 4 (i; ii).

2.2.2 Decline in Maltese FL students.

Despite the aforementioned importance of FLs to modern Europe and the local initiatives that took place during the last decade in order to improve the situation of FLL (Pace, 2016, 2015a, 2015b, 2018) (Appendix 4 ii), MFLs in Malta still lack popularity at Post-Secondary and Tertiary level. This is very worrying considering the increasing number of students with low levels of proficiency in FLs after compulsory FLL (Pace, 2018).

2.2.2.1 A decreasing number of students getting qualified in FLs after SE.

FLs in Malta's SEC, Intermediate and Advanced level examinations include Arabic, French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish. The problem of shortage in FL students in the Post-Secondary and Tertiary sector, initiated when SEC FL examinations in Malta were not made compulsory (Pace, 2018). At that time, there was a belief that students would obviously continue with their FL studies and opt for FL examinations by the end of their SE (Pace, 2018). However, this decision resulted in languages being considered as hard and insignificant subjects and given that our educational system is to a large extent based on examinations, focus is mostly placed on compulsory subjects. As a result, a trendy orientation towards subjects which are perceived as necessary and significant, such as Information Technology (IT) Finance and Sciences, has been adopted (Pace, 2018).

Year	% of students registered for FL SEC level examinations
May 2004	75.7%
May 2009	67%
May 2014	60.3%
May 2019	67.5%
Source: Adapted from MATSEC Statistical reports (2005a, 2010a, 2015a, 2020a)	

Table 1: Percentage of students in Malta registered for a FL SEC examination in May 2004, May 2009, May 2014 and May 2019.

The concern of the present situation of FLs in Malta is fuelled by the drastic decline in the registrations for FL SEC examinations. From May 2004 to May 2019 the percentage decrease of students registering for a FL SEC examination was that of -10.83% (Adapted from MATSEC Examinations Board, 2005a, 2010a, 2015a, 2020a). As can be seen in Table 1, from the total number of candidates registered for the first session of SEC examinations, 75.7%, registered for at least 1 FL SEC exam in May 2004 (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2005a). This percentage decreased to 67% by May 2009 (MATSEC Support Unit, 2010a), and to 60.3% by May 2014 (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2015a). Better figure results could be seen in May 2019 as the percentage of students registered for a FL SEC examination increased to 67.5% (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2020a). However, despite this increase, one should still consider the figure of 67.5% as alarming given that the rest of the students, thus 32.5%, did not sit for at least 1 FL SEC exam after 5 years of compulsory LL in their SE.

2.2.2.2 A decreasing number of FL Advanced level learners.

Year	% of students registered for FL Advanced level examinations
May 2004	16.1%
May 2009	14.2%
May 2014	8.7%
May 2019	5.5%

Source: Adapted from MATSEC Statistical reports (2005b, 2010b, 2015b, 2020b)

Table 2: Percentage of students registered for FL Advanced level examinations in May 2004, May 2009, May 2014 and May 2019.

More shocking figures can be seen in the number of Post-Secondary students registering for Advanced FL examinations over the past 17 years. From May 2004 till May 2019 there was a percentage decrease of -65.84% in the number of students registering for at least 1 FL exam at Advanced level (Adapted from MATSEC Examinations Board, 2005b, 2010b, 2015b, 2020b). From the total number of candidates registered for the first session of Matriculation Certificate (MC) examinations, only 16.1% registered for an Advanced FL exam in May 2004, and 5 years later 14.2% did so (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2005b, 2010b). However, the drastic decline in Advanced FL students happened over the past decade where in May 2014 and in May 2019 only 8.7% and 5.5% respectively chose to register for at least 1 Advanced FL exam at Post-Secondary level (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2015b, 2020b).

Scholastic Year	Number of students studying a FL at Advanced level
2016 – 2017	186
2017 – 2018	163
2018 – 2019	129
2019 - 2020	145
Source: Adapted from Pace, 2019.	

Table 3: Number of students studying a FL at Advanced level between 2016 and 2020.

Pace (2019) provides a better picture of the situation of Advanced FL study in Malta during the past 5 years. As seen in Table 3, the total number of first- and second-year Post-Secondary students studying FLs in Malta, gradually declined from 186 in scholastic year 2016/17 to 145 in scholastic year 2019/20.

These are quite shocking figures considering the large number of students studying other subjects at Advanced level. (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2020b). This clearly shows that the situation of MFLs at Post-Secondary level in Malta is a problematic one.

2.2.2.3 A decreasing number of FL Intermediate level learners.

Year	% of students registered for FL Intermediate level examinations
2004	19.5%
2009	13.5%
2014	7%
2019	5.7%

Source: Adapted from MATSEC Statistical reports (2005b, 2010b, 2015b, 2020b)

Table 4: Percentage of students registered for FL Intermediate level examinations in May 2004, May 2009, May 2014 and May 2019.

Another massive decline is clearly evident in the number of FL Intermediate level students. As shown in Table 4, from the total number of candidates registered for the first session of MC examinations, 19.5% of Post-Secondary students registered for a FL Intermediate exam in May 2004 (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2005b). By May 2009 this percentage decreased to 13.5% (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2010b). Recently, more worrying figures occurred as in May 2014 and May 2019, only 7% and 5.7% respectively planned to get certified in a FL at Intermediate level (MATSEC Examinations Boards, 2015b, 2020b).

This means that between May 2004 and May 2019 there was a percentage decrease of -70.77% in the number of Post-Secondary students registering for an Intermediate examination in FLs (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2005b, 2020b), another shocking yet real result of the recent situation of MFLs at Post-Secondary level in Malta.

In reality, the University's General entry requirements for Undergraduate courses do not encourage Post-Secondary students to take FLs at Intermediate level (Pace, Office of the Permanent Secretary, & MEDE, 2018). In fact, in addition to their SEC qualification in English, all first-year students at the UM should have an English Intermediate or Advanced level qualification of at least grade C (University of Malta, 2020). Those students who do not obtain

this grade or better, or who do not study English at Post-Secondary level, have to undergo a proficiency test at University and in case of failure, students have to follow the English Communicative Aptitude Programme (ECA) whilst reading their course of specialization. Given that in the Matriculation course English is in the same group of FLs, Post-Secondary students choose to take English at Intermediate level rather than a FL, so that they avoid to follow the ECA programme at University (Pace, Office of the Permanent Secretary, & MEDE, 2018). As a result, the number of students choosing FLs at Intermediate level is minimal.

The low number of students studying FLs at Post-Secondary level has led to a major downfall of FL students in Tertiary education. Data on the overall decrease in the number of first year students taking FLs at University level between scholastic years 2004/05 to 2019/20, can be found in Appendix 4 (iv) and Appendix 5.

2.3 Reasons behind the decline in the number of FL learners at Post-Compulsory level.

The reasons behind the avoidance of languages as soon as FLL is no longer compulsory are quite complex (Pace, 2015a). However, a better understanding of certain characteristics will help us learn more about what is actually going on in FL teaching and learning, and how these characteristics influence the students' will to persist with or to avoid FLs in their studies.

2.3.1 *Motivation and attitude.*

As Pace (2015b, p.4) clearly states; "It is a known secret that motivation is a key factor in FL successful learning". Gardner and Lambert (1972) differentiate between two types of motivation; instrumental motivation and integrative motivation. While the former includes motivation that takes place because the learner needs (a) language(s) for immediate improvement and functional objectives such as succeeding in exams, career growth and financial benefits, the latter takes place when the FL student learns a language because of a desire to assimilate with the culture and the native speakers of the FL being studied (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). According to Lightbown and Spada (2013) when a learner has a particular

need to communicate in the target language (TL) or to achieve particular career goals, students will appreciate the value of being able to communicate in the TL and they will be motivated to learn and improve in the language being studied. Moreover, if learners perceive the community of the TL and its speakers positively, they would be willing to assimilate with them and their culture (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

On the other hand, Deci and Ryan (1985) differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In intrinsic motivation, the learner carries out a task for the pleasure that it generates and this usually gives rise to good feelings along with a strong self-determined motivation. In extrinsic motivation, an activity is carried out in order to accomplish other goals such as career advancement. It has been argued that the more learners study a language out of their own will, the harder they work and the more capable they feel (Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999). However, according to Williams et al. (2002, p. 521), FLL does not “appear to be particularly intrinsically motivating in itself”.

One of the most pertinent questions that affects students’ motivation to learn a FL nowadays, is related to the utility of FLL (Pace, 2015a). In Chambers (1999), English learners of German of 11 up to 17 years, compared themselves with German learners of English of the same age group and they perceived English as much more useful than the FL that they were studying, arguing that German students of English had more opportunities to use their language skills than they had with German. Without even knowing, students look for a link between their interests and LL, however in the majority of cases, they find the school program very restricting or overwhelming (Martí Alonso, 2019).

During the past years, students studying FLs in Malta were predominantly assessed on one language competence (writing) (Pace, 2015a), to the detriment of the 4 other language competences, that is reading, listening, spoken production and spoken interaction. This made students perceive a gap between FLL and its actual utility in real circumstances (Pace, 2015a). According to Pace (2015b), this is a key factor contributing to the present situation given that learners are more likely to put their efforts in when they recognize that there is a link between the classroom and outside reality, and when they understand that they can apply what is being taught in class to real circumstances.

It is also argued that language skills, participation and motivation increase when learners have the possibility to be active during the lesson and manipulate subject matters that they already know or that form part of their interests (Martí Alonso, 2019). Pace (2015a, p. 612) equally blames students' lack of motivation to learn a FL on what he calls a " 'one size fits all' program of studies". For many years, before the introduction of the Language Proficiency Assessment (LPA) programme in Malta (Appendix 4 ii), students who did not acquire basic language skills during their initial years of FLL, found it difficult to cope with other students throughout their studies, due to a uniform program which limited the teachers' and learners' resilience (Pace, 2015a).

Studies on the attitudes that students hold towards FLL, such as that of Stables and Wikeley's (1999) with 14- and 15-year-old English learners, report that attitudes towards FLs are extensively negative. On the Post-Secondary curriculum, MFLs are perceived as hard (Fisher, 2001, Graham, 2002) and only suitable for the most competent (Graham, 2004). Others regard the ability of learning languages as a special competence possessed by the few (Horwitz, 1988).

Williams et al. (2002) also claim that although Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9 students wish to be successful in languages such as French and German, they find FL lessons uninteresting and boring, and if languages were not compulsory school subjects, some learners would never attempt to learn them. On the contrary, Marshall (2000) shows us that this is not necessarily the point of view of all students as in his study, those learners who did not pursue languages did not show any disinterest with regard to LL. In fact, it was the burden of an overwhelming curriculum that made them avoid languages after the age of 16. In the same manner, Fisher (2001) also reports that out of 117 English 16-year-old learners, 69% felt that FLs were useful for business trades and 76% opposed the idea that since everyone speaks their own language, it is useless for English speakers to acquire other languages.

Whilst emphasizing the complex role that motivation has in LL, Lightbown and Spada (2013) claim that it is difficult to determine whether positive attitudes lead to successful language acquisition or vice versa, or whether there are other elements that affect them both. However, attitudes towards FLL do leave an impact on the students' performance, as Grech

(2011) found that those students who have positive attitudes towards French, tend to perform well in the SEC examination of this language.

2.3.2 Gender.

Studies report that motivation to learn FLs is higher among girls than among boys as girls tend to like languages more, and their desire to learn new ones is significantly higher than that of male learners (Williams et al., 2002). In fact, compared to females, males have lower positive attitudes to acquire a language other than English (Stables and Wikeley, 1999).

Apart from the “widening gap in motivation to learn” (Williams et al., 2002, p. 522) found between males and females, very often, girls surpass boys in all academic disciplines, especially in MFLs. In fact, whilst being more intrinsically motivated than males, female learners are found to make more effort in studying languages (Williams et al., 2002).

With regard to French, more girls seem to choose this FL (Williams et al., 2002). In fact, girls are more attracted by its sound and they perceive a greater need to study it than boys (Williams et al., 2002). It has also been confirmed that females tend to do better in this subject than males (Callaghan, 1998). The explanations for such a phenomenon include feminine-biased topics, the dominance of female language teachers which result in French being regarded as a female-dominated discipline, as well as family and social factors (Callaghan, 1998). Grech (2011) also found that Year 11 boys tend to have more difficulties during French SEC examinations and they are not as enthusiastic as girls towards French lessons. According to Williams et al. (2002), there is a manly perception that it is not cool for boys to work hard on French or to try out anything that is perceived as boring, and if boys actually do like languages, they do not show it, as they perceive such likes as inappropriate to show.

2.3.3 Age.

The older learners get, the less positive their attitudes towards LA (Language Acquisition) will be (Gardner and Smythe, 1975). Williams et al. (2002) and Gauci (2016) support the claim that motivation to learn FLs decreases with age as some of the initial enthusiasm for learning a FL

gradually gets lost. However, Chambers (1999) suggests that this motivation decline with age in FLs, might form part of the general waning in students' enthusiasm for education in general, that many learners experience during their SE.

Lightbown and Spada (2013) argue that very often young students have more time and opportunities for LA and practice, and they do not face the pressure to hold accurate and fluent conversations from an early stage as elder learners do. Besides, their first faulty attempts are often recognized and praised. On the other hand, elder learners face circumstances in which they are expected to use and understand a language which is more complex. In contrast with young children, adult learners feel ashamed and conscious about their inadequate proficiency in the language being studied, and they might grow a feeling of incompetency after disappointing attempts to share their thoughts precisely (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This has also been confirmed by Gauci (2016) who also agrees that as learners grow older, they are more conscious of doing mistakes and ending up ridiculed by their peers. As a result, this wrong attitude may have a bad influence on learners' enthusiasm and motivation to engage in circumstances where the TL is used (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

2.3.4 *Language experience and the role of the teacher.*

Negative language experiences may also result in students dropping language courses or choosing not to take them at all (Graham, 2004). The teaching methods used by the language teacher definitely impact the students' motivation towards the language being studied. Exchanges between the interviewer and Year 9 students in Williams et al. (2002) reveal that some FL learners perceive the acquisition of new vocabulary as tedious given that it involves writing down lists of words, reading out the lists aloud and writing exactly the same lists once again, a very boring and traditional method indeed.

According to Williams et al. (2002) it is crucial for teachers to discuss the reasons for studying languages and explain to their students their importance. Rather than investing all the efforts on curriculum content, it is equally or even more important to also dedicate some time to boost students' motivation, sense of agency and attitudes towards FLL (Williams et al., 2002). Teachers can positively affect the learners' motivation to acquire something new if they create

classroom environments which students look forward to, due to the provision of the necessary support, daunting yet simple and explicit learning objectives, and topics adapted to the learners' level and skills (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Studies indicate that the use of language in a FL classroom, whether it is the L1, L2 or L3, may also influence students' motivation and attitudes towards the FL. Italian teachers interviewed in Caruana and Camilleri Grima (2013), tend to believe that the use of the L1 with young and/or weak students, may serve as a motivational tool. Similarly, Abela (2011) concluded that the majority of teachers perceive the complete exclusion of the mother tongue from the FFL classroom as a factor that demotivates students from studying French. Along the same lines, questionnaire results in Bezzina (2016) also uncover the beliefs of Maltese FFL teachers, that code switching is beneficial as it instils motivation and confidence in learners.

Such findings suggest that the sole use of the TL in a FL classroom may also be a factor that hinders motivation towards FLL. Notwithstanding the fact that the use of the TL in a FL classroom is of extreme importance and that students should be encouraged to use this language as much as possible, teachers should not stifle learner participation by limiting speech to the TL only.

2.3.5 *Language proficiency.*

Apart from the fact that many persons perceive languages as unimportant, others, despite their high academic achievement in their overall education, find FLL difficult (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Whilst acknowledging that there is a connection between previous language success and motivation, Lightbown and Spada (2013) argue that both success and motivation can result from a high language aptitude or a positive environment in which languages are learnt.

Rather than describing the relationship between achievement and motivation in FLL as a one-way relationship, Williams et al. (2002) perceive this process as a reciprocal phenomenon. In this study, it has been found that those students who have strong language proficiency are more willing to study languages out of their own interest. High proficiency students also tend to have a greater interest to perform well in the FL, and a greater possibility to find LL useful,

interesting and fun. There is also a tendency that such students perceive themselves as having a higher level of ability and success, while low-proficiency learners generally have a low-level of language self-concept (Williams et al., 2002). In fact, a lot needs to be done in order to avoid the early sense of weakness indicated by low attainment (Williams et al., 2002).

A related factor which is also important and which equally influences students' motivation to learn FLs, is their expectations of success or failure in the FL, or as otherwise referred "self-efficacy" (Tremblay and Gardner, 1995). In Zimmermann (1995), it is argued that along with the students' real abilities, their expectations of success or failure and the implications that these expectations leave on motivation, influence learners' academic achievement. Moreover, the value of success or how important it is for individuals to be successful in the language being studied, also affects motivation. In fact, Wigfield (1994) claims that the higher the expectancy to achieve a goal and the greater the value and importance of this achievement, the more motivated the individual will be to succeed.

2.3.6 Attribution to success and failure.

Bandura (1995) sustains that self-efficacy is in itself affected by the reasons and interpretations provided by the students for their achievement or otherwise. On a similar note, Graham (2004) argues that the reasons to which students attribute their positive or negative achievements, can potentially shape their perceptions of future performance and thus, their motivation to conduct the same or equivalent tasks once again.

Attributing the academic performance to the learning strategies used can enhance motivation, given that learners manage and control their learning responsibly whilst keeping in mind that the methods and approaches that they use will determine their success or failure (Graham, 2004). According to the attribution theory, motivation is higher when lack of success is believed to take place due to factors which the individual can control, such as insufficient effort and ineffective strategies implemented (Graham, 2004).

However, Dörnyei (2001) argues that there is a high tendency that rather than positively attributing success or failure in FLA to effort and learning strategies, students retain negative attributions related to their own abilities and skills. This happens due to a feeling of insecurity

and incompetency towards a subject that requires a certain level of proficiency (Dörnyei, 2001). While citing Dweck (1987), Graham (2004) suggests that learners who attribute their low achievements to insufficient competency and perceive inability as a life-long unalterable deficiency over which they have no control, would have lower motivation to work and to persist in the face of difficulties encountered. Additionally, Graham (2004) also concludes that attribution of lack of success to task difficulty is an indication of passiveness and lack of motivation, and very often in such cases, success is perceived as impossible.

2.3.7 Career guidance.

The aspects discussed above indicate that there are many factors that lead students to choose a particular career or training course. Nowadays, students give significant importance to career planning and when it comes to their own career prospects, they seek professional guidance (Wikto, Bernes, Magnusson, Bardick, 2005, Hiebert, B., Borgen, W. A., & Schober, K., 2011).

According to Wikto et al. (2005), learners perceive information on Post-Secondary schooling, courses and professions as extremely beneficial. Studies such as that of Rothman and Hillman (2008) also confirm that Year 10, Year 11 and Year 12 students all find career guidance quite useful and satisfying. However, the students who are considered to benefit the most from career guidance, are those who are not sure about their future plans (Rothman & Hillman, 2008).

McDonough (2006) claims that CGCs influence positively the students' goals, plans, knowledge and their Post-Secondary enrolment process. In fact, the extent to which career advice influences the actual career and subject choice of the students is also of key importance for this study. Although Menon (2010) states that students do not regard counsellors as central to their career choices, more recent research found that CGCs leave a significant impact when making such choices (Awinsong, Dawson, & Gidiglo, 2015). Ogunlade and Akeredolu (2012) continue to confirm the strong influence that CGCs leave on students' decisions, as participants in their study claim that their wrong career decisions were mostly due to an

inadequate support from the CGCs. This means that the career guidance advice does influence students' choices and their decisions regarding which career-pathways they will go for.

In the case of Malta, FL skills might only seem an essential requirement for a small number of students (Pace, 2015a). Unfortunately, not much has been said on whether languages are discussed between students and CGCs, and whether the latter encourage learners to take on languages at Post-Secondary and Tertiary level. In fact, this is uncharted territory, from a research perspective. It is hoped that participants' replies to the questionnaire in this study, may shed some light on this topic. Expectations would be that locally, CGCs do not often recommend taking up languages at Post-Secondary level, given that such a small number of students choose them. It is equally assumed that CGCs probably steer students towards a more tangibly foreseeable career, and/or a more lucrative option.

2.4 A closer look onto the French language.

2.4.1 *Perceptions on the French language amongst students.*

In Abdilla (2020), who based her study on mixed methods of research, different opinions were expressed as regards the French language by Year 8 learners, namely 10 male students attending a church school and 20 mixed students attending a public school. The aim of this research is to analyse whether using pedagogical games in the classroom increases students' motivation to acquire French. Among the research instruments used, a questionnaire was distributed to the above-mentioned students. The researcher carried out an enquiry among students to obtain a better understanding of the different methodologies that are currently being put into practice during French lessons, as well as to gain some valuable knowledge about favourite activities and learning styles of the students.

The majority of church school Year 8 students in this study claim that they intend to sit for the French SEC level examination, and they also plan to pursue their studies in this language after SE, since they perceive French as a pleasant language which is easy to learn. They equally believe that later on they will need to speak and understand French, especially when going abroad. However, although the majority of these students wished to continue with their

studies in French, a significant number of learners were still undecided due to the perceived difficulty of the subject and their low expectancies of examination success.

More worrying results were obtained from students attending a public school, as less than half of the participants planned to sit for the French SEC exam or to pursue their studies in this language at Post-Secondary level. A significant number of students were also undecided whether to opt for the French SEC examination or not. Negative responses from these learners included the fact that some students hate the French language. Others find it difficult and very often they do not find anyone who can help them improve their language level. The idea that French is not important was also expressed as many students are convinced that they do not need this language for their future work or studies. Although this is a small-scale study, its results show that negative attitudes towards the French language in Malta, start from a very early age. The fact that less than half of Year 8 students from a public school are intending to sit for their French SEC examination and pursue their studies in this language, is very worrying, considering that they have only learnt French for less than two years and after such a short period of time, they are already excluding it from their future plans.

Malta is not the only country in which the French language has lost its significance. In fact, in her study, Graham (2004) reported that only 19% out of 286 Year 11 English students wish to keep studying French after they reach the age of 16, as many also perceive French as a difficult subject. This may reflect the shared belief that FLA is hard to accomplish (Graham, 2004). Allied to the reasons given in Abdilla (2020), the subject's level of difficulty, students' dislike and lack of interest in the French language, its inutility for the students' future career and their low proficiency in the language, are among the reasons that are found to discourage Year 11 students from studying French post 16 years of age (Graham, 2004). Similarly, Year 11 participants in Fisher's (2001) study also claim that they find French General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) difficult, thus they feel unable to manage this language at Advanced level. In Tse's (2000) study with University undergraduate and graduate students, some participants also describe their experience of studying French in college as horrible and they express their regret for not choosing another language course instead of French.

Besides, concerns regarding the disparity between the aptitude of FL learners by the end of compulsory language schooling and the unrealistic demands that the Advanced French

language curriculum entails soon after, have been expressed (Graham, 2004). Graham (2004) found that 93% and 88% of students in Year 12 and Year 13 respectively, put in a lot of effort in order to obtain their desired grades. The “big gap” (p.179) between French GCSE and Advanced level is believed to dampen the students’ motivation to cope with the increased difficulty in the subject matter (Graham, 2004).

2.4.2 A deeper analysis of student numbers in French at varying levels.

Data issued by the Eurostat confirms that for the year 2017 French was the second most studied FL by lower secondary students in Europe (Eurostat, 2017) while for 2018, it was the third studied FL among upper secondary European learners (Eurostat, 2018). However, despite being a commonly studied language by the young Europeans, recently French seems to have lost its popularity among Maltese youths. Statistics of the number of students choosing French or sitting for French examinations indicate, that at all levels of education the trend of studying this FL is waning.

2.4.2.1 French as a FL in SE.

	French	Italian	German	Spanish
Scholastic Year 2014/15	359	1254	232	237
Scholastic Year 2019/20	341	1165	330	484
Source: Data obtained from the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability retrieved on 5 th April, 2021.				

Table 5: Number of Year 7 students choosing FLs in State Secondary Schools in scholastic years 2014/15 and 2019/20.

Data obtained from the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability confirms that in Secondary State schools in Malta, French has lost its trend as the second most chosen FL by students commencing their SE. In scholastic year 2014/15, Italian as a FL was the language chosen by the majority of Year 7 students, followed by French, Spanish and German. However, more recently there seems to be a radical shift in FL preferences at Secondary level.

In fact, in scholastic year 2019/20, while Italian remained the most popular FL to be chosen by students starting their SE, the popularity of French seems to have faded away as in the same scholastic year, French was the third FL to be chosen by Year 7 students. Although from scholastic years 2014/15 to 2019/20 the number of students choosing French remained more or less the same, there was a significant rise in the number of students choosing German and most particularly Spanish.

In 5 years' time the number of students choosing Spanish in SE increased by more than double the amount. Moreover, the increasing number of students choosing German, which has led to a relatively small gap between the number of German and French learners, shows the high risk of French becoming the fourth preference for Year 7 students in their choice of FLs. This confirms what had been predicted by Caruana in 2017 that French may not remain the second most chosen FL in Secondary level. One should note that the total number of Year 7 students commencing SE in State schools in scholastic years 2014/15 and 2019/20 could not be obtained. Thus, percentages showing the number of learners choosing different languages from the total number of Year 7 students could not be issued. However, the drastic change in students' preferences in FLs at this level is nonetheless clearly evident.

Despite the decline that the Italian language has undergone, it is still the most popular language to be chosen and studied in SE. For a long time, Italian has been given a lot of importance by the Maltese mainly due to historical and geographical reasons (Council of Europe, 2015). Until some decades ago, at a time when studying other FLs was more widespread, watching television in Italian was very popular in Malta (Council of Europe, 2015). This had a significant influence on the acquisition of the Italian language among the Maltese, as many claim that they learned this language from television (Council of Europe, 2015). However, nowadays watching television programs in Italian is no longer a trend as people are more into Maltese, American and British channels (Council of Europe, 2015). This not only

affected the status and skills in Italian among youths (Council of Europe, 2015), but as a result, students are far more less exposed to languages in general. In fact, due to a lot of time spent playing video games and watching series or videos in English, today’s new generation are very fluent and have excellent skills in the English language. Consequently, being highly skilled in this language, makes students think that they do not need other languages and thus, they perceive the learning of FLs as useless.

	Arabic	French	German	Italian	Russian	Spanish
May 2004	0.15%	37.63%	7.11%	50.13%	0.18%	4.79%
May 2009	0.16%	35.36%	10.82%	47.74%	0.42%	5.50%
May 2014	0.70%	33.32%	9.5%	48.38%	0.53%	7.57%
May 2019	1.92%	27.37%	12.99%	46.83%	1.14%	9.75%
Source: Adapted from MATSEC Statistical reports (2005a, 2010a, 2015a, 2020a)						

Table 6: Percentage of students registered for SEC level examinations in different FLs from the total number of FL SEC registrations in May 2004, May 2009, May 2014, May 2019.

It is clearly evident that Spanish has gained a lot of popularity during these past years and this ever-growing popularity can also be seen through the FL SEC May registrations of the past 17 years. Table 6 shows the percentage of students registered for SEC May examinations in Arabic, French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish from the total number of students registered for FL SEC examinations in the main session (MATSEC Examinations Board 2005a, 2010a, 2015a, 2020a). If we look closely at the percentage of registrations for French SEC from May 2004 to May 2019, one immediately notes that the percentage of French SEC candidates decreased considerably from 37.63% in 2004 to 27.37% in 2019 (MATSEC Examinations Board 2005a, 2020a). On the contrary, in 15 years’ time, the percentage of students registering for Spanish and German SEC in May sessions increased.

2.4.2.2 French as a FL at Post-Secondary level.

	Arabic	French	German	Italian	Russian	Spanish
May 2004	/	3.90%	1.03%	10.12%	0.04%	0.99%
May 2009	/	3.98%	0.57%	8.82%	/	0.82%
May 2014	0.07%	2.28%	0.73%	4.65%	0.10%	0.83%
May 2019	0.16%	1.32%	0.54%	2.46%	0.21%	0.80%
Source: Adapted from MATSEC Statistical reports (2005b, 2010b, 2015b, 2020b)						

Table 7: Percentage of students registered for Advanced level examinations in different FLs from the total number of candidates who registered for the May Matriculation Certificate session in 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019.

As discussed earlier, the situation of FLs in Post-Secondary Institutions, both at Intermediate and Advanced level is very problematic in Malta. Table 7 shows the percentage of Maltese students registered for Advanced examinations in Arabic, French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish from the total number of candidates who registered for the May MC session in 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019.

Statistics clearly show that in 15 years, the number of students registering for French examinations at Advanced level decreased. In fact, the mere percentage of 3.90% in May 2004, gradually dropped to 1.32% by May 2019 (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2005b, 2010b, 2015b, 2020b).

Data on the difference between the curriculum of French at SEC level and French at Advanced level can be found in Appendix 4 (iii). A deeper analysis of the situation of this FL indicates that in May 2009, from a total of 346 students registering for FL examinations at Advanced level, 28.03% were students of French (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2010b). However, during the past decade, this percentage continued to decrease given that from 212 candidates registering for FL examinations at Advanced level in May 2019, only 24.06% registered for an examination in French at this level (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2020b).

Along with French, both German and Spanish Advanced have lost their popularity among Post-Secondary students between May 2004 and May 2019. (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2005b, 2010b, 2015b, 2020b). However, the FL which has undergone the largest student deficit at this level is Italian.

	Arabic	French	German	Italian	Russian	Spanish
May 2004	0.04%	3.99%	1.61%	13.43%	/	0.40%
May 2009	0.08%	4.43%	1.23%	7.38%	/	0.37%
May 2014	0.05%	3.06%	0.51%	2.84%	0.02%	0.49%
May 2019	0.08%	1.71%	0.99%	2.41%	0.05%	0.47%
Source: Adapted from MATSEC Statistical reports (2005b, 2010b, 2015b, 2020b)						

Table 8: Percentage of students registered for different FLs at Intermediate level from the total number of candidates who registered for the May Matriculation Certificate session in 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019.

With regard to FLs at Intermediate level, the situation is not any better. Table 8 shows the percentage of students registered for Intermediate level examinations in Arabic, French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish from the total number of students registered for the MC examinations in May 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019.

Although the percentage of candidates registered for French Intermediate examinations started to increase gradually from May 2004 (3.99%) to May 2009 (4.43%), in May 2014 the number of Post-Secondary learners wishing to obtain an Intermediate certification in French dropped once again (3.06%). By May 2019, from the total number of students registered for the MC examinations, only 1.71% planned to sit for French at Intermediate level (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2005b, 2010b, 2015b, 2020b).

2.4.2.3 French at University level.

Data retrieved from the Office of the Registrar of the UM also proves that in 15 years, French has also lost its importance among University students. In order to examine the situation of this FL at the UM, an analysis of the decrease in the number of first year students choosing FLs combined with other subjects in the courses of Bachelor of Arts (B.A) and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) (Honours) was carried out. Tables showing the combination of FLs with other subjects in the above-mentioned courses during scholastic years 2004/05, 2009/10, 2014/15 and 2019/20 can be found in the Appendix section.

Data obtained shows that in 2004/05 the total number of students studying French along with another subject in the B.A or B.Ed (Honours) course was that of 25 students which decreased to 14 students by 2014/15. More recently, in scholastic year 2019/20 only 3 students were enrolled in the B.A course and chose French. This means that French has lost its trend of 2-digit figures in the number of students choosing it at University level. Moreover, the drastic decline leading to only 3 students of French in scholastic year 2019/20, shows that there is a high risk that in the near future this FL might hardly be chosen at all, at least in particular years, at University level.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter an overview of the existing literature on the key features of our study has been provided. Against the backdrop of the key importance of FLs for economic and communicative purposes on the local and international scenarios, the declining number of students studying FLs at varying levels in Malta, and the unfavourable attitudes held towards French locally and overseas, are definitely wakeup calls for action to take place. An investigation of the factors which influence the students' decisions to choose or to avoid FLL namely age, gender, previous FLL experiences and performance, career guidance advice, motivation and attitudes towards FLs, has also been carried out in this chapter. It is hoped that by conducting this study, we will be able to build on previous research and present a comprehensive picture of the situation of MFLs in Malta at Post-Secondary level.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the research problem and present the research questions and hypothesis. An overview on the nature of this research, the participants, the data collection and analysis, and the ethical considerations addressed, will be equally provided.

3.2 The research problem.

As has been previously indicated, the number of Maltese students who choose to study FLs at Post-Secondary level, after 5 years of compulsory LL in SE, is on a sharp decline. In fact, the number of FL students in Post-Secondary and Tertiary education is extremely low, compared to the number of students enrolled in other subjects (Pace, 2019). Besides, French seems to have lost its allure among the young generation since the number of learners choosing this language is also on a decline, compared to the number of students learning other languages.

As a future FL teacher, such concerns have instilled motivation in me to discover the reasons why FLs are no longer popular after SE. It is believed that, in order to address this increasing problem effectively, we must first discover what is constituting a problem to learn FLs at Advanced level and why students are immediately choosing to eliminate FLs from their main areas of study, as soon as they are no longer required to study them. The views of Post-Secondary students themselves are perhaps the best source of information that could help us understand what led them to avoid or to persist with FLs. Studying how they perceive FLL, and analysing the relevance and perceived importance of FLs, particularly French, for Post-Secondary students, should help us gain a clearer idea of the factors that influence FLL and that are leading to this drastic decline. It is expected that the reasons given by these students for choosing or avoiding FLs as their main areas of study, will give us an explanation of why we are facing this troubling situation of so few FL learners at Post-Secondary and Tertiary level.

3.3 Research questions and hypothesis.

In order to achieve the objectives of this study, we are basing this research on 3 main research questions:

- (a) What are Post-Secondary students' perspectives regarding learning a FL in Malta?
- (b) What is discouraging Maltese students from choosing foreign languages as their main area of study?
- (c) How is the French language perceived by students and why is it no longer popular at Post-Secondary level?

As regards the first research question, we believe that those few students who pursue FLL at Advanced level are mostly girls and they do so due to their love for languages and foreign cultures in general. The increasing number of students quitting SE without any certification in FLs (Pace, 2015a), makes us hypothesise that the majority of Post-Secondary students do not perceive the FLL experience in SE positively, and that most probably, the large majority of students consider FLs and FLL as difficult and highly demanding.

Given that other fields such as those of sciences and commerce, have long been perceived as more important domains in the island that guarantee lucrative and successful careers, our hypothesis for the second research question is that many perceive FLL as not important, useless and not worth to study. This together with the perceived difficulty of FLs and the negative FLL experiences in SE, may be among the most common factors that discourage students from choosing FLs as their main areas of study. As previously indicated, the fact that few students pursue their main studies in FLs, also leads us to the assumption that the advice provided by CGCs is not always in favour of choosing languages at Post-Secondary level, and that this may be another factor leading to the present situation of FLs after compulsory FLL.

Besides, the increasing number of students choosing Spanish and German to the detriment of French, leads to the hypothesis that French is no longer considered as important. Furthermore, the decreasing number of students choosing this language at varying levels, also makes us believe that French is perceived as a demanding and difficult subject. In fact, it is

assumed that these perceptions make students feel incapable to learn French at Advanced level or even worse, that they do not feel the need to learn this language at all.

By addressing the above-mentioned research questions, this study will provide a broad picture of the factors that are hindering FL study, particularly French, at Post-Secondary and Tertiary level. It is believed that if our results answer these 3 research questions, we could move towards the next step of finding solutions and addressing this problem more specifically. Findings from this study would also help language teachers to identify the demotivating factors in FLL and address them effectively.

3.4 The nature of this research.

Before conducting our own research, previous studies that have been carried out on the matter were read, analysed and discussed in a structured literature review. For the present study, a quantitative methodology has been adopted, centred on numerical data and based on methods which involve structured data collection instruments, random sampling and predetermined response categories (Kabir, 2016). This methodology enables us to summarize, generalize and compare our results (Kabir, 2016).

The perspectives of Maltese students with regard to FLL, are represented mainly through statistical data. It is believed that statistical information is best to represent the respective order of importance of the predominant reasons behind the decline of Post-Secondary FL students. In fact, numerical evidence and percentages enable us to portray more clearly and compare the strength of certain factors, that are leading to this avoidance of FLL after SE.

An electronic questionnaire is our main research tool for data collection. The students' responses were compared and their attitudes and preferences were contrasted on the basis of several factors including gender, previous FLL experience, and CGCs advice. Results from our own research, were cross-referenced with the data that had been obtained from previous studies discussed in the literature review. The main tasks in this study are to organize, compare and contrast data in order to find out the aspects on which the respondents agree and disagree, so that a reliable discussion can be formed.

3.5 Participants.

Participants in this study include male and female Post-Secondary students between 15 and 23 years old. Post-Secondary students were chosen as participants, because they already had a FLL experience in their SE. Furthermore, it is at Post-Secondary level that learners choose whether or not to take FLs as their main area of study. In fact, our belief is that their viewpoint of languages will not only explain why French and other FLs are no longer popular at Post-Secondary level, but it will at the same time give a clear indication of the factors that may have influenced their motivation to persist with or to avoid FLs as their main area of study.

We decided to conduct our research in 4 different Sixth Forms in Malta, 2 of which form part of State education, 1 is a Church Sixth Form and the other a Sixth Form belonging to the UM. In order to have valid information on what is leading to the discussed decline, it was believed that this study should be based on a representative number of Post-Secondary students. In fact, we decided to take up these 4 Sixth Forms, in order to have a significant sample of students and to base our study on the views of participants that are coming from different types of Post-Secondary institutions. A total number of 514 students participated in this research of which 74.9% were females. Surprisingly, the number of responses largely exceeded the required number for the sample to be representative. In fact, the total number of Post-Secondary participants in this study was above 362 students which was a safely representative number of this population calculated by the expert statistician Professor Liberato Camilleri of the Faculty of Science at the UM. This may be an indication that students do feel strongly about the matter of studying FLs and they wish to express and share their views on the topic.

3.6 Data collection.

Data collection took place during the months of January and February 2021. As has been previously indicated, information for this research was gathered through an anonymous online questionnaire administered to all Post-Secondary students attending the 4 above-mentioned Sixth Forms in Malta. The questionnaire was formed through Google Forms, an easy web-based application used to collect data through online surveys and questionnaires

(Dutton, 2015). The choice of this web-based application depended on its practicality, as it includes all standard type of questions and collects information efficiently.

This questionnaire was mainly created to obtain information on the strength of various motivational factors that lead students to choose or to avoid FLs once they are no longer compulsory. This research tool was used for this study for various reasons. First of all, questionnaires have been identified as practical methods used to investigate perspectives, preferences, attitudes and opinions, which correspond to the factors on which this study is based (Check & Russell, 2012). The questionnaire was considered as the most suitable method to meet the research objectives also because for this research it was necessary to get information from primary sources and to work on primary data. Moreover, an online questionnaire is a very suitable method which can be easily sent to a large number of people, hence, it allows a statistically significant amount of information to be collected. This was essential to ensure reaching out to a representative sample of Post-Secondary students. Besides, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online questionnaires were best to ensure the safety of the participants and avoid any possibilities of virus transmissions.

It was also assumed that due to the anonymity of this method, participants might be more willing to participate and share information. Hence, more valid data, higher reliability of results and a better response rate could be obtained. Besides, given that electronic questionnaires do not require an immediate reply, participants also had time to consider their responses and they could answer the questionnaire at their convenience. It is hoped that this may have led to more accurate and honest results.

The questionnaire consists of multiple-choice, closed and open-ended questions which aim to analyse the perspective of Maltese students with regard to the choice of languages at Post-Secondary level. It is made up of 35 questions about the students' viewpoint on languages especially on French, the factors that may have influenced their motivation to persist or not to persist with FLs as their main area of study, and their reasons for choosing or not choosing French.

The questions are asked logically from the most general to the most specific, and divided into sections so as to improve the visual appeal which Dillman, Smyth and Christian (2014) regard as a salient aspect of surveys. In fact, the questionnaire is divided into 2 main sections. The

first section is addressed to all Post-Secondary students, while the second section is only addressed to those students who have French as one of their main areas of study. The second section was added in order to study more closely the experience of those studying French at Advanced level. By the end of the first section, participants are asked whether they study French at Advanced or Intermediate level, or not at all. Those students who indicate that they study French at Advanced level are automatically directed to the second section of the questionnaire. Those who mark that they do not study French or that they only study it at Intermediate level, are directed to submit the questionnaire.

In the first section, students are mainly questioned about their current main areas of study, the reasons for their choices, their previous FLL experience in SE, their perception of French and of FLL in general, and their experience with CGCs prior to their enrolment in Post-Secondary schooling. The objective of these questions is mainly to understand what factors motivated students to choose or to avoid FLs.

The reasons for avoiding FLs as main areas of study are mainly asked to discover the predominant factors leading to the decline in the number of Advanced FL learners. Questions on FLL in SE aim to discover aspects such as previous FLL experience, the grades normally obtained in FLs, the effectiveness of FL teachers, the workload in FLL and to what reasons the students attribute their success or failure in languages. Through these questions, it was also aimed to study the correlation of the above-mentioned factors with the motivation to avoid or to persist with FLL. Questions regarding the students' perception of French and of FLL in general, are expected to shed light on the perceived difficulty, importance, usefulness and relevance of languages, and more particularly of French, for the students' planned career. Those students who do not have FLs in their main areas of study are also asked whether they consider to take up FL proficiency or mainstream courses at University, in order to confirm whether these students regret their current choice. Questions on CGCs advice are mainly asked to discover whether FLs are discussed during career guidance sessions, and whether students are encouraged by CGCs to take up languages at Post-Secondary level. These questions also aim to find out the reasons provided by CGCs of why students should or should not further their studies in FLs.

On the other hand, the second section focuses more on the current experience of learning FFL at Advanced level. Questions on the perceived difficulty of French, on the transition from Secondary to Post-Secondary education and on the students' future plans to pursue their studies in French after Post-Secondary education, are mainly asked. The aim of these questions is to find out whether Post-Secondary students perceive their current French Advanced level course as useful or not and whether this course sets unrealistic demands on the students. Information on how hard Advanced learners of French have to work in order to achieve their required grades is also sought. This section equally aims to provide insights on whether there is a knowledge level gap between the SEC and Advanced French courses, and whether students of French feel they are prepared or not for the Advanced FFL curriculum by their SE. Questions on the students' future study plans with regard to French, aim to provide the reasons why very few learners choose to study French at Tertiary level.

3.7 Data analysis.

This research is based on the actual response rate of the above-mentioned questionnaire. Guidance from Professor Liberato Camilleri was sought for the sample sizing of this study and the percentage of participants needed to guarantee representativity. In fact, advice from Professor Camilleri was given on how to go about the student population size, confidence level and margin of error.

Responses were gathered and analysed using Google Forms. Given that this application automatically stores and manages the feedback received, as soon as participants submitted their questionnaire electronically, their responses were immediately received on this platform. In order to study the results obtained in the most accurate manner, questionnaire results for this study were reviewed through a summary of responses, through responses by question, through individual responses and through a spreadsheet form.

As already indicated earlier, differentiation and comparisons of attitudes based on certain factors were carried out. Given that the majority of the questions in the questionnaire were multiple-choice or closed in nature, data for this research was mostly interpreted quantitatively. In fact, analysis took place in a descriptive manner; statistical data and

percentages were given in order to describe what the majority of Maltese students think with regard to FLL and FLs. On the other hand, open-ended questions and “Other” responses were analysed by using the “responses by question” tool offered by Google Forms, through which all the answers given to a particular question could be accessed and better understood, while keeping track of the similarities and dissimilarities of the answers provided. For these types of responses, a thematic approach has been adopted where different answers were categorized under their respective themes so that statistics could be issued.

Moreover, data for this study was analysed and discussed through bar charts, so that a clear representation of the results obtained could be presented. This gave more immediate indications of the most popular perspectives on FLs and of the most common factors that discourage Maltese students from pursuing FL education. A detailed discussion and interpretation of results was also carried out in order to understand and compare the influence of different types of factors leading to the low number of FL students in Malta.

3.8 Ethical considerations.

During the month of July 2020, the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) which deals with the protection of the rights and the well-being of participants, was contacted in order to start the necessary administrative procedures to conduct research. After a rather long process, the study was approved by the FREC, and soon after this approval, letters of request for permission were sent to the Secretariat for Catholic Education and the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability, in order to obtain permission to conduct research in Church and State Sixth Forms respectively. As regards the University’s Sixth Form institution, permission to conduct research was sought from the Principal. After another rather long process, all permissions were obtained.

Information letters were then sent to all the Heads of schools in which they were informed in detail about the study, its aims and purposes, the questionnaire, the participants’ involvement, the procedures to be followed, and the extent to which confidentiality of records would be maintained. Permissions from all the 4 Heads of Schools were obtained without significant difficulty. Once all permissions were collected, they were forwarded to the FREC

for the final ethical clearance. No ethical or data protection issues were found in this study, and permission to conduct this research was thus approved.

After approval from the FREC, a link of the Google Forms questionnaire was sent to the Heads of schools through an email. This link was then distributed via email as well, to all Post-Secondary students attending 4 Sixth forms, by the Heads of Schools themselves or the persons who were in charge of this matter.

As soon as participants accessed the Google Forms link, they were automatically directed to an information letter which was provided in both Maltese and English. In fact, the information letter was incorporated within the same link of the questionnaire so that before proceeding to the questions, students could be informed about all the aspects of this research, including the nature of the study and the purpose of the questionnaire. In this way, they could make an informed decision regarding their participation in this research. Although the researcher sought the cooperation of participants, participation in this questionnaire was entirely voluntary. Moreover, participants could discontinue participation at any time without giving any reasons. Most importantly, students were explicitly informed that by participating in the questionnaire, they would automatically be giving consent to participate in the research.

Confidentiality of records was also protected and promised to the participants. In fact, all the information collected was held as strictly confidential and it was only accessed by the researcher and the supervisor. Once the research was terminated, the questionnaire replies were no longer stored.

With regard to the questionnaire itself, this research tool did not include any questions on sensitive personal data that might have been offensive, distressing or deeply personal, and participants were not asked to give their name or any form of identity during this research. Questions were also clear and objective. This means that adequate word choice and range of responses were used in order to avoid leading questions which would prompt specific answers and compromise data. Furthermore, no personal involvement of the researcher took place, and a reliable method of data collection and data analysis was used, in order to produce unbiased results.

3.9 Conclusion

In this chapter the quantitative methodology used to collect data for our study was presented. This methodological approach enabled us to obtain valid information on how FLs and FLL is perceived by Post-Secondary students, and on the main factors that are discouraging the latter from pursuing FL study at Advanced level. In the next chapter, an analysis of this data will be carried out.

4 Analysis

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter results obtained through our questionnaire will be presented and analysed. This chapter is divided into two sections; the first section will concentrate on the analysis of the responses obtained in the first part of the questionnaire dealing with FLs and FLL, while in the second section an analysis of the responses received in the second part of the questionnaire regarding the learning of French at Advanced level, will be carried out. For every question analysed in both sections, percentages are calculated from the number of responses received for every question respectively.

4.2 An analysis of the first part of the questionnaire: The perspectives of Post-Secondary students on FLL and FLs.

Questions in the first part of the questionnaire were addressed to all participants and focused mainly on the perspectives of Post-Secondary students with regard to FLs, French in particular, and FLL in general.

4.2.1 Age and Gender.

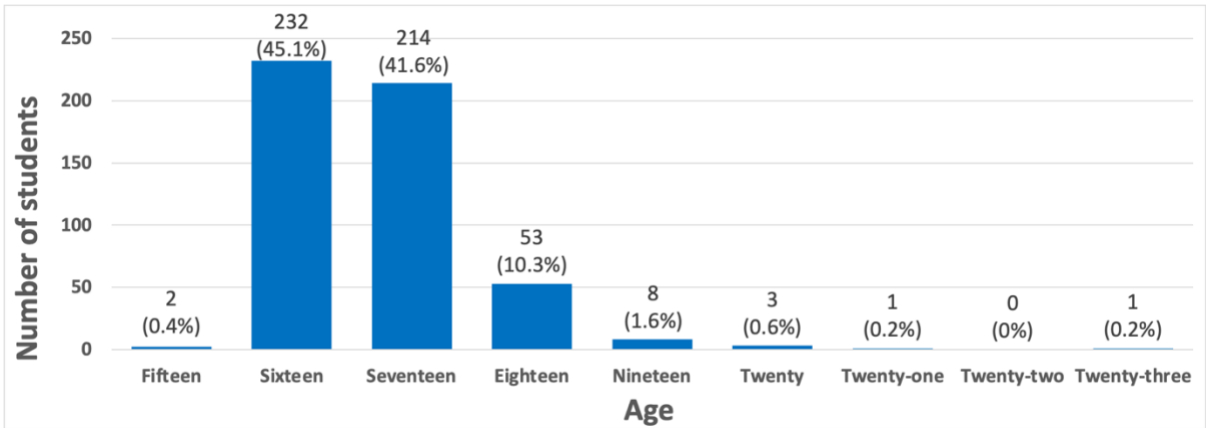


Figure 1: Age

As can be seen in Figure 1, the age of Post-Secondary students participating in our research varied from 15 to 23 years. Out of a total number of 514 participants, 45.1% were 16 years old, while 41.6% were 17 years old. Students aged 18 amounted to 10.3%, and only 1.6% and 0.6% of the participants were 19 years old and 20 years old respectively. Two students (0.4%) who were 15 years old, 1 student (0.2%) who was 21 years old and another 23-year-old (0.2%) participant also formed part of our research.

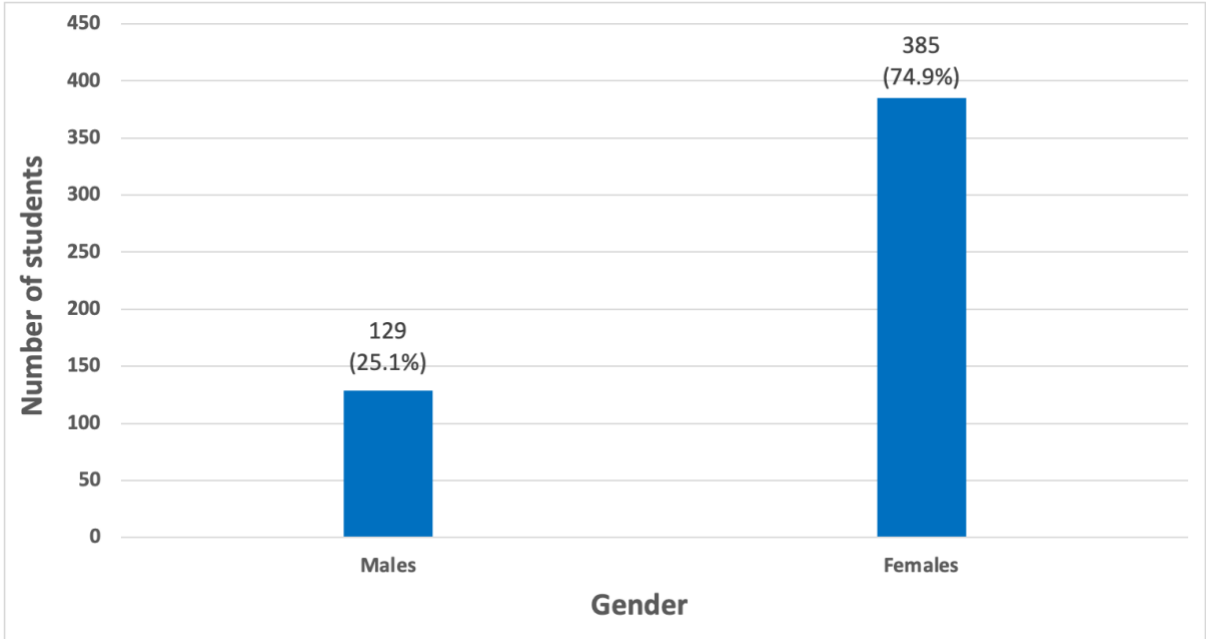


Figure 2: Gender

Moreover, the majority of our participants (74.9%) were females while 25.1% of respondents were males.

4.2.2 Most popular domains to be studied as main areas at Post-Secondary level in Malta.

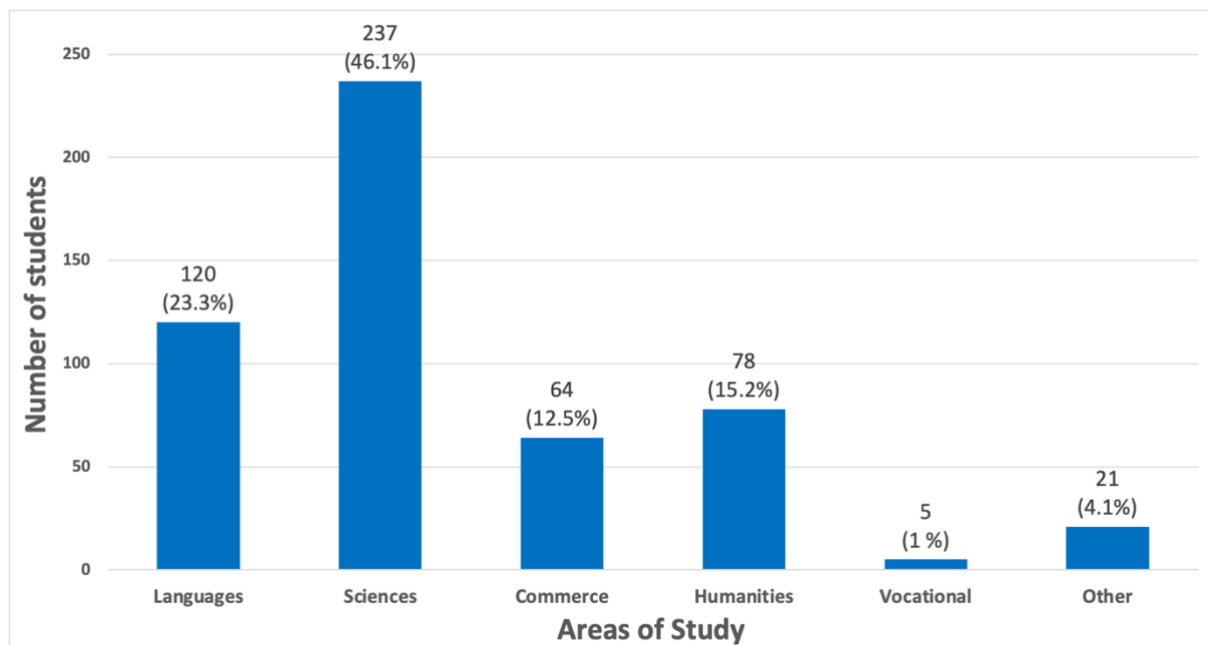


Figure 3: Indicate the group/s of your main areas of study.

In order to indicate the group/s of their areas of specialization, students had the possibility to choose between the domains showed above and/or write down their main area/s of study in the “Other” option. Hence, participants had the possibility to mention more than one group of subjects. For this reason, the total amount of students in different areas of studies shown in Figure 3, exceeds the total number of participants participating in our research.

As Figure 3 shows, the most popular area studied as a major at Post-Secondary level is the area of Sciences (46.1%). Languages are the second most popular chosen domain at Advanced level given that 23.3% of our participants indicate that they are Advanced language learners. In this case the term “Languages” does not only include FLs, but statistics also represent students who have Maltese and English among their specialized areas. It is assumed that some students who in their main areas of study have a mixture of languages with another domain, failed to identify them both as main areas, since later on we will see that the number of students studying languages at Advanced level exceeds this figure.

On the other hand, only 15.2% of respondents have Humanities subjects as their majors, while 12.5% are currently specializing in Commerce disciplines. The Vocational domain is much less

popular as only 1% of the students are studying Vocational subjects at Advanced level. Additionally, 4.1% of respondents mention other subjects which do not form part of the above-mentioned domains.

4.2.3 The study of languages after SE.

4.2.3.1 The languages chosen at Post-Secondary level.

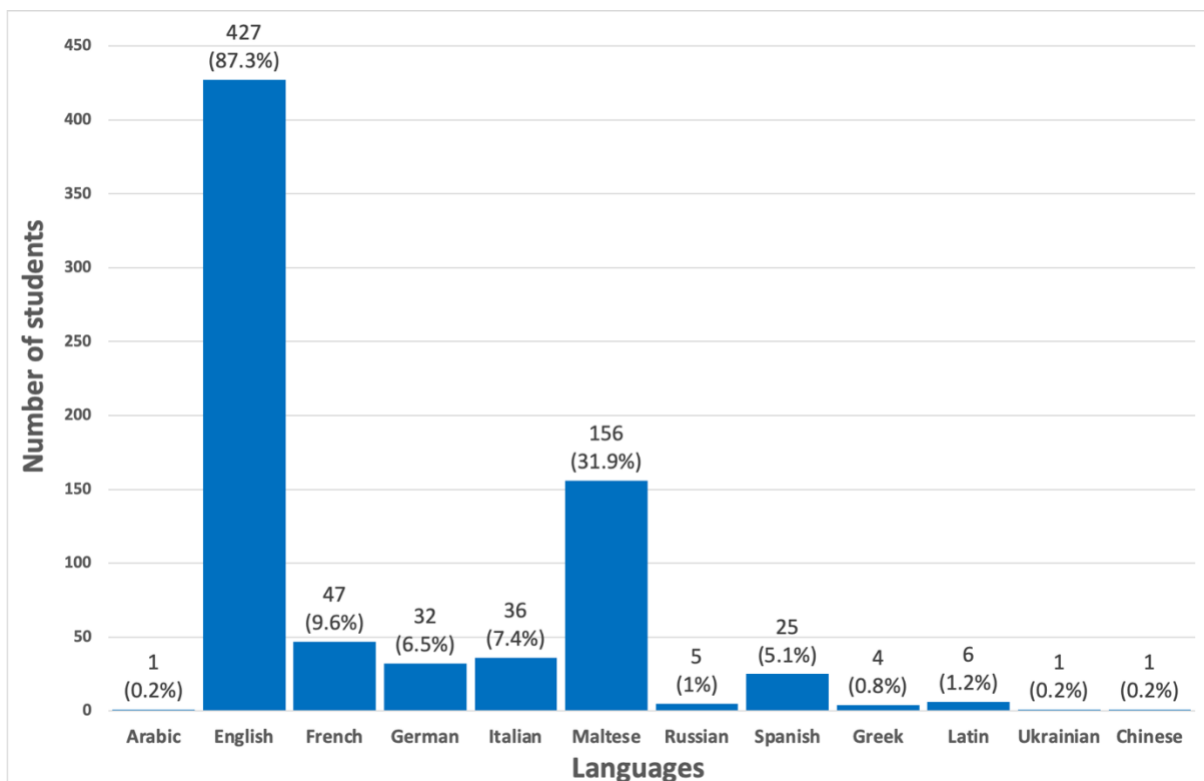


Figure 4: If you have languages in your areas of study please tick them below.

Out of 514 participants, 128 (24.9%) students are studying FL/s at any level in Post-Secondary; of which 17.2% are males and 82.8% are females.

Students who have languages at Post-Secondary level had the possibility to tick more than one language and to add more languages in the “Other” option. 489 responses were obtained for this question and only 1 answer was invalid. One should note that all the above-mentioned languages can be studied both at Advanced or at Intermediate level.

It is clearly evident that the most popular language chosen at Post-Secondary level is English (87.3%) followed by Maltese (31.9%). As regards French, it is the third most popular language studied by the questionnaire participants at this level as 9.6% of those who answered this question claim that they have this FL at Sixth Form. This is followed by Italian where students of Italian participating in our research amount to 7.4%. On the other hand, students of German and Spanish amount to 6.5% and 5.1% respectively.

A lower number of students can be seen for Latin, Russian, Greek, Arabic, Ukrainian and Chinese. In fact, only 1.2% of respondents are studying Latin, 1% are learning Russian while 0.8% of participants are studying Greek. Finally, Arabic, Ukrainian and Chinese at Post-Secondary level are only studied by 1 student (0.2%) each.

4.2.3.2 The number of languages chosen at Post-Secondary level.

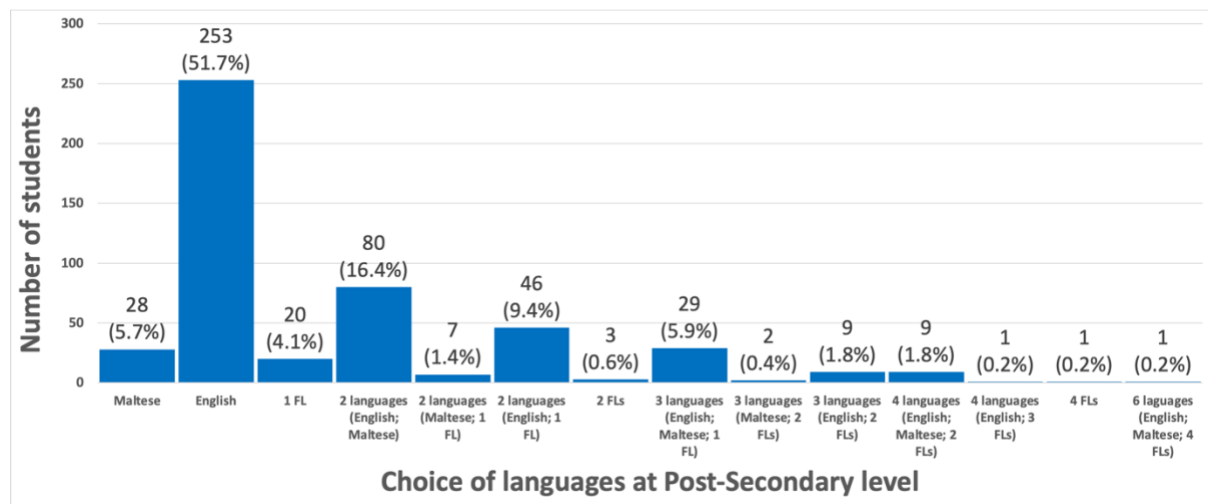


Figure 5: Number of languages chosen at Post-Secondary level.

Figure 5 gives a better indication of how languages are chosen at Post-Secondary level. Once again, all the above-mentioned languages can be studied both at Advanced and/or at Intermediate level. Out of 489 responses 5.7% of participants only have Maltese as a language at Post-Secondary while the majority (51.7%) do not study any other languages except English. On the other hand, only 4.1% of respondents are learning 1 FL at Post-Secondary level that is either French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

As regards the number of students studying more than 1 language at this level of education, 16.4% of participants have 2 languages in their areas of study; however, these only include Maltese and English. Students who study 2 languages which include Maltese and a FL amount to 1.4%. Moreover, 9.4% of the participants indicate that they are studying English along with 1 FL, while only 0.6% are studying 2 languages which are both FLs.

A closer analysis of the number of students studying 3 languages after their SE, demonstrates that 5.9% have English, Maltese and 1 FL in their areas of study. Furthermore, only 0.4% of respondents are studying Maltese along with another 2 FLs and 1.8% claim that they have English and 2 FLs at Sixth Form.

Very few participants study 4 languages at Post-Secondary level. In fact, while 1.8% are studying English, Maltese and 2 FLs, only 1 participant (0.2%) has English along with another 3 FLs. Similarly, only 1 participant (0.2%) has 4 languages which are all FLs. Eventually, another student (0.2%) claims that after SE she is studying 6 languages which include English, Maltese, and 4 FLs.

4.2.3.3 *The level at which languages are studied at Post-Secondary level.*

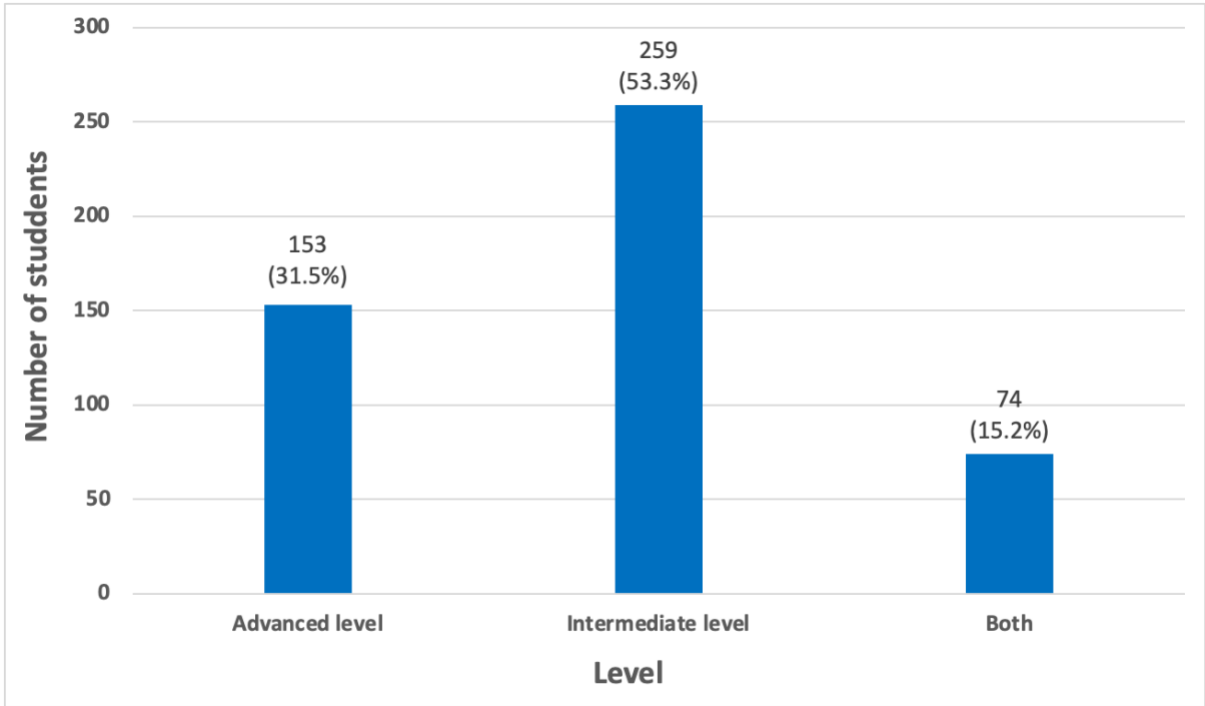


Figure 6: If you have languages in your areas of study please indicate at which level.

As outlined in Figure 6, a careful look at the level at which languages are studied indicate that the majority (53.3%) of 486 students who answered this question, study them at Intermediate level. Once again, the term “languages” in this case also includes Maltese and English along with FLs. On the other hand, a lower percentage of 31.5% state that they have languages as their main area/s of study, while only 15.2% of the students have languages both at Advanced and at Intermediate level.

Out of 153 participants who are studying languages at Advanced level, only 29 students (19%), 10.3% males and 89.7% females, have at least 1 FL as a main area of study. This means that from all the 514 participants in research, only 5.6% study a FL/FLs at Advanced level.

Moreover, 54 students (73%) from those who indicate that they have languages both at Intermediate and at Advanced level, study at least 1 FL. From a total of 54, 11.1% are males and 88.9% are females. The probability is that a number of these students also study FLs at Advanced level.

4.2.4 Reasons explaining why students do not pursue FLL after SE.

4.2.4.1 Main reasons why students avoid FLs after compulsory FLL.

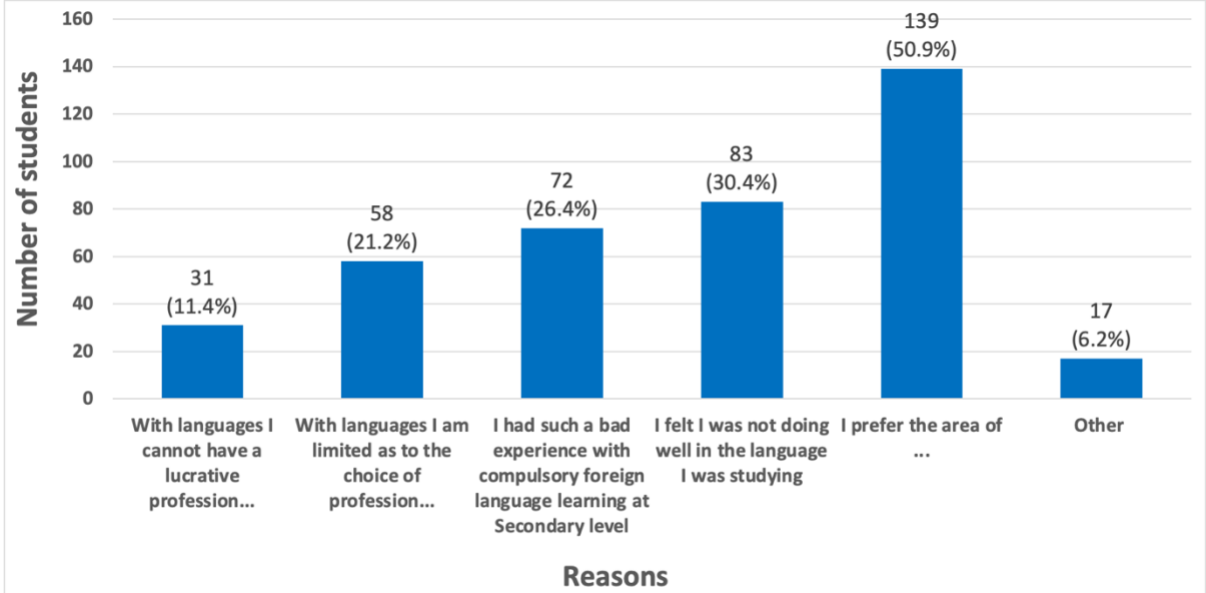


Figure 7: If you do not have foreign languages as your MAIN AREAS of study, please tick one or more reasons why you did not persist with language learning.

A total of 273 responses was obtained when Post-Secondary students who do not have FLs as main areas of study were asked to provide reasons for this decision. In this question, participants could tick more than one answer and they could also add other reasons in the “Other” option. An analysis of these reasons in order of importance shows that the most common reason (50.9%) why students do not choose FLs for their main areas of study, is because they prefer other areas. The preference of these domains will be further discussed in the analysis of the next question.

With regard to the second most popular reason, 30.4% of participants indicate that they felt they were not doing well in the language/s studied during their SE. Moreover, 26.4% of respondents claim that they had such a bad experience with compulsory FLL in SE.

The fourth most common reason (21.2%) why students in Malta do not specialise in languages after compulsory FLL, is the fact that with languages students are limited as to the choice of future profession. Finally, the fact that with languages students cannot have a lucrative profession was a reason for 11.4% of those who answered this question.

Additionally, 20 more reasons which were different from the reasons provided by the researcher were given by students in the “Other” option, however, only 17 of these responses were valid.

4.2.4.2 Other reasons for avoiding FLs at Post-Secondary level.

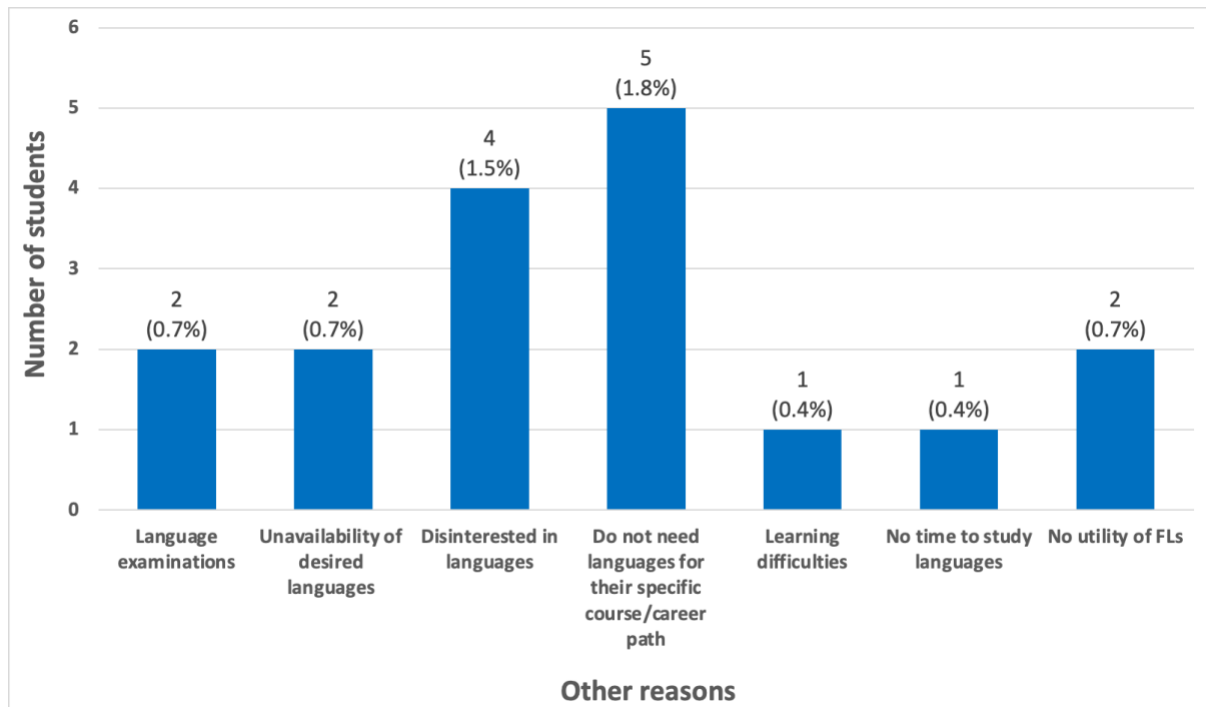


Figure 8: Other reasons why students did not persist with language learning.

Among these 17 students, 1.8% claim that they did not choose any FLs as their main areas of study because they do not need languages for their specific courses or future career paths. Furthermore, 1.5% of the students expressed their disinterest towards languages and LL in general. Two other participants (0.7%) showed concern regarding the way language exams are corrected, and 2 others (0.7%) said that the unavailability of the desired languages stopped them from pursuing FLL as their main areas of study. While referring directly to FLs, another 2 participants (0.7%) underlined the fact that they see no utility and importance of FLs and FLL. Finally, 1 participant (0.4%) said that her learning difficulty makes LL extremely difficult, while another participant (0.4%) claimed that she would have loved to choose a language, however, she has no time to study what she refers to as “an extra subject”.

4.2.4.3 The preference towards other areas of study.

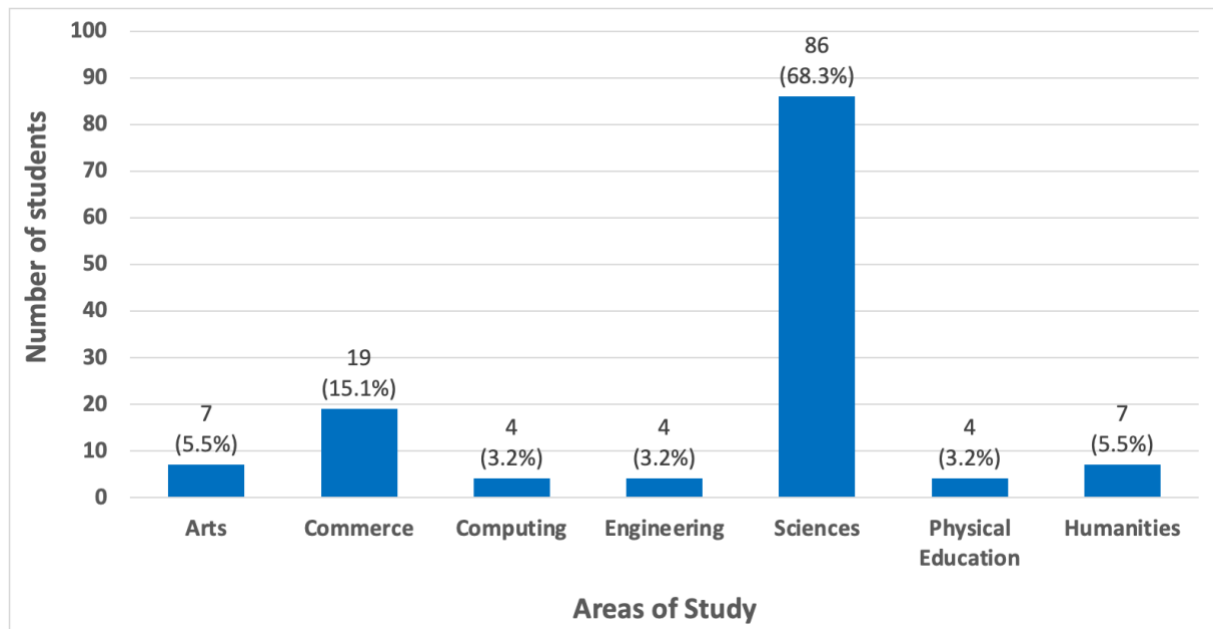


Figure 9: If you chose the fifth answer in the previous question, please specify which area you prefer.

Figure 9 enables us to look deeper into the main reason why students did not persist with FLL as it gives a better indication of which domain is mostly preferred by Post-Secondary students other than languages. A total of 141 participants responded to this question, however, only 126 answers were valid. Percentages were taken from the number of valid answers. In some cases students mentioned more than 1 area of study. In this case, every specified area mentioned by each participant was added to its respective domain.

As can be seen in Figure 9, the majority of the participants (68.3%) who answered this question, prefer the area of Sciences other than languages, while 15.1% of respondents indicate that they fancy more the area of Commerce. The preference towards the area of Arts is held by 5.5% of students and another 5.5% prefer the area of Humanities. The areas of Computing, Engineering and Physical Education were preferred by 4 students (3.2%) each.

4.2.5 Previous FL experience in SE.

4.2.5.1 FLs studied in SE.

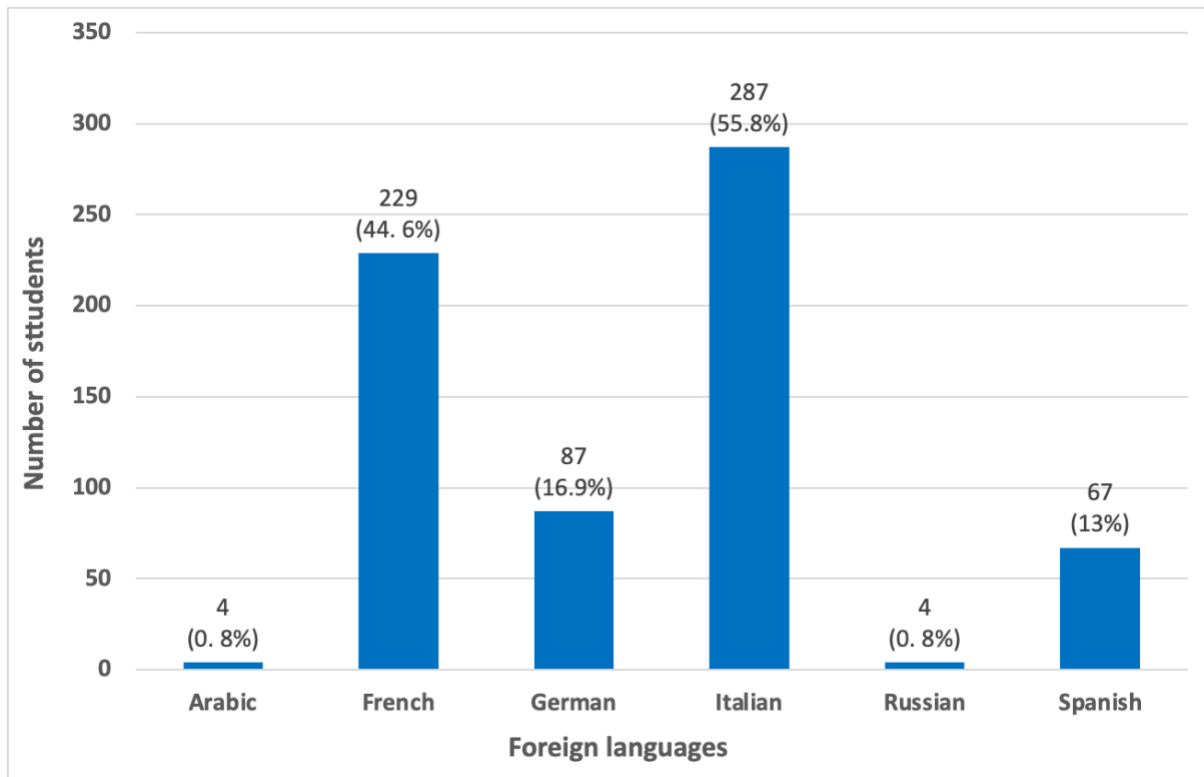


Figure 10: What foreign language/s have you studied in Secondary education?

All 514 participants indicated the FL/s that they studied during SE and the average mark that they normally obtain or obtained in this language. In the above question students had the possibility to tick more than one language. The majority of our participants (55.8%) studied Italian during their SE, while French, the second most popular language was studied by 44.6% of respondents. On the other hand, 16.9% of participants studied German, 13% studied Spanish while only 4 students (0.8%) studied Arabic and Russian.

4.2.5.2 Average mark normally achieved in FLs.

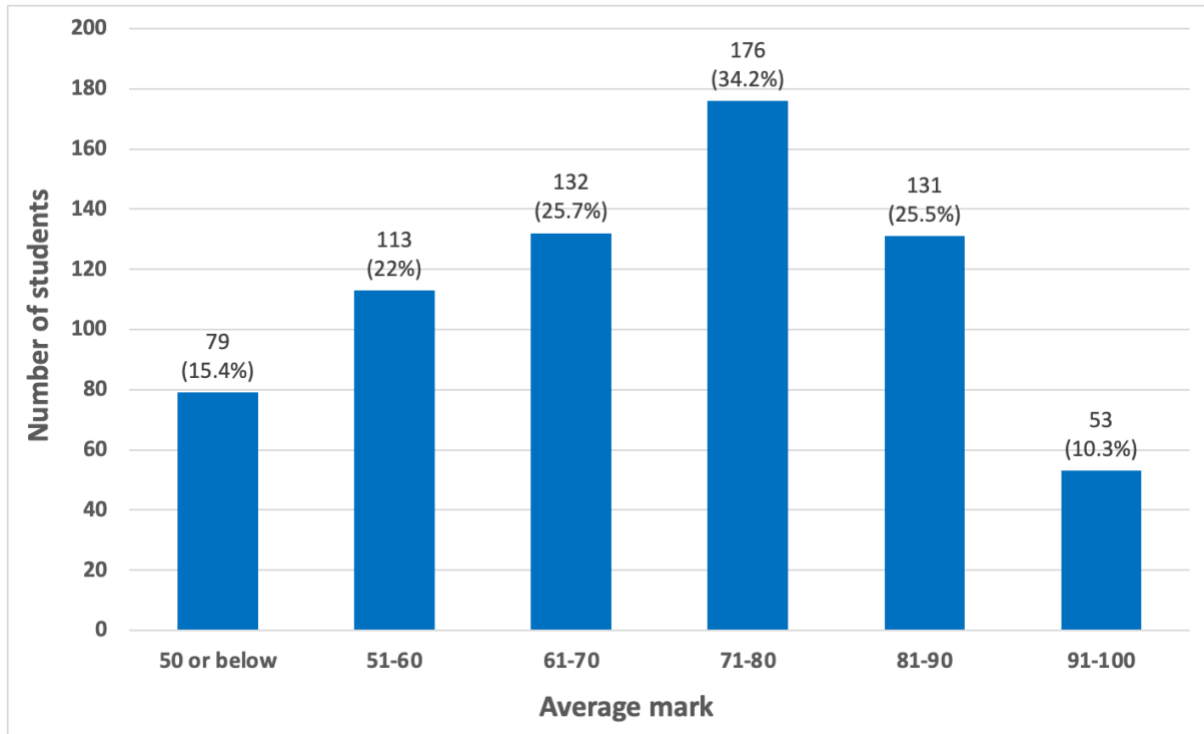


Figure 11: Tick the average mark you normally achieve/achieved in foreign languages.

As regards the average mark normally obtained in FLs, students also had the possibility to tick more than one answer. As can be seen in Figure 11, the majority of the participants (34.2%) obtain or obtained an average mark of 71-80 in FLs. The grade of 61-70 is or was normally achieved by 25.7% of students, while 25.5% indicate an average mark of 81-90. For 22% of participants, their grade in FLs is or was between 51 and 60 and 15.4% achieve or achieved a grade of 50 or below. Only 10.3% of our participants claim that in FLs they had or have an average mark of 91-100.

4.2.5.3 Reasons to which low or high success in languages is attributed.

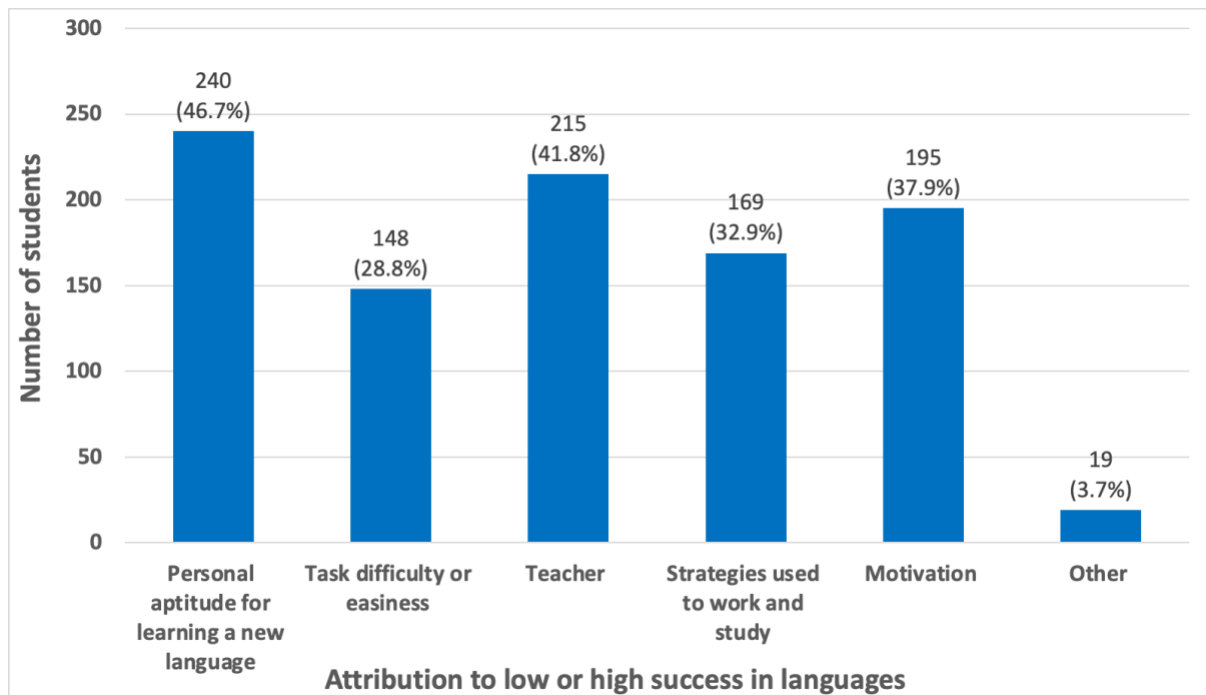


Figure 12: Perceived reasons for low or high success in languages.

When students were asked for the reasons to which they attribute success or failure in languages, participants also had the possibility to choose more than one answer and to add other answers in the “Other” option. All 514 participants answered this question and as indicated in Figure 12, the majority of the students (46.7%) attribute their degree of success in languages to their own personal aptitude for LL. A slightly lower percentage of 41.8% think that success in languages depends on the teacher and according to 37.9% of our participants, it depends on motivation to acquire languages. The belief that achievement in languages relies on the strategies used to work and study is held by 32.9% while for 28.8% of respondents, it relies on the degree of task difficulty. Another 3.7% respondents provide other valid possible reasons in addition to those provided by the researcher.

In all, 28 participants added more answers in the “Other” section, however 2 of them were invalid while another 7 were grouped with the reasons that were already provided by the researcher. Thus, this leaves 19 valid “Other” responses.

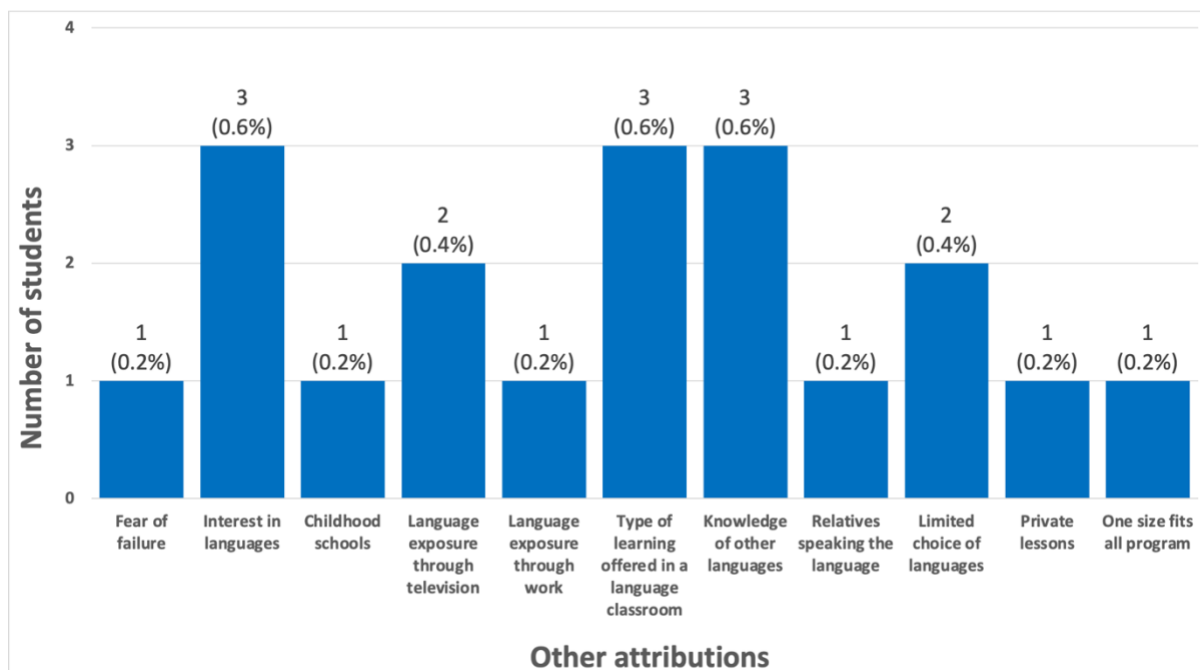


Figure 13: Other reasons to which success or failure in languages is attributed.

As can be seen in Figure 13, 3 students (0.6%) think that success in LL also depends on the level of interest one has in languages. Another 3 students (0.6%) think that the way learning takes place in a language classroom does affect the achievement in languages, while 3 others (0.6%) see a link between knowledge of other languages and low or high success in LL.

On the other hand, 2 students (0.4%) add that exposure to languages through television also affects language success, while another 2 participants (0.4%) indicate that they were not motivated to study languages harder as the languages that they would have liked to learn were never taught due to a lack of choice. A participant (0.2%) also states that fear of failure influences achievement in languages and another student (0.2%) attributes low or high success in languages to the LL that takes place in childhood schools.

One participant (0.2%) also attributes successful LA to language exposure through work and another student (0.2%) states that it relies on whether family relatives speak the languages being studied or not. According to 1 student (0.2%) low or high success in languages also depends on private lessons while another participant (0.2%) puts the blame of her low success in LL on a one size fits all program as she states that as a new student, she was put into the

wrong class and had no possibility to change level. This led her to fall behind and never catch up in the language studied.

4.2.5.4 Learning FLs in SE.

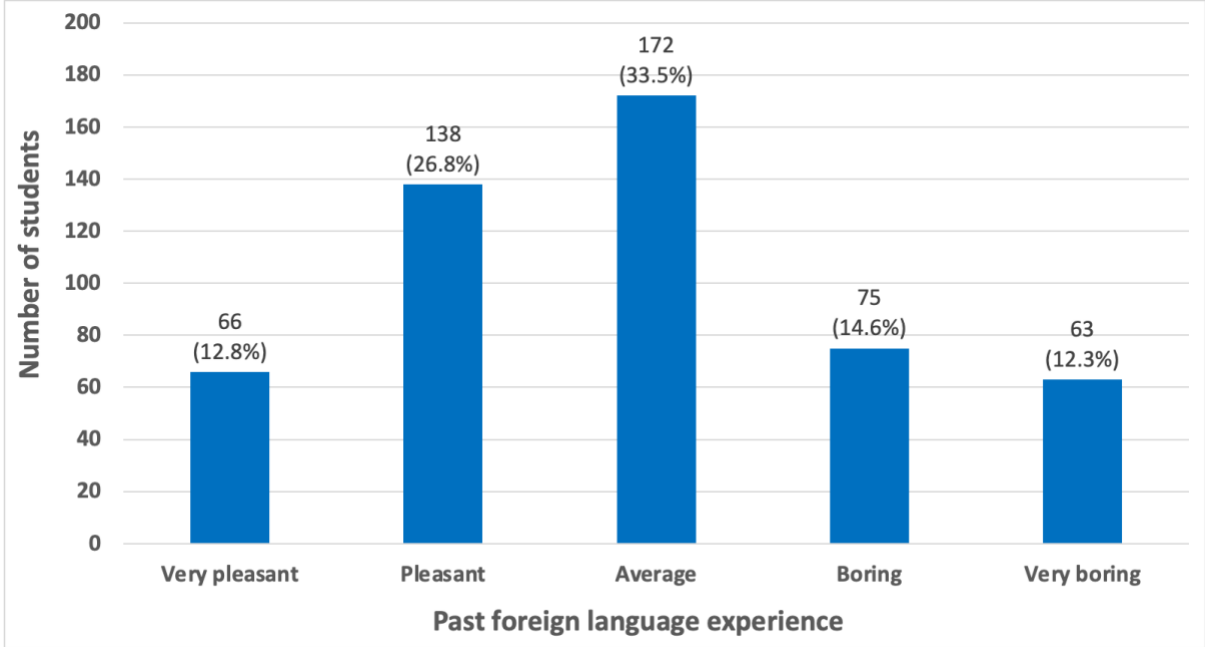


Figure 14: Rate your past foreign language experience in Secondary education.

When Post-Secondary students were asked to rate their compulsory FL experience during their SE, the majority (33.5%) of the 514 participants rate this experience as average. A lower percentage of 26.8% consider it as being pleasant. However, 14.6% of respondents refer to their past FLL as boring and another 12.3% describe it as very boring. Only 12.8% of participants think that their past FLL experience in SE was a very pleasant one.

4.2.5.5 Past FL teachers.

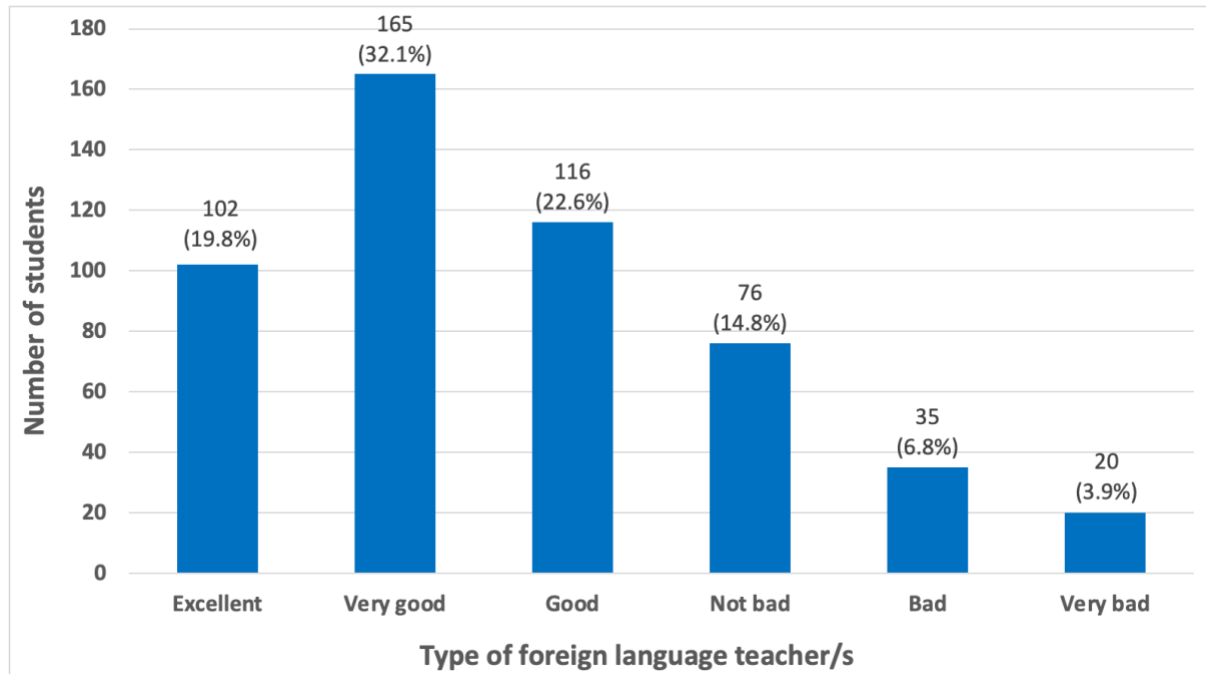


Figure 15: How was/were your foreign language teacher/s who left the greatest impression on you?

With regard to the perspective of Post-Secondary students regarding their past FL teacher/s, the majority (32.1%) of the 514 responses received for this question, indicate that the FL teachers who left the greatest impression on our participants were very good. Another 22.6% of the students consider their past FL teacher/s as good while 19.8% describe these educator/s as excellent. A lower percentage of 14.8% refer to their past FL teacher/s as “not bad”, 6.8% as bad, while for 3.9% of respondents their past FL educator/s was or were very bad.

4.2.5.6 Level of workload FLL entails in SE.

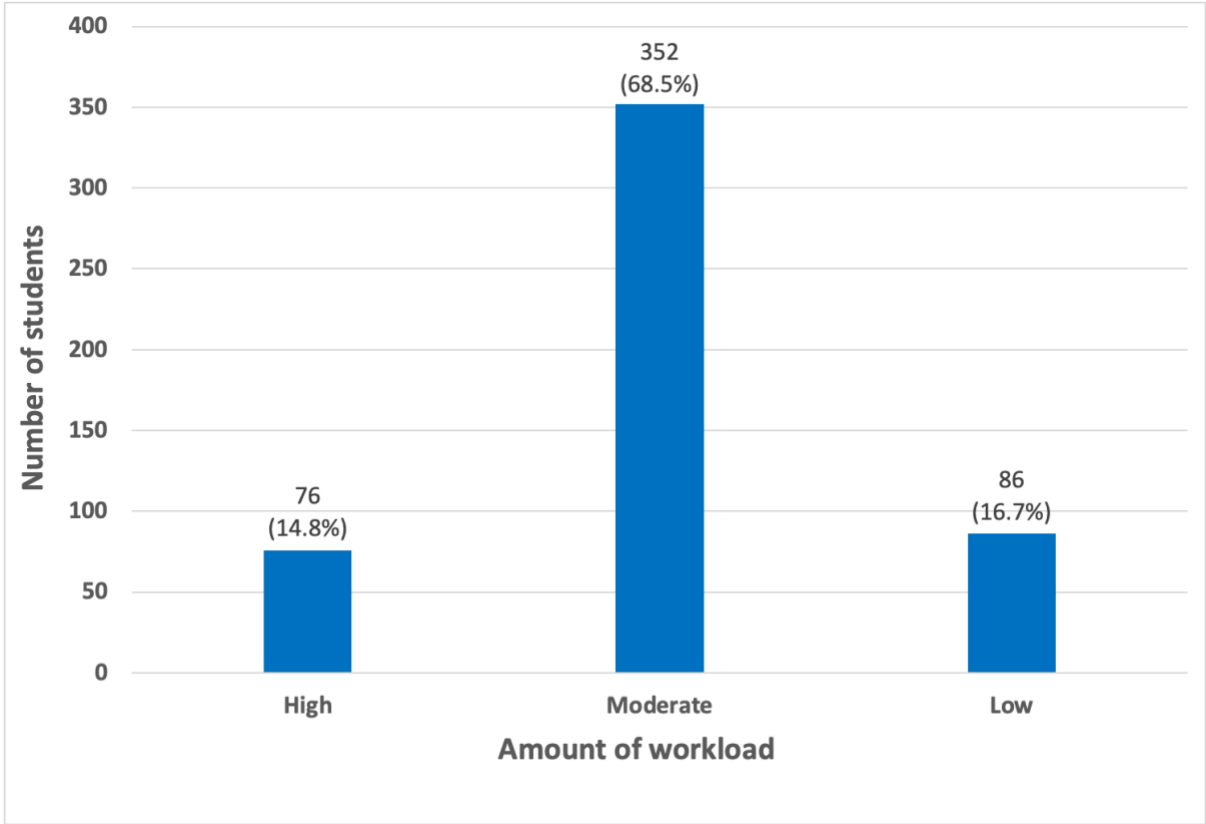


Figure 16: Rate the amount of workload you had.

Additionally, from 514 participants, 68.5% indicate that during FLL in SE they had a moderate amount of workload, while for 16.7% of respondents the workload was low. On the contrary, according to 14.8% of the students, compulsory FLL entailed a considerable amount of work.

4.2.6 The perception of Post-Secondary students on FLs.

4.2.6.1 The perceived importance of FLs for the students' planned career.

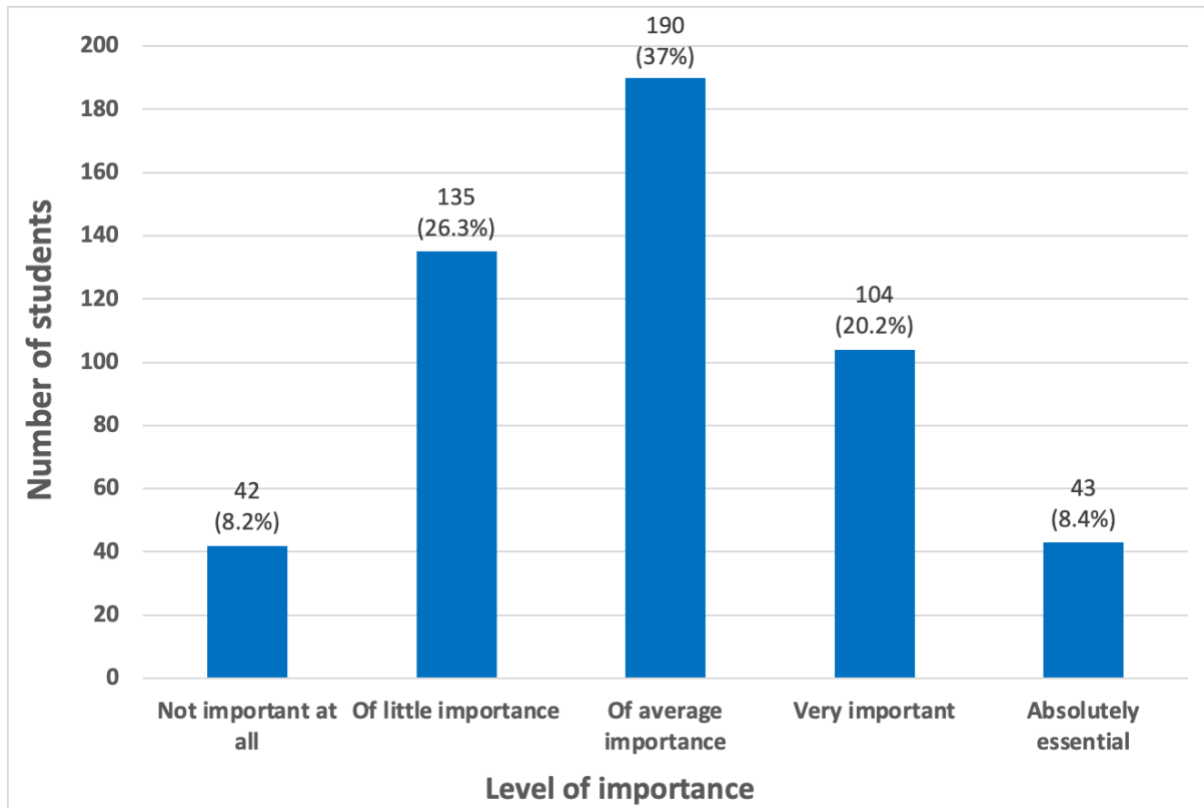


Figure 17: How much do you think that foreign languages are important for your planned career?

A deeper analysis of the perspectives of Post-Secondary students on FLs, points out that for the majority of our participants (37%), FLs are of average importance for their planned career. On the other hand, 26.3% of respondents consider FLs as being of little importance, while 8.2% regard FLs as not important at all for their future career path. This is not the case of other participants as for 20.2% FLs are very important for their planned profession. However, only 8.4% of the students believe that FLs are absolutely essential in this regard.

4.2.6.2 *Students' opinions on the high level of work and effort that FLL entails.*

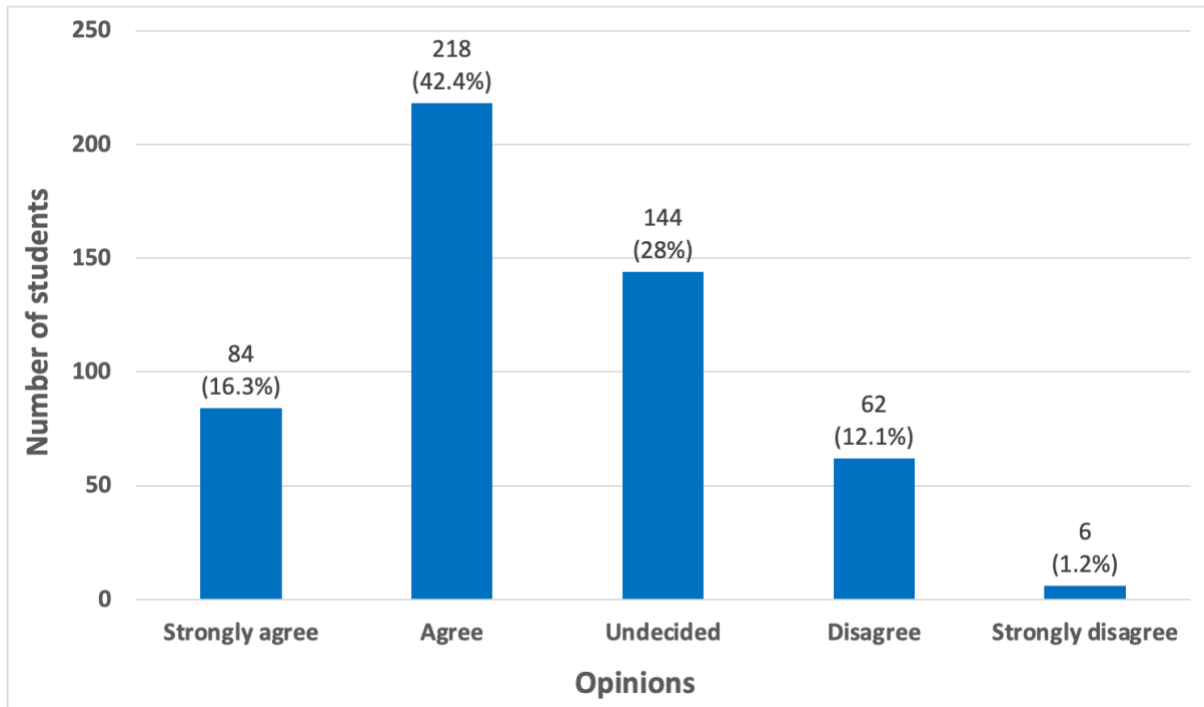


Figure 18: Do you think that foreign language learning is highly demanding?

When asked whether FLL is highly demanding, the majority (42.4%) of 514 participants agree that FLA entails a lot of hard work and effort. Another 28% of respondents were undecided regarding this issue, while 16.3% strongly agreed. Only 12.1% of the students disagreed that FLs are very demanding and 1.2% strongly disagreed.

4.2.6.3 Encouraging factors leading students to study FLs at Post-Secondary level.

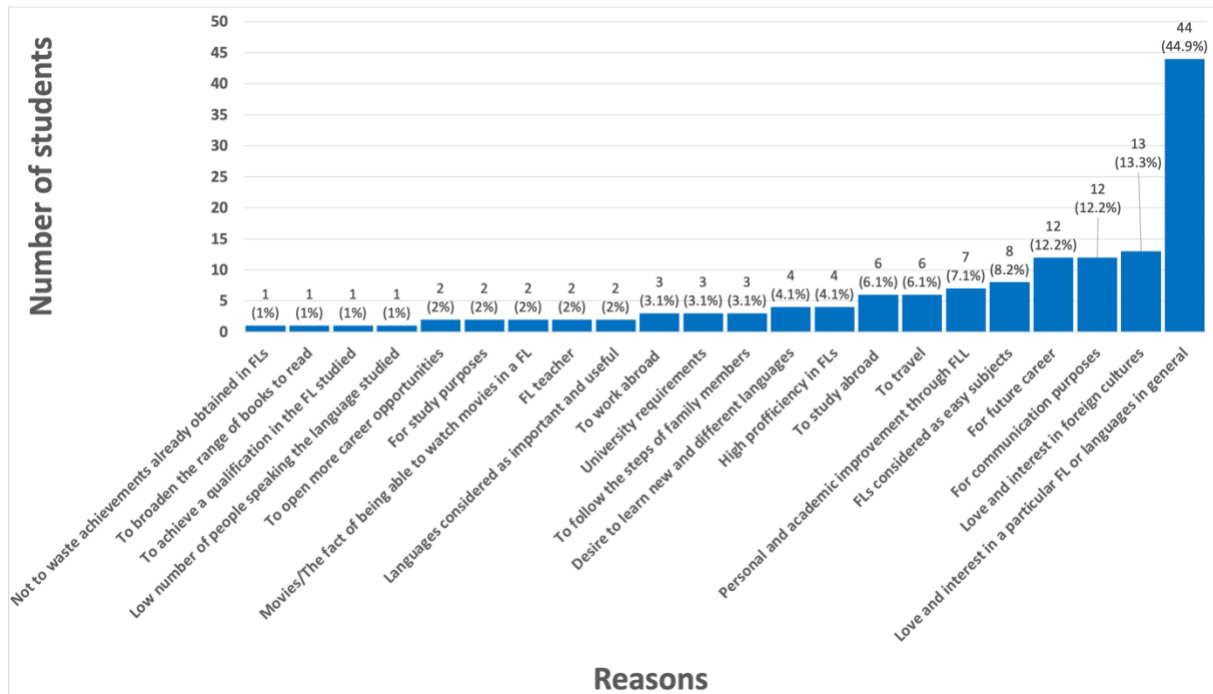


Figure 19: If you are studying a foreign language, what was/were the reason/s that motivated you to study it?

In this research we also try to find out reasons that encouraged FL Post-Secondary students to pursue FLL. This was an open-ended question and students had the possibility to respond through a long answer text. A total of 221 responses were obtained for this question, however, only 98 answers were valid. In order to have a more representative percentage of the answers obtained, percentages in Figure 19 are taken from the total number of valid answers. Some responses also had more than one valid reason. In this case, each different reason mentioned by every participant was categorized under its respective theme. As a result, the total number of students supporting different reasons exceeds the number of valid answers received.

As indicated in Figure 19, the most common reason (44.9%) encouraging FL Post-Secondary students to continue studying FLs after SE, was their love and interest in a particular FL or languages in general. For 13.3% of the students, it was their love for and interest in foreign cultures that led them to make such a choice at Post-Secondary level, while 12.2% of respondents claim that they are currently studying a FL in order to be able to communicate

with more people speaking different languages. Another 12.2% plan to use FLs for their planned career.

On the other hand, 8.2% of FL students claim that they are studying FLs because for them FLs are easy. The belief that through FLL students can improve both personally and academically in the language being studied is held by 7.1% of respondents. Travel purposes encouraged 6.1% of the participants to study FLs while another 6.1% declare that they are pursuing FLL to study abroad. For 4.1% of respondents it was high grades and proficiency in FLs that motivated them to learn more and another 4.1% maintain that their desire to learn new and different languages encouraged them to do so.

Three students (3.1%) affirm that they followed the steps of a family member and 3 others (3.1%) claim that they chose to study FLs because of University entry requirements which entail that students have at least one language at Post-Secondary level. The plan of working abroad was another reason that motivated 3 students (3.1%) to pursue FLL, while 2 others (2%) said that they are studying FLs because they consider them important and useful. Two other participants (2%) also said that a FL teacher inspired them to continue studying FLs while 2 others (2%) state that they were inspired to do so by watching movies in a FL or by the idea of being able to watch movies in a FL.

Two students (2%) maintain that they decided to take FLs at Post-Secondary level to help them in their studies and 2 others (2%) claim that with FLs they open more career opportunities. Another participant (1%) sustains that the fact that in Malta there are not a lot of people speaking the FL she is studying, encouraged her to further her studies in this language. One participant (1%) pursued FLL in order to achieve a qualification in the FL studied as she failed to obtain a SEC qualification after SE. Another participant (1%) mentions that she is studying a FL to broaden the range of books that she could read, while another student (1%) claims that he is studying a FL simply not to waste previous achievements obtained in the language being studied.

4.2.6.4 *Post-Secondary students who do not study FLs at Post-Secondary level: their future plans to pursue FLL.*

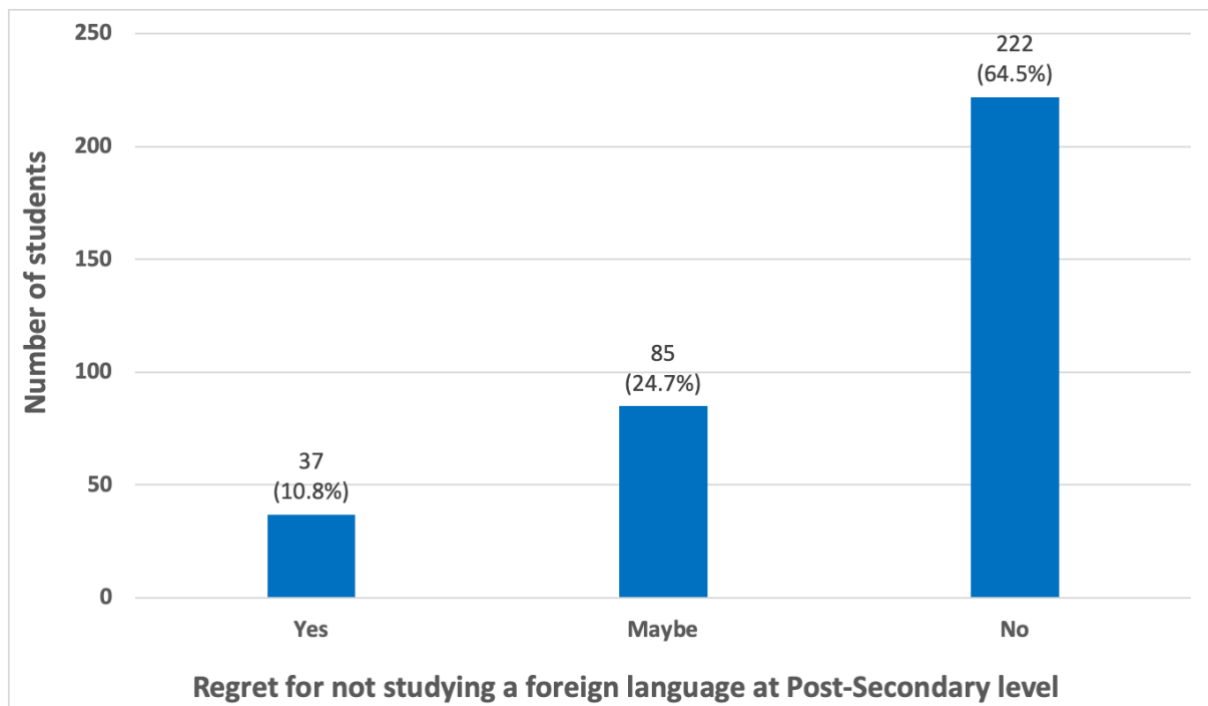


Figure 20: If you are NOT studying a foreign language, do you regret not doing so?

On a different note, participants who in our study answer whether they regret their choice of not studying any FLs at Post-Secondary level amount to 344 students. As indicated in Figure 20, it is clearly evident that the majority of the students (64.5%) do not regret their decision of not pursuing FLL after SE. However, 24.7% of respondents answered that maybe they feel some regret. Students who feel regretful of their decision only amount to 10.8%.

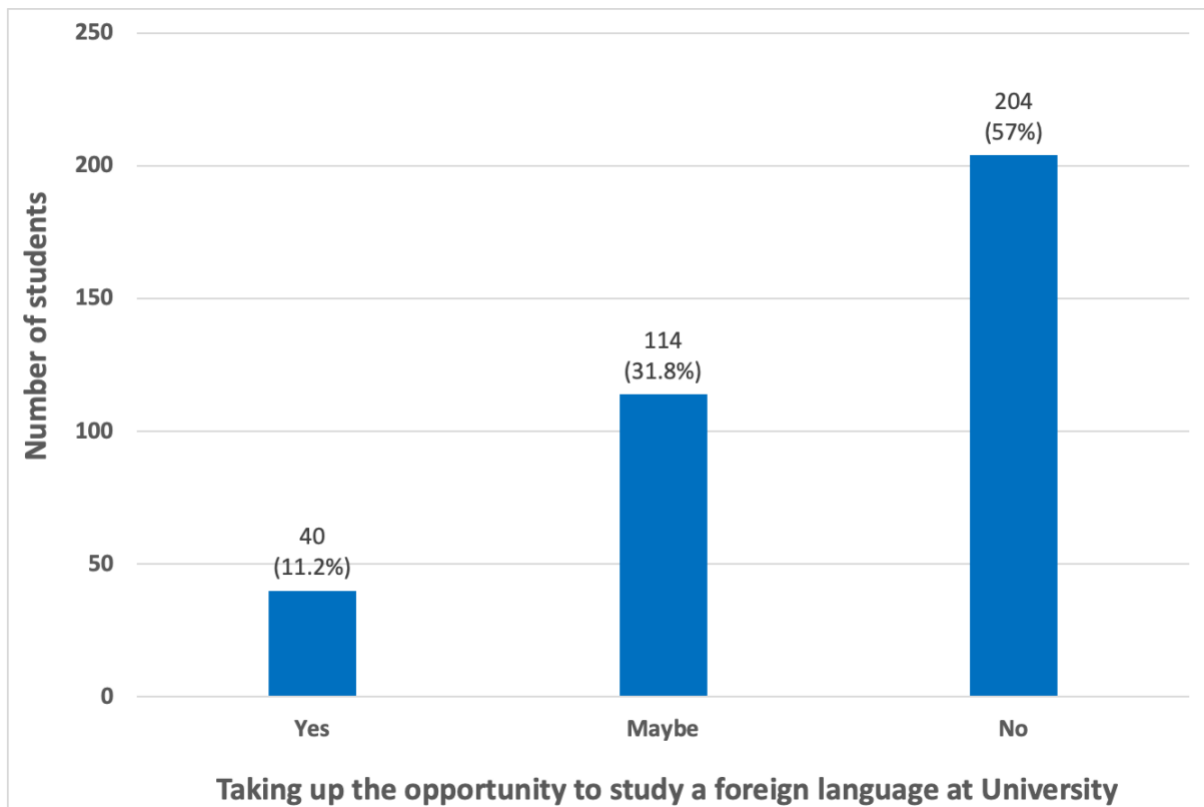


Figure 21: If you are NOT studying a foreign language, would you take up the opportunity at University to study one along with your main course?

Similar results were obtained when students who do not have any FLs at Post-Secondary level were asked whether they would take up the opportunity at University to study one along with their main course. Of the 358 participants who answered this question, most (57%) said that they will not take such an opportunity. However, 31.8% of participants answered that maybe they would study a FL at University and 11.2% answered in the affirmative indicating that they would learn a FL along with their course of specialization.

4.2.7 The perception of Post-Secondary students on the French language.

4.2.7.1 The perceived difficulty of the French language.

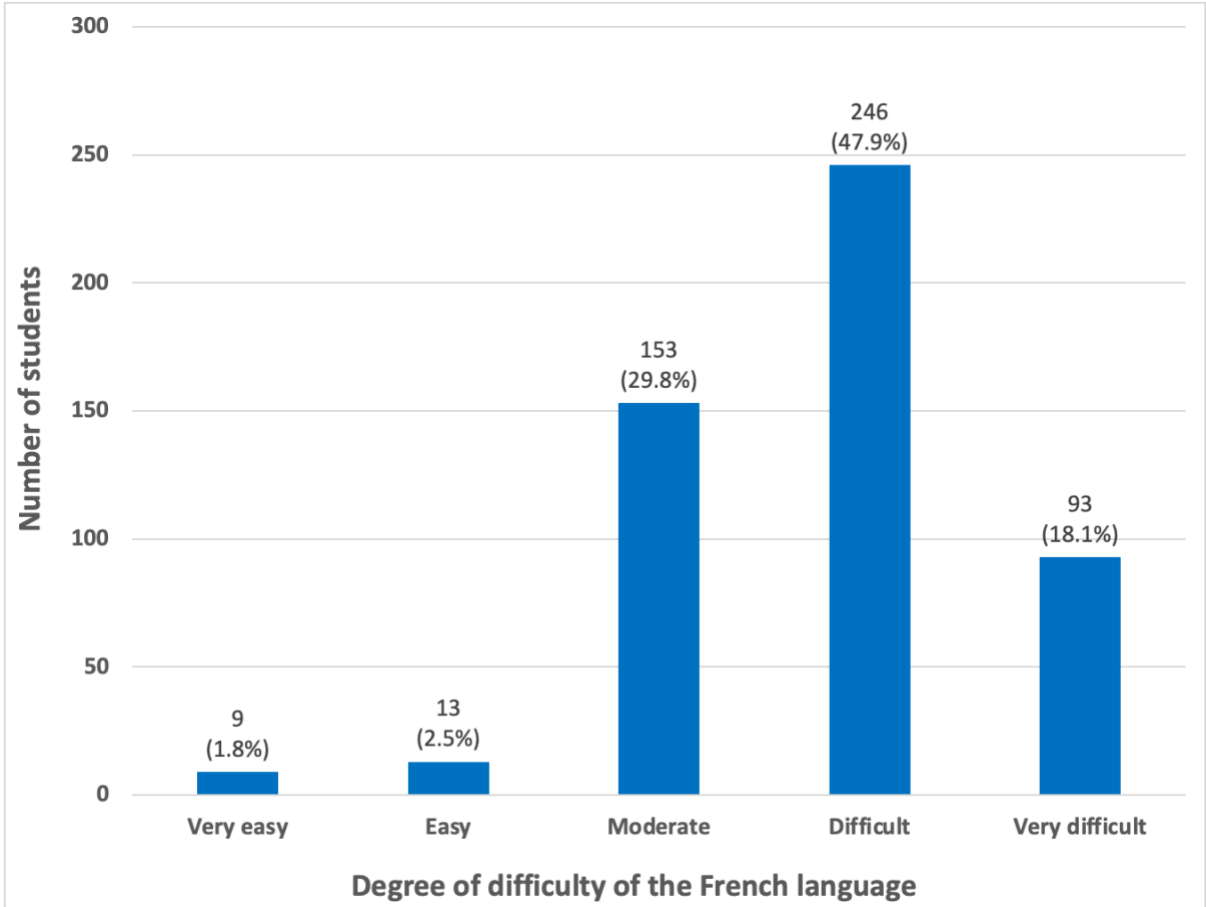


Figure 22: Degree of difficulty of the French language.

A closer look at the perspective of Post-Secondary students regarding the French language reveals that a considerable number of students regard French as a difficult language to learn. In fact, from all the participants in our questionnaire, the majority (47.9%) perceive French as hard. On a different note, according to 29.8% of respondents, this language has a moderate degree of difficulty, however, 18.1% of the students think that French is very difficult. Only 2.5% and 1.8% of participants perceive French as easy and very easy respectively.

4.2.7.2 French compared to other FLs.

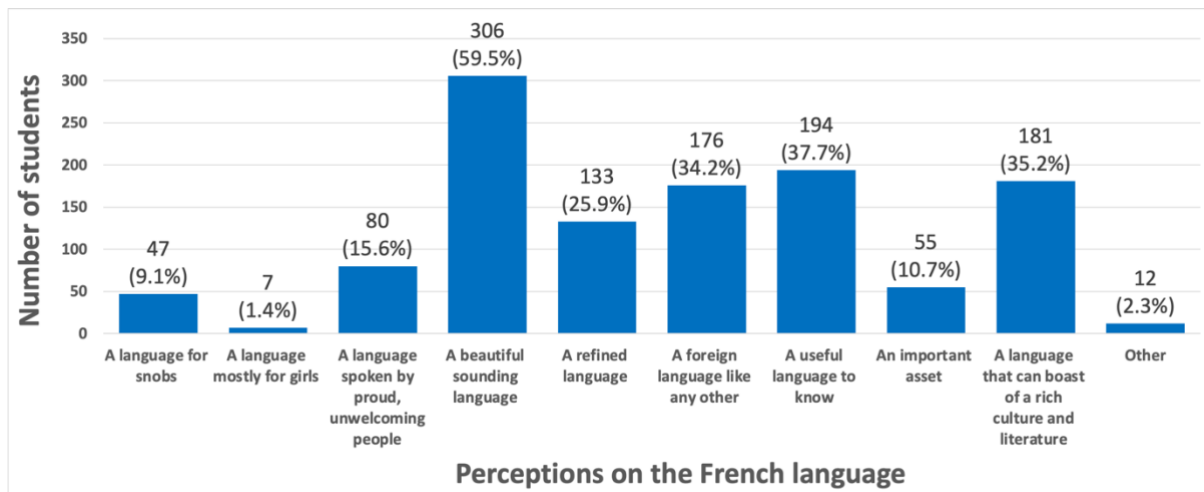


Figure 23: How do you perceive the French language compared to other foreign languages?

All 514 participants shared their views on how they perceive French compared to other FLs. Students had the possibility to tick more than one answer and to add other answers through the “Other” option. As can be seen in Figure 23, most of the students (59.5%) perceive French as a beautiful sounding language. For 37.7% of the students, it is a useful language to know and according to 35.2% it is a language that can boast of a rich culture and literature. Another 25.9% of respondents also think that French is a refined language while 10.7% consider it as an important asset.

In contrast, 34.2% of the participants regard this FL as a language like any other and 15.6% believe that it is a language spoken by proud, unwelcoming people. Moreover, for 9.1% of the students French is a language for snobs and 1.4% also think that this FL is mostly for girls. 16 other participants shared their viewpoints on French through the “Other” option, however; 3 of them were invalid and 1 “Other” response was grouped with a particular option which was already provided by the researcher.

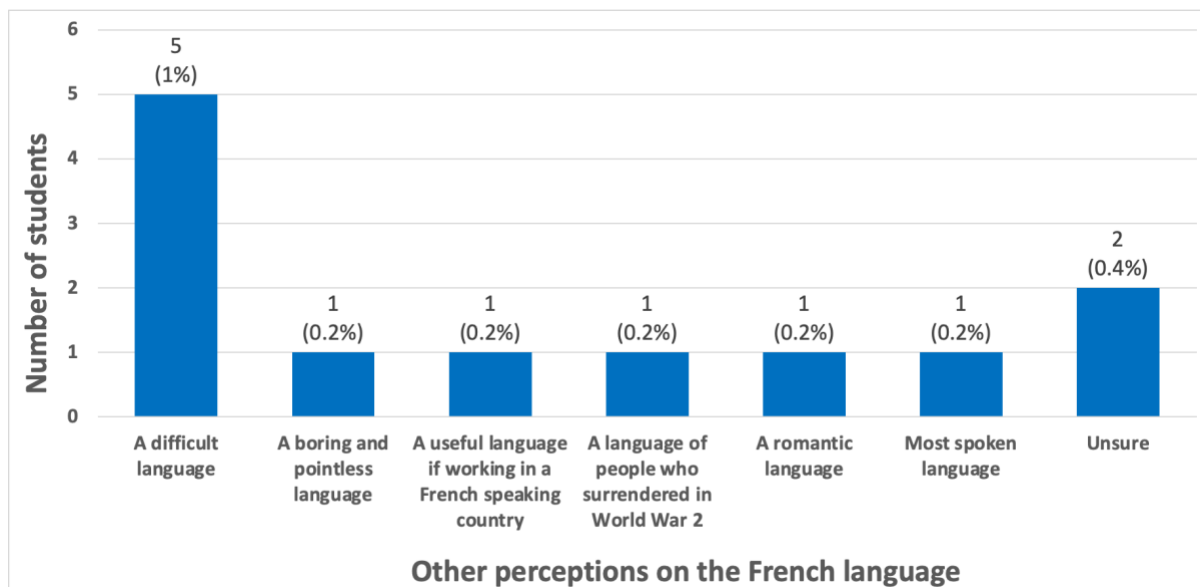


Figure 24: Other perceptions on the French language.

Further analysis of the “Other” perceptions provided, indicates that 5 of them (1%) emphasize once again the fact that French is a difficult language. Additionally, while 1 participant (0.2%) perceives this FL as boring and pointless, another one (0.2%) believes that it is useful when working in a French speaking country. One participant (0.2%) even considers this FL as a language of people who surrendered in World War 2!

On a better note, 1 student (0.2%) considers French as a romantic language while another one thinks that compared to other languages, French is the mostly spoken language. Two other participants (0.4%) were unsure regarding their perception of this FL.

4.2.8 The influence of career guidance on students' will to pursue FLL at Post-Secondary level.

4.2.8.1 The option of taking languages at Post-Secondary level: Is it discussed and encouraged by CGCs?

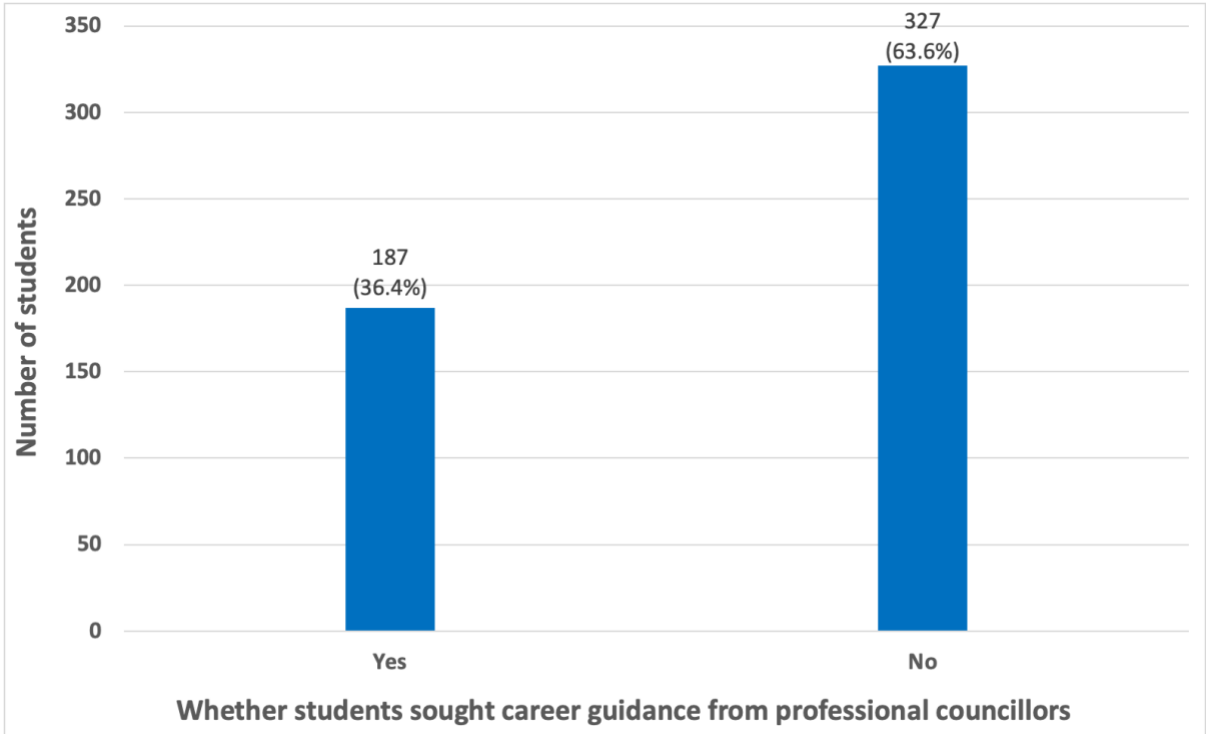


Figure 25: Have you ever sought career guidance from professional counsellors?

When students were asked whether they ever sought any advice from professional counsellors regarding their choice of subjects at Post-Secondary level, 63.6% of the 514 participants state that they did not, while 36.4% claim that they sought such advice.

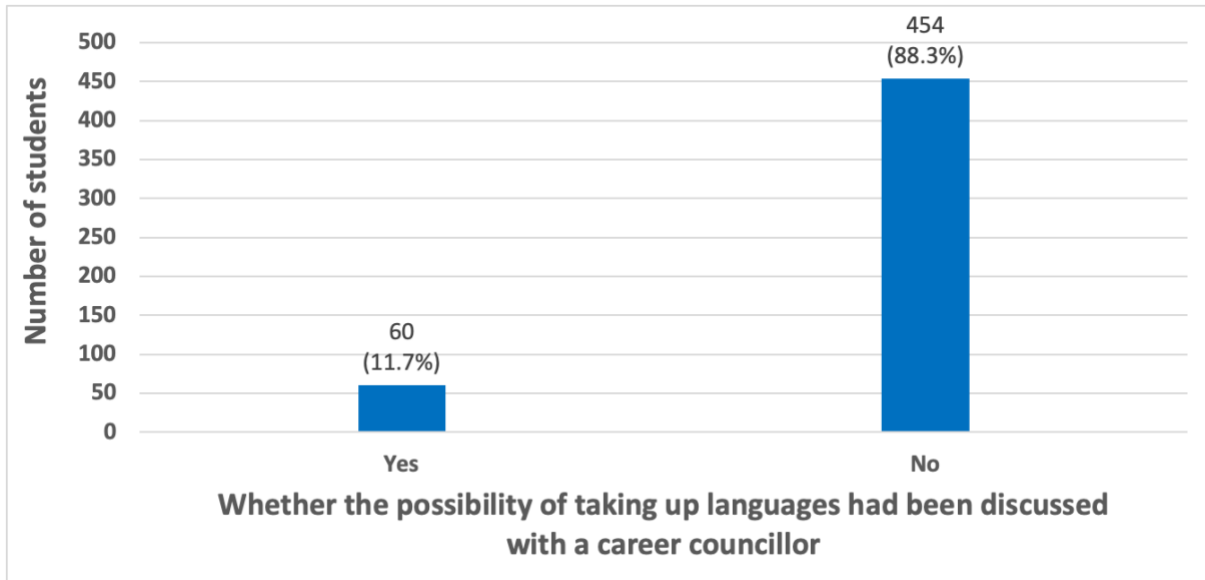


Figure 26: Have you ever discussed the possibility of taking up languages with a career counsellor?

Additionally, from all participants, only 11.7% have ever discussed the possibility of taking up languages with a CGC, while 88.3% of respondents claim that they never did so.

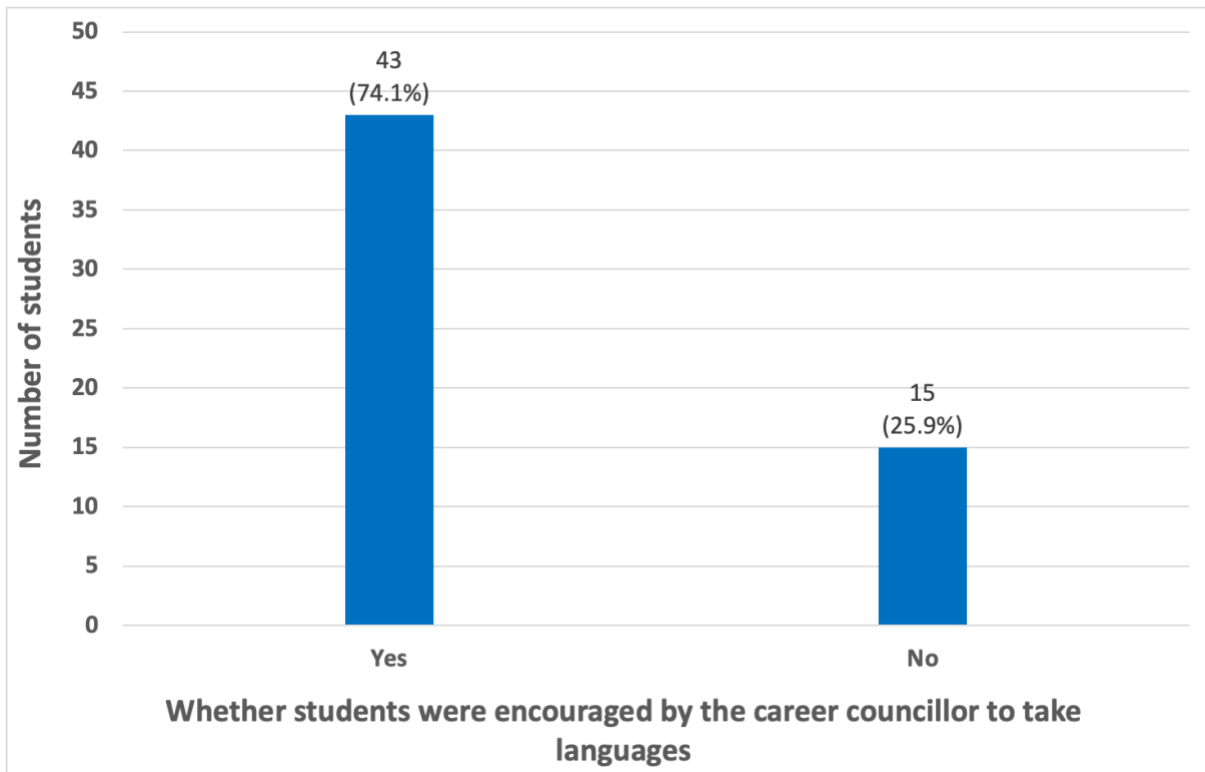


Figure 27: If you answered YES in the previous question, were you encouraged to take languages by the career counsellor?

Those Post-Secondary students who have discussed with the CGC the opportunity to take up languages, were asked whether they were encouraged by the latter to do so or not. 91 answers were obtained for this question, however, only 58 were valid since the responses of the participants who in the previous question had indicated that they never discussed with the CGC the opportunity to take up languages, were ignored. Furthermore, not all students who in the previous question ticked that such discussions with the CGC were held, answered this question. In this case, percentages are taken from the number of valid responses.

As indicated in Figure 27, the majority (74.1%) of the students said that CGCs encouraged them to take languages at Post-Secondary level, while 25.9% of respondents claim that they were not encouraged at all.

4.2.8.2 Encouraging reasons provided by CGCs to pursue LL at Post-Secondary level.

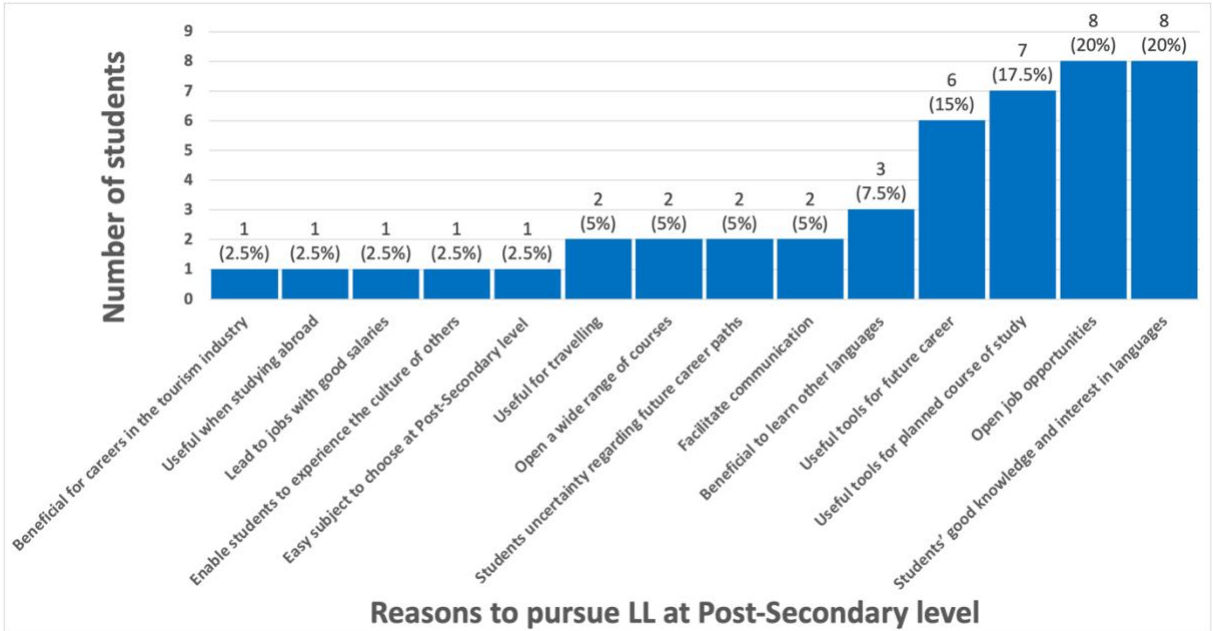


Figure 28: If you were encouraged to take languages, what reason/s were provided by the career counsellor?

The reasons provided by CGCs which encouraged students to take up languages after compulsory LL, are shown in Figure 28. In all, 46 reasons were provided but given that only 40 were valid, percentages were taken from the valid amount of responses. One should note that

the term “languages” here not only includes FLs but Maltese and English as well. There were some cases where participants provided more than one reason. In this case, every different reason mentioned by each participant was categorized under its respective theme. Besides, not all the students who in the previous question had indicated that they were encouraged to study languages at Sixth Form, provided the reasons which were given by their CGC.

As seen in Figure 28, one of the most common reasons (20%) that CGCs provided to encourage students to take up languages at Post-Secondary level, was that since students like these subjects and since they already had very good proficiency and knowledge in the language/s being studied, they should go for this choice. Another 20% of participants said that the fact that languages open job opportunities was another reason provided by their CGC.

On the other hand, 17.5% of the students claim that they were told that languages are required or will become very useful for their planned course of study, while 15% of respondents also mention that their CGC considered languages as useful tools for the students’ future career.

Three other participants (7.5%) maintain that their CGC informed them on how beneficial it is to learn other languages. One of these participants reports that she was told that languages “are useful subjects for everyday life”. Another 2 students (5%) were told that languages facilitate communication. On a different note, 2 others (5%) claim that they were encouraged to study these subjects simply because they were undecided regarding the career paths that they would take in the future, hence, the option of taking languages was encouraged.

Two students (5%) also state that they were told by their CGC that languages open the opportunity for a wide range of courses, while another 2 (5%) claim that the reason that languages are useful for travelling was also mentioned.

Among these reasons, we also find less favourable ones as 1 participant (2.5%) was told that since she was Italian, it would be easy for her to study this language at Post-Secondary level in order to “fill in what’s left”. On a better note, the fact that languages enable students to experience the culture of others, was another reason provided to another student (2.5%).

One participant (2.5%) was equally informed that languages lead to jobs with good salaries while another student (2.5%) was told by his CGC that languages are useful when studying

abroad. Finally, 1 participant (2.5%) even reports that the CGC underlined how beneficial languages are for careers in the tourism industry.

4.2.8.3 Discouraging reasons provided by CGCs not to pursue LL at Post-Secondary level.

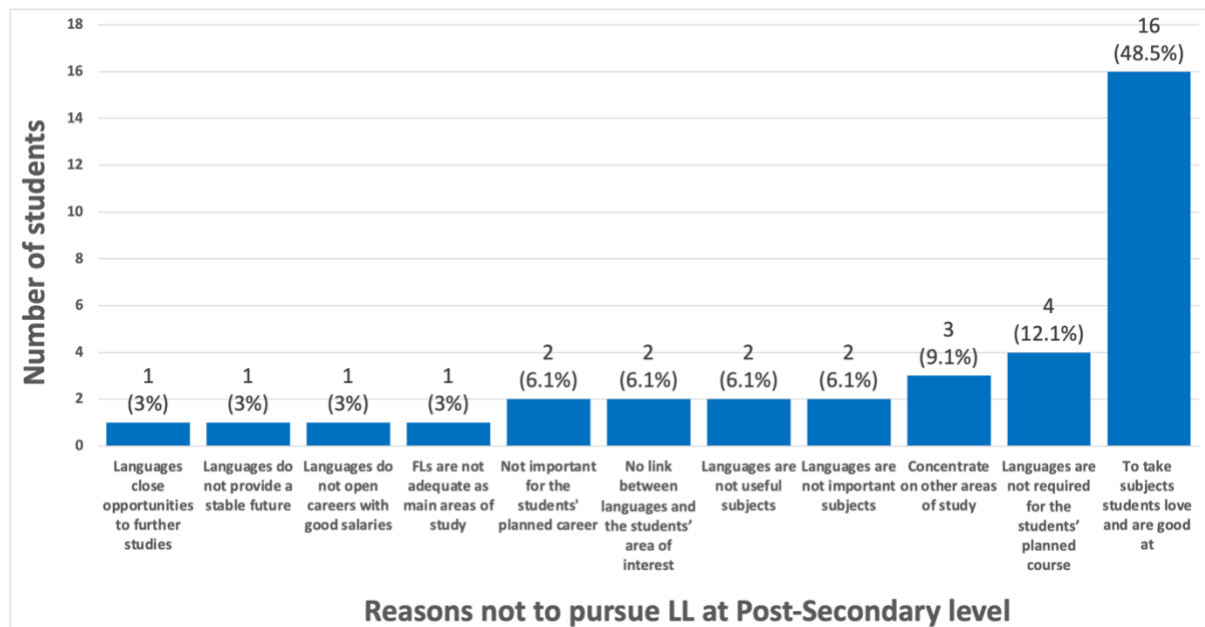


Figure 29: If you were NOT encouraged to take languages, what reason/s were provided by the career counsellor?

This research also aims to find out the reasons that were provided to Post-Secondary students who were not encouraged by CGCs to take languages at this level. A total of 62 responses were received however, only 33 were valid. This number of valid responses indicates that apart from the students who had previously indicated that they were not encouraged to take languages at Post-Secondary level when discussing this option with the CGC, students who did not discuss such an opportunity but who were never encouraged in any way by the CGC to take languages, also answered this question. Thus, their responses were still taken into consideration in order to gain a better idea of the reasons discussed that in a way or another demotivated students to pursue LL after SE. Once again, percentages are calculated from the number of valid responses. In this question, some students also provided more than one

reason, therefore, every reason provided by each participant was grouped with its respective theme.

As indicated in Figure 29, the most common advice (48.5%) provided by CGCs, which discouraged students to take languages at Post-Secondary level, was that to take subjects which students love and are good at and not subjects which they hate and have trouble in. Another 12.1% of the participants also claim that they were told that languages are not required for their planned course, while 9.1% were encouraged to focus on other areas of study rather than languages.

Two students (6.1%) were even told that languages are not important subjects. In fact, one of these students reports that his CGC provided the following reason: “That it would take up slots of study that I can use for other, more important subjects”, while another one claims that she was told that “Apart from English, there is no reason to learn another foreign language”.

Similarly, 2 other students (6.1%) were informed that languages are not always useful in certain sectors of work. As a matter of fact, while referring to his CGC one of these participants answers: “He preferred us learning subjects that are more in need as a job like accounting [...]”.

Furthermore, the fact that no link is perceived between languages and the areas in which students are interested, was another reason for discouragement discussed between CGCs and 2 other students (6.1%). On a similar note, 2 participants (6.1%) were told that languages are not important for their planned career.

While referring specifically to FLs, the advice given to 1 student (3%) by his CGC/s was that FLs are not adequate subjects to study as main areas. Another participant was told (3%) that languages do not lead to jobs with good salaries, while one student (3%) also maintained that the fact that languages do not provide a stable future was another reason provided by his CGC that discouraged him to pursue LL at Post-Secondary level. Lastly, one more participant (3%) was even told that with languages she will miss the opportunity to enhance further her studies.

4.2.9 Number of Post-Secondary students studying French

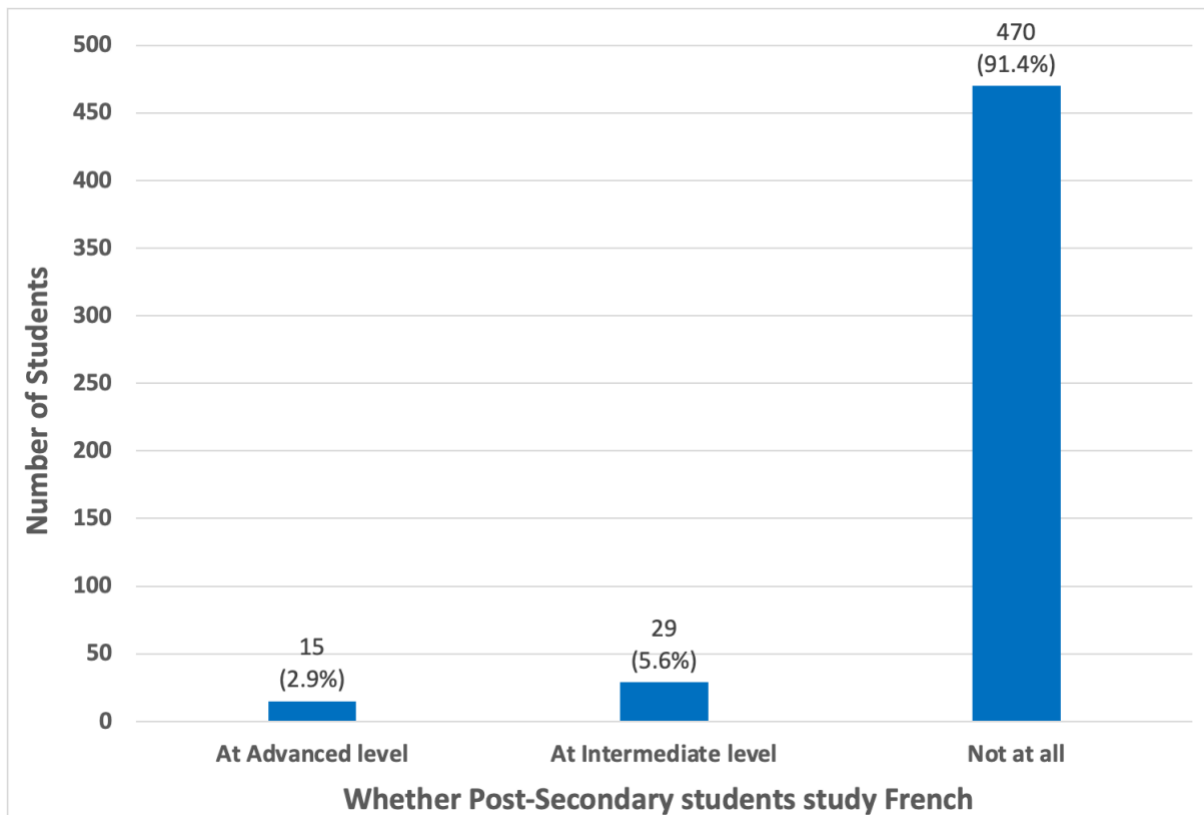


Figure 30: Do you study French?

From 514 students participating in our study, the vast majority (91.4%) claim that they do not study French at any Post-Secondary level. A small percentage of 5.6% have this FL at Intermediate level, while only 2.9% of the participants are studying French as a main area of study.

4.3 An analysis of the second part of the questionnaire: The perspectives of Advanced learners of French with regard to this language.

The second section of the questionnaire was addressed to Post-Secondary students who study French at Advanced level and questions in this section concentrate mainly on the experience of the latter who are specializing in French as post-compulsory FLL. Although 15 participants have French as a main area of study, only 14 answered to all questions of the second part of the questionnaire.

4.3.1 Learning French at Advanced level.

4.3.1.1 The level of hard work that French at Advanced level entails.

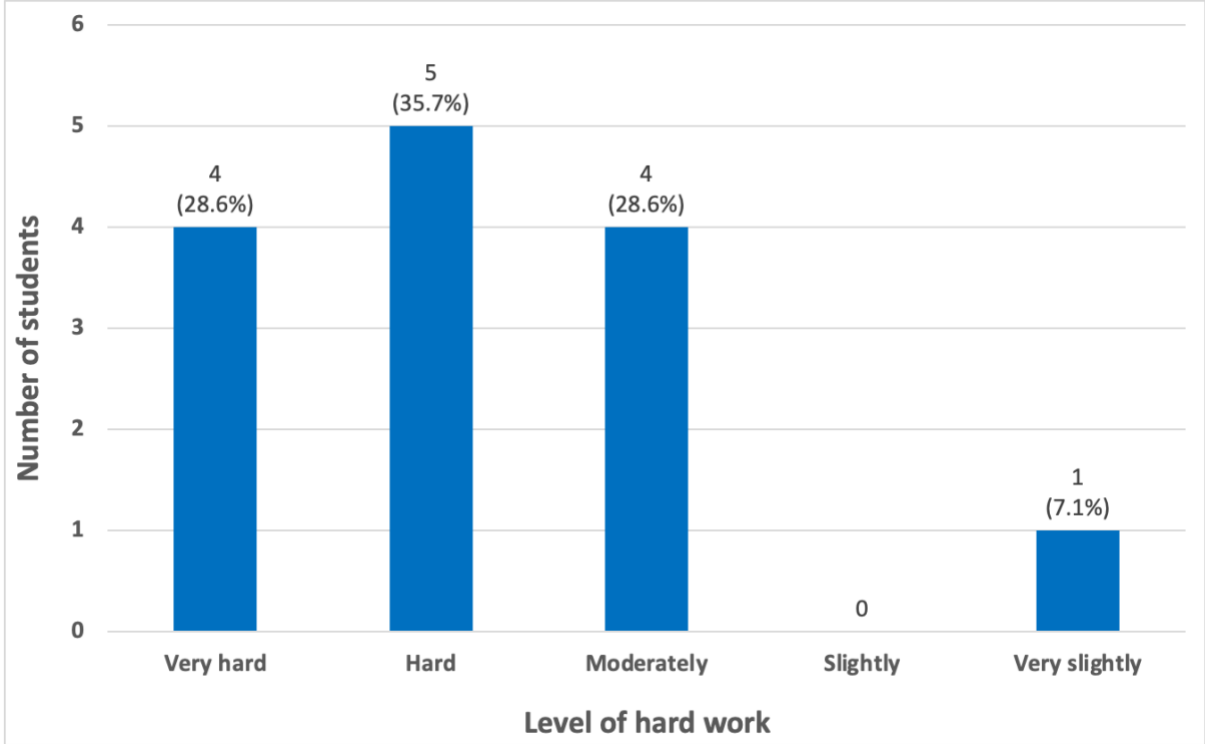


Figure 31: How hard do you work to achieve your hoped-for grades in tasks and exams?

As indicated in Figure 31, when students of French were asked how hard they work for their hoped-for grades, the majority (35.7%) state that they work hard and 28.6% of the students even claim that they work very hard. However, another 28.6% of respondents only rate their efforts to obtain their desired grades as moderate. On the other hand, one participant (7.1%) claims that she works very slightly to achieve desirable results.

4.3.1.2 The perceived utility of French Advanced lessons.

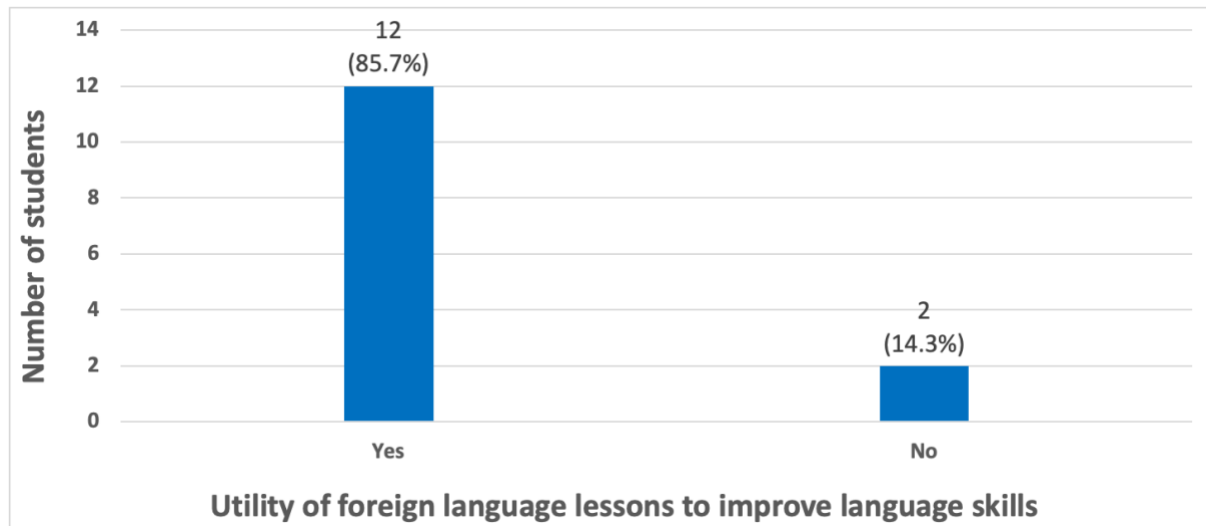


Figure 32: Do you think that your foreign language lessons are being useful enough to improve your language skills?

Studying the French language at Advanced level entails hard work for the majority of Post-Secondary students, and 85.7% of respondents maintain that they find their French lessons useful to improve their language skills. However, this is not the case of all 14 participants as 2 of them (14.3%) indicate that they do not find such lessons useful enough to develop their abilities in the language. In fact, according to one participant: “There is very little oral practice which is not enough to become fluent”.

Moreover, another participant states:

“We are not learning the language to be used on a daily basis, we are learning it for the exam and like all other subjects, probably forgotten after the exam. The language should be taught to have more fluency in sentences and in daily conversations in my opinion”.

4.3.1.3 The demands put on Advanced learners of French.

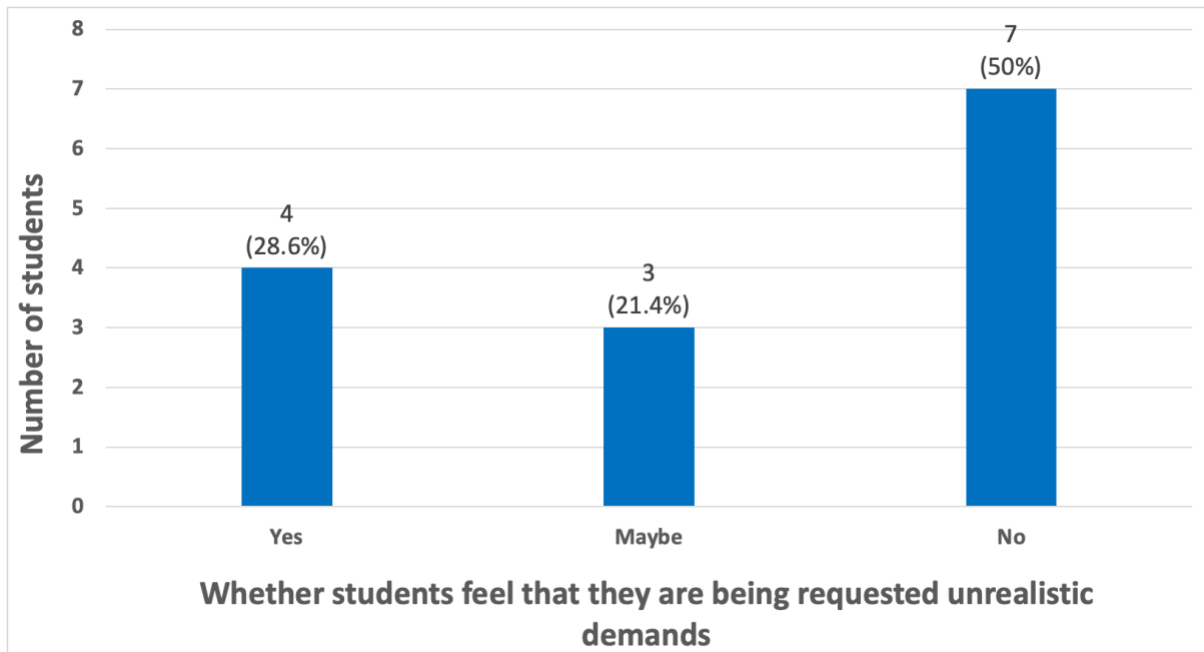


Figure 33: Do you feel that you are being requested unrealistic demands?

When students of French were asked whether they are being requested unrealistic demands, different viewpoints were obtained. In fact, while 50% of the students feel that they are not being requested unreasonable demands, 28.6% feel that this is the case and 21.4% of participants answered “Maybe”.

4.3.2 The transition from learning French in SE to learning French at Advanced level.

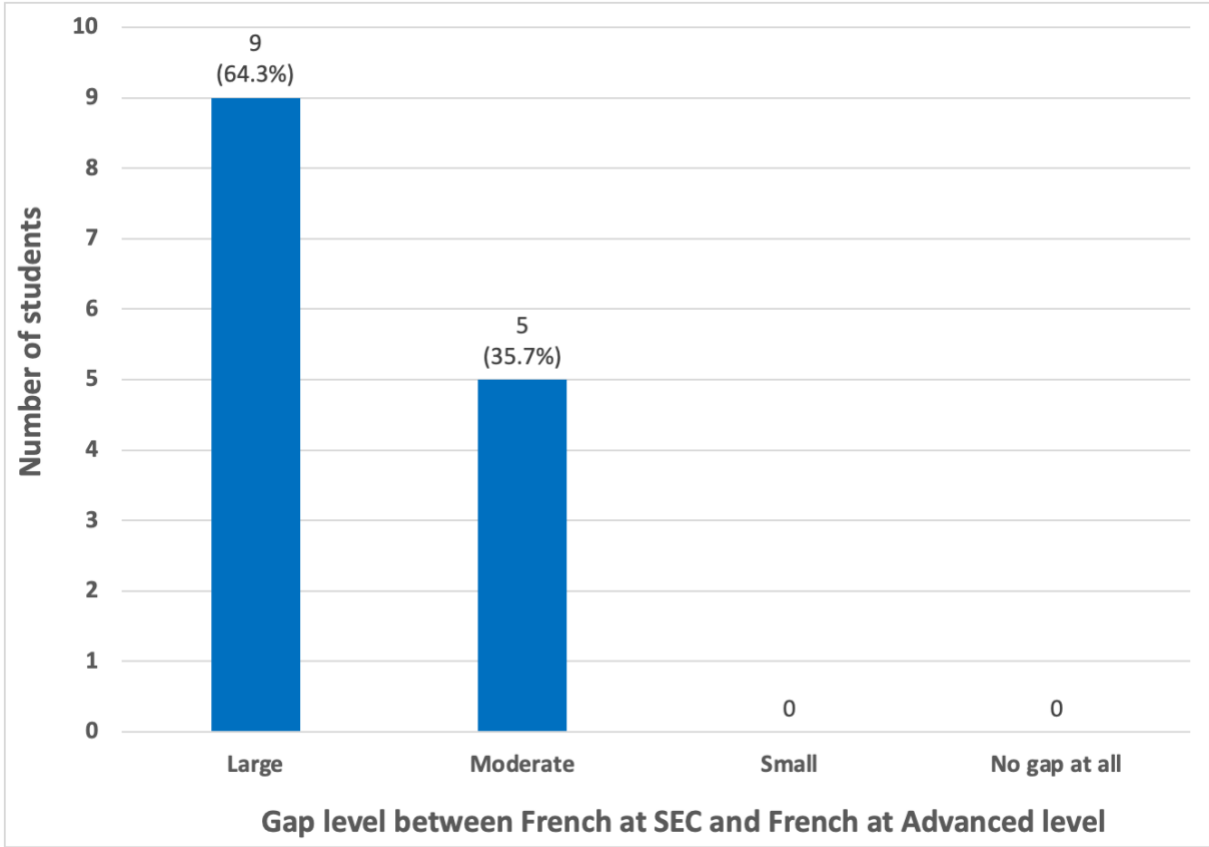


Figure 34: How would you rate the gap between French at SEC and French at Advanced level?

According to the majority of Advanced learners of French (64.3%), there is a large knowledge level gap between French studied at SEC level and French studied at Advanced level. For 35.7% of the participants this gap is moderate, however, none of the participants said that this gap is small or that there is no gap at all.

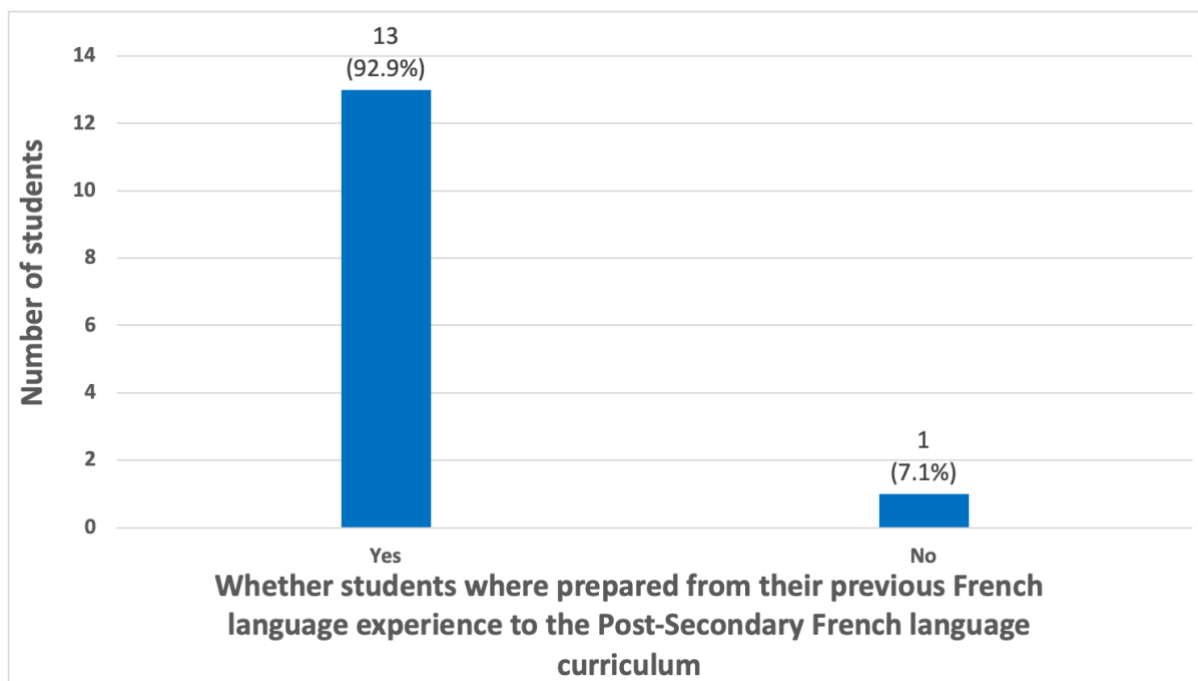


Figure 35: Were you prepared from your previous French language experience to the Post-Secondary French language curriculum?

However, although most of the Advanced learners of French state that there is a gap between French at SEC and French at Advanced level, the large majority (92.9%) claim that they were prepared from their previous French LA in SE to the Advanced French program. Only one participant (7.1%) disagrees in this regard and states that after learning French in SE, she was not prepared for the French Advanced curriculum. In fact, this student claims: "The literature in A-level is much more difficult, obviously, but in Secondary we were not prepared with the much more difficult vocabulary and the fluency of the language during lectures."

4.3.3 Pursuing studies in French after Post-Secondary education.

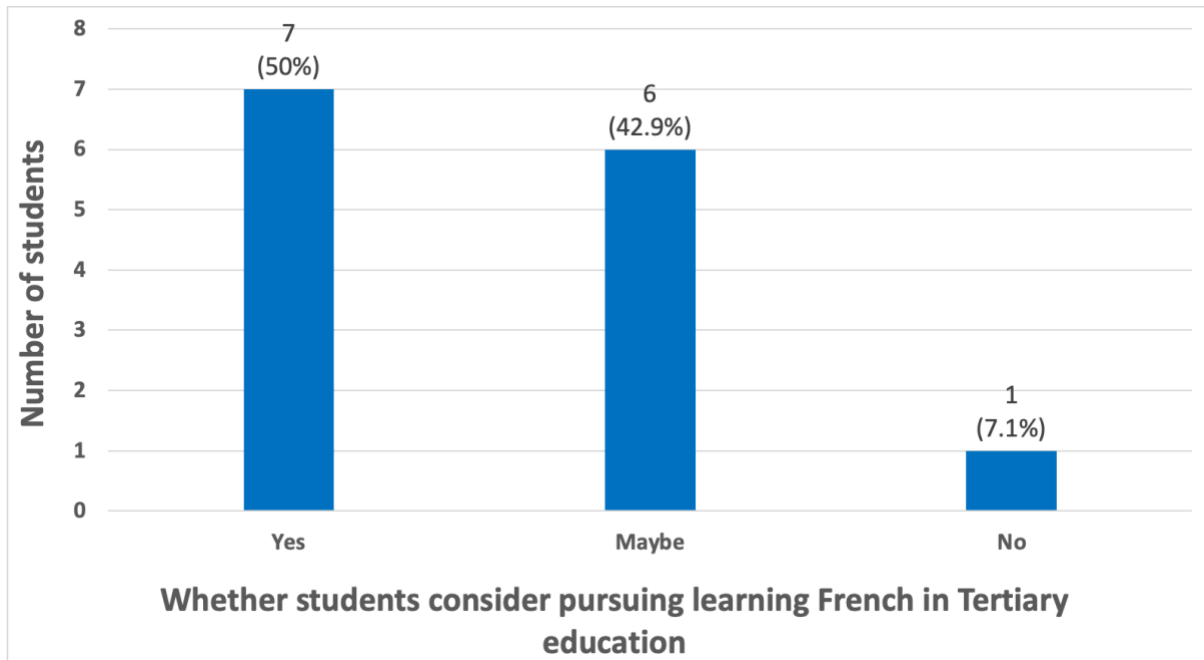


Figure 36: Do you consider pursuing learning French in Tertiary education?

Results obtained from our study show that not all Advanced learners of French plan to pursue their studies in this FL at University. In fact, only 50% of the participants consider studying this language in Tertiary education, while 42.9% still seem undecided as they answered “Maybe”. The fact that French is not required for the course that a participant (7.1%) plans to take at University, led this student to the decision not to continue studying French after Post-Secondary education. In fact, this participant states that although she needs to know a FL, it is not a necessary requirement for her future course.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overall picture of the results obtained regarding the perspectives of Post-Secondary students on FLL, FLs and French and the factors that are retaining students from choosing FLs at Post-Secondary level. We also showed which of these perspectives and factors are most common and widespread in the participants’ mentality and experiences. An

interpretation of the data obtained in the Maltese context and a discussion of these results in relation to the literature that has been produced will be carried out in the next chapter.

5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The discussion of the results obtained aims to answer the three research questions on which this study is based. This chapter is divided into three sections and each section concentrates on a particular research question. In order to interpret and discuss our research problems, references will be made to the results presented in the previous chapter and to the literature that has been discussed in the second chapter.

5.2 What are Post-Secondary students' perspectives regarding learning a FL in Malta?

5.2.1 *Gender differences in FLL at Post-Secondary level.*

It seems that in Malta the study of FLs is trendier among girls than among boys as in this study we found that the majority of students who pursue FLL at Post-Secondary level are females. The fact that females already compose the large majority of our participants can be a reflection of this factor. These outcomes correspond to the trend that was found in earlier studies overseas such as that of Wikeley and Stables (1999) and Williams et al. (2002); in these studies with younger learners, it was consistently found that girls are more into FLL than boys. As our study confirms, it seems that such attitudes of higher motivation to learn FLs among females, are also shown by elder students at Post-Secondary level. It is believed that these outcomes arise out of the common stereotypical perception that languages are good subjects to be studied by females.

5.2.2 *The experience of learning FLs in SE.*

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, for most of our participants the experience of learning FLs in Maltese Secondary schools was neither positive nor negative. In our questionnaire, one particular student who used to study German claims: "I guess, I wished my experience with German was more enjoyable, because I hate saying that I came out of Secondary school after 5 years of studying it and I do not even know how to speak it fluently".

This comment and many others which are similar, indicate that after 5 years of compulsory FLL, some students are experiencing a feeling of incompetency when they come to use FLs in real circumstances. It is believed that this sense of incompetency refrains from making the FLL experience a very pleasant one and that this feeling also influences the desire of students to pursue FLL in the future.

5.2.3 *The level of effort and abilities needed for FLL.*

The past experience of FLL in Secondary schools is also linked to the perception of many students that FLs require high skills and efforts. When participants were asked whether FLL is highly demanding, the majority answered from their experience in SE as most of our participants do not study FLs at Post-Secondary level. Although a large percentage claim that FLL at Secondary level entails a moderate amount of workload, the majority of the participants agree or strongly agree that FLL in general is highly demanding. The fact that the majority who answered these questions only experienced FLL in Secondary schools, leads us to the assumption that most probably this perception is driven from what students had undergone during FL lessons in SE.

This study does not provide insight on what makes a considerable number of participants believe that FLA requires high levels of effort and abilities. However, this makes us question whether the learning of FLs is being delivered to students in a way which is best to make the language studied more easily accessible. Such perception could derive from lack of adequate resources received by students which could have facilitated the learning of a FL, or from an absence of differentiated pedagogy which might have easily rendered the learning of a FL challenging to some students.

5.2.4 *FL teachers*

Despite the above-mentioned results our study reveals that a large percentage of our participants perceive their past FL teachers as very good, good or even excellent. As it has been discussed in the literature review, teachers (Lightbown and Spada, 2013, Williams et al.,

2002), their methods (Williams et al., 2002) as well as the language used during FL lessons (Caruana and Camilleri Grima, 2013, Abela, 2011, Bezzina, 2016) influence the motivation of students to study FLs. Given that a considerable amount of our participants perceive their past FL educators positively, teachers do not seem to be among the main factors that are discouraging students from pursuing FLL at Post-Secondary level. Nevertheless, for the small percentage of participants who consider their past FL educators as bad or very bad, teachers might have been among the reasons that demotivated these students from learning FLs in the future.

5.2.5 *The reasons behind being successful or unsuccessful in languages.*

Our participants believe that success or failure in this domain mostly depends on personal aptitude for learning a new language. Thus, instead of attributing success or otherwise in languages primarily to the strategies used to work and study, hence to factors on which students have control, our participants perceive personal abilities as the factors that determine their language achievements. This confirms the risk mentioned by Dörnyei (2001) of students doing negative attributions in FLL due to a sense of incompetency for subjects which are thought to necessitate a certain level of proficiency. Nevertheless, attributions of a lack of adequate acquisition to personal aptitude lower the motivation of students who are not very good at languages, as they will blame their lack of achievements to their own abilities. As a result, the probability that they would persist with LL would be very low.

We have equally observed that for our participants, the second most popular element that determines success or failure in languages is the teacher. Thus, it is evident that students attribute low or high achievements in languages to factors on which they have no control, that is: if students have high personal aptitude for learning new languages and good teachers, then they will succeed in languages, but if their abilities are weak and their teachers are bad, then success in languages is not possible. It is believed that such attributions perpetuate some form of passiveness from the part of the students towards LL. Besides, the number of participants attributing success or failure in languages to task difficulty or easiness is not low. This linked to perceptions of a FL as a demanding subject accentuates further the passivity that some students hold towards languages (Graham, 2004).

On the other hand, for our participants motivation is the third most important factor that leads to success or failure in languages. It was expected that more students would attribute language achievements to motivation, and it could be foreseen that this factor would be among the 3 most common attributions, given that studies such as that of Grech (2011) show that students' attitude towards a particular subject influences their performance in it.

5.2.6 *The perspectives of Post-Secondary students on pursuing FLL.*

The reasons provided by Post-Secondary learners of FLs that motivated them to pursue FLL are quite diverse. As indicated in the analysis of results, students persist with FLs mainly because of their love and interest in a particular FL or languages in general (44.9%), and also as a result of their love and interest in foreign cultures (13.3%). In other words, the large majority of our participants chose FLs at Post-Secondary level due to what Deci and Ryans (1985) define as intrinsic motivation since they study FLs because they find them interesting and enjoyable. As regards the second most common reason to persist with FLL, love and interest in foreign cultures perfectly coincides with the integrative motivation that Gardner and Lambert (1972) defines. In other words, the two most common reasons for pursuing FLL do not include beliefs that FLs are important, but they consist more of reasons that are on a personal and affective level, related to personal liking and love for FLs and foreign cultures. This suggests that perhaps some of the students are not aware of the range of advantages that they could benefit from by being able to use and understand FLs.

Reasons which involve the utility of FLs such as communication purposes and future career plans are third in popularity. Although in this study these are not the most popular factors that encouraged students to pursue FLL, such reasons confirm Lightbown and Spada's (2013) conclusions that some students will be driven to learn and improve in the language being studied, when they have a specific need to communicate in the TL or to accomplish certain career goals.

It is quite worrying however that very few students claim that they chose to persist with FLs for future studies, or that they consider FLs as the means which open more career opportunities. Besides, the very small percentage of participants who decided to pursue FLL

because they perceive FLs as important and useful subjects, is also worrying considering the vast literature produced on the extreme importance that FLs have nowadays. It seems that these arguments are not reaching or not convincing young learners somehow. This not to mention that certain reasons behind the decision to pursue FLL, such as that FLs are easy subjects, are not intrinsically true and cannot be interpreted positively when compared to other more valid reasons, such as the opportunities that FLs open in real circumstances.

Notwithstanding the importance of students' perspectives on FLL, the fact that the majority of our participants do not study any FL at Post-Secondary level, that they do not even discuss such an opportunity with CGCs, or that they do not regret their decision not to study any FL after SE, lead us to the much more important question of what is actually demotivating students from pursuing FLL as main area of study.

5.3 What is discouraging Maltese students from choosing foreign languages as their main area of study?

5.3.1 *The preference of other areas.*

This study confirms that few Post-Secondary students have FLs as their main area of study. Such outcomes can be considered as the result of what had been confirmed in other studies with Secondary learners, that enthusiasm to learn FLs decreases with age and gradually gets lost (Williams et al, 2002, Gauci, 2016). In other words, motivation to learn FLs does decline by the end of SE and as a result, we are facing the current situation of few learners specializing in FLs at Post-Secondary level.

As seen earlier, the prevalent reason why Post-Secondary students avoid FLs as their main areas of study is because they prefer other areas, most particularly the area of sciences. It is believed that such preferences are deriving from the decision debated by Pace (2018) of making FL SEC examinations optional. The fact that a large percentage of our participants prefer the sciences domain, confirms Pace's (2018) conclusions that since SEC FL examinations were not made compulsory, FLs are considered as unimportant subjects, while more importance is given to subjects which are compulsory to access Post-Secondary education,

hence, subjects which are deemed as necessary and important such as the scientific disciplines.

This along with the fact that the second preferred area was that of Commerce, also supports our hypothesis that subjects in the areas of Sciences and Commerce are considered as more essential due to a trendy belief that jobs in these domains are always on demand and guarantee high salaries.

5.3.2 *The lack of success previously achieved in FLs.*

The low achievements normally obtained in FLs in SE are another strong discouraging factor that is demotivating students from choosing languages as main areas of study. Such findings confirm Williams et al.'s (2002) and Lightbown and Spada's (2013) conclusions that proficiency and level of success in languages leave an impact on motivation towards LL. These results also serve as proof that students with low levels of proficiency generally have a low-level of language self-concept (Williams et al., 2002).

When students were asked to indicate the average mark normally achieved in FLs, the two most common grades achieved by our participants were 61-70 and 71-80. Such grades are not very encouraging to pursue studies in these subjects as generally students perceive themselves more successful when grades are above 80 or 90. Although this study does not shed light on what prevented the majority of our participants from achieving very high grades in FLs, we persist with Williams et al. (2002) in that something needs to be done in order to prevent an early impression of weakness due to low achievements.

The fact that a large percentage of our participants attribute success or failure in languages to personal aptitude, makes such results more valid, given that the reasons students give for their high or poor accomplishments, influence their motivation to repeat the same or similar work (Graham, 2004).

5.3.3 Previous FLL experiences.

Part of our results also support Graham's (2004) claim that negative language experiences lead students to drop the language or not study it in the future. In fact, the third most common reason why students did not choose FLs as their main areas of study was due to a bad experience they had with compulsory FLL in SE. With what we have seen so far, FLL that takes place in Secondary schools, seems to form part of the "root of the problem" (Graham, 2004, p.172) that is locally being experienced in the Post-Secondary sector. Although students were not directly asked what made such experiences bad, answers obtained in other questions lead us to the assumptions that the teaching methods used and the way FLL takes place in the classroom are among the main causes. In fact, some students claim:

Student A: "I felt like we were learning a lot of things really fast".

Student B: "The school I used to go to did not teach languages well. We learned how to conjugate the verbs but never had practice in speaking or hearing the language and how it could be used in everyday life. We only spoke the language when we were practising for an oral exam. I had gone to Italy for a week and stayed with my Italian friends and I learned more Italian in a week than in 5 years".

This proves Pace (2015b) right in his conclusions that FLL which does not involve a realistic context is a crucial aspect contributing to the low number of students studying FLs, given that learners are more inclined to work hard when they recognize a link between the classroom and outside reality, and when they comprehend that what is learned in class can be applied to real-life situations. It is evidently clear that student B and many others who expressed similar experiences, did not practise the 5 language competences during FLL, thus, their previous experience of FLA failed to help them develop their competences to be able to use the FL in real situations. With such experiences there is a high risk that students perceive current and future studies in FLs as useless.

5.3.4 *The belief that FLs open a limited choice of careers.*

As underlined by Pace (2013), our study confirms that there is a belief that with languages students are limited in the choice of career. Although statistics indicate that this belief is not a very strong factor leading to low FL student numbers, most probably such perceptions are due to insufficient information on the job opportunities that FLs open. It is believed that in order to avoid this perception, more emphasis should be given on the provision of clear information to both Secondary and Post-Secondary students on the range of career opportunities that pupils can embrace after FLL. Information on the salaries offered in such professions is equally important.

In fact, the idea that with languages one cannot have a lucrative profession, might be also driven by the fact that many perceive teaching as the only career path that languages open in Malta. Since the salary of teachers in Malta is perceived as insufficient by many, this could have caused some students to avoid FLs. The only way forward to avoid these perceptions is by informing students as soon as they commence FLL on the benefits and opportunities that FLs have to offer.

5.3.5 *The lack of importance that FLs have for the students' future career plans.*

The fact that a considerable number of students consider FLs as highly demanding subjects could be another discouraging factor preventing some students from pursuing FLL as main areas, given that in studies such as that of Marshall (2000) pupils avoided languages due to their perception of an overwhelming language curriculum. However, this does not seem to be one of the strongest factors leading to the present situation locally, given that another large percentage of our participants were undecided regarding the skills and efforts that FLs entail.

What actually seems to be a key factor in our scenario is the lack of importance that FLs have for the students' planned career. As seen earlier, students give significant importance to career planning and to obtaining the necessary achievements for their future profession (Hiebert et al., 2011). However, for the vast majority of our participants FLs are of average, of little or of no importance at all for their planned career. The fact that a large percentage of students did not discuss with CGCs the opportunity to take languages at Post-Secondary level,

or that the large majority do not even regret their decision of avoiding FLs and do not plan to study one at University, is thought to stem from students' disinterest in FLs and their perceived insignificance of these subjects. This confirms that FL skills might only seem essential for few students (Pace 2015a) and that a significant number of learners perceive FLL as unimportant (Williams et al., 2002). In other words, most of our participants do not see any circumstances where they could use or need FLs in their future plans, hence the perception of FLs as “extra subjects”. In fact, some students claim:

Student A: “I did not see the need to further my knowledge on languages”.

Student B: “Most foreign languages have no use in everyday life. Truly the only languages you really need is Maltese (since we live in Malta) and English (to be able to communicate with others from outside our country)”.

Student C: “I did not feel the importance of learning another foreign language if I was not going to be travelling or living there”.

Student D: “I do not need any specific languages for any of my courses”.

It is believed that students are perceiving this lack of FL importance due to a gap that exists between the FLL that takes place in the classroom, outside reality and the actual use of FLs (Pace, 2015b). The reasons provided above further highlight the importance of FL courses for specific purposes that provide learners with realistic possibilities in which they can implement their FL abilities (Pace, 2015b) (Appendix 4 ii). Through the provision of these courses, students can appreciate more the ability of knowing other languages as they understand better how useful FLs can become in their respective areas of interest. Maybe it is time to introduce these courses even at University and increase the range of domains in which these courses are provided.

The insignificance that FLs have for some students are more explicitly conveyed through a particular comment that was made in answer to one of the questions in the questionnaire. In fact, one participant said: “**** languages. Why should I study languages anyway? You should study adequate subjects and not languages”. Through this comment it is evidently clear that

some students retain negative attitudes towards languages and nearly have a sense of hatred towards these subjects which are perceived as insignificant, useless and inadequate. It is believed that the first step towards addressing the problem of the shortage of FL students, would definitely be that of changing such negative perspectives towards FLL and of laying stress on the actual importance and beneficial use that FLs have.

5.3.6 *The advice of CGCs on taking or not taking languages at Post-Secondary level.*

As shown in the analysis section, the majority of students who discuss the option of taking languages at Sixth Form were encouraged by CGCs to do so. However, as it has been predicted, there were some cases where CGCs did not recommend taking up languages at Post-Secondary level. Given that the advice provided by CGCs influences the students' final decisions (Awinsong et al., 2015), it is believed that the reasons provided by CGCs not to pursue LL after SE are another factor leading to a low number of students specialising in FLs.

As already mentioned, the most common advice that demotivated students from pursuing LL was that of choosing subjects which students like and are good at and not subjects which they dislike and have trouble in. Such results correspond to previous ones where the majority of our participants claim that they did not choose FLs because they prefer other areas and because they felt that they were not doing well in the language studied. Although few students look for guidance from CGCs, it seems that the above-mentioned advice does not help in improving the situation of low student numbers in FLs, given that for the majority of students the subjects in which they are not interested and they are not good at, are actually languages. Hence, such advice is indirectly encouraging students to pursue studies in other areas.

Other worrying reasons provided by CGCs such as that languages are not required for the students' planned course, that there is no link between languages and the students' area of interest, or that languages are not important for the students' planned career, highlight even further the need of integrating FLs into a range of courses at University, including courses within the sciences domain, as it has been proposed by Pace (2018) (Appendix 4 ii). This would

also help to improve the level of students' interest in FLs since as we have seen earlier, nowadays students prefer other areas to the detriment of the languages domain.

The fact that students do not need FLs for their future studies or planned career is a common problematic reason that arose many times in this study. In fact, we have just seen that most of the students do not perceive FLs as significantly important for their prospective profession. In the previous chapter we have equally observed that an Advanced level student of French will no longer study this language at University because she does not need it for her planned course. Besides, the most common reason for avoiding FLs as main areas at Post-Secondary level provided in the "Others" option, was that students do not need languages for their specific course or planned career.

It is also worth mentioning that the large majority of our participants only have English as a language at Post-Secondary level given that a grade C or better in this subject is required in order to avoid a proficiency test at University. In other words, students do not feel the need to study FLs given that English is the only language required to pursue studies in their desired areas at University. This confirms that such entry requirements are indirectly stopping students from studying FLs at Post-Secondary level (Pace, Office of the Permanent Secretary, & MEDE, 2018). It is believed that something definitely needs to be done in order to incorporate FLs with different areas of study and make them more relevant to students interested in domains in which languages are perceived as useless. Otherwise, interest in FLs will simply be limited to some students specializing in certain areas of Humanities, Business, Education, Translations and Interpreting.

It is assumed that other reasons such as that languages are insignificant or useless subjects, that they are inadequate as main areas of study or that languages do not open high-paid job opportunities, are also driven from the lack of presence of FLs in areas that are perceived as profitable and more important.

As regards the motivating reasons provided by CGCs to pursue LL, all reasons provided were positive. However, certain reasons such as that students are very good in languages, that they should choose languages because they are undecided with regard to the career path they will go for, or that languages are easy subjects to study, are not sufficient reasons that inform students on the actual importance and utility of languages. In other words, it is believed that

such reasons are not strong enough to persuade future Post-Secondary students to choose these subjects because they are necessary.

5.4 How is the French language perceived by students and why is it no longer popular at Post-Secondary level?

5.4.1 *Post-Secondary students' perspectives on French.*

Although very few students claim that they perceive French as a language for girls, results related to gender in our study indicate otherwise as all 14 participants who in our research study French at Advanced level are females. This corresponds to findings which sustain that girls have more positive attitudes towards this language than boys (Grech, 2011) and that French is more chosen by females than by males (Williams et al., 2002). Such outcomes could be driven by the general perception mentioned earlier that languages are for girls.

Positive perceptions were mainly expressed by our participants as regards the French language. In fact, as seen earlier a significant number of students perceive this language as a beautiful sounding language, a useful language to know, a language that can boast of a rich culture and literature, and a refined language. However, fewer students consider this language as an important asset and the perception that French is just a FL like any other is also popular.

Although negative perceptions are not held by a large number of participants, there are some students who regard French as a language spoken by proud unwelcoming people and as a language for snobs. It is assumed that these perceptions are driven by the international prejudice about the pride of French people.

On the other hand, the fact that very few students perceive French as an important asset is contradictory to the fact that 37.7% of the participants find this FL as useful to know. Although these 2 results are not in line, the fact that the majority do not regard French as an important asset is of some concern. This could be driven by the general perception that FLs are insignificant and useless. Besides, the fact that nowadays Spanish and German are increasing their popularity might be an indication that students are regarding other languages as more

useful, attractive and important. However, as is already the case with FLs in general, it is also believed that a significant number of students could not think of any circumstances in which they would need French in the future, and as a result, they do not regard this FL as an important asset. Studies such as that of Abdilla (2020) demonstrate that this issue is already evident among many Maltese Year 8 students learning French in a State school, who are already convinced that they will not pursue studies in French due to its perceived uselessness for their future work or studies.

It is equally assumed that lack of information given to Secondary and Post-Secondary students on the importance that the French language has in Europe and internationally, could be another factor leading to the majority of our participants disregarding the importance of this language. Given that motivation to study a FL also depends on its perceived utility (Pace, 2015a), the fact that many students do not perceive French as an important asset certainly has negative consequences on the number of students pursuing studies in this language after SE.

This study also reveals that many Post-Secondary students consider French as a difficult or very difficult subject. Some comments on this FL in our questionnaire indicate that these perceptions are driven by the fact that most of the French orthography does not correspond to its pronunciation. In fact, when students were asked how they perceive French, a student answered: “Hard since most words are not written as spoken”. In the next sub-section we will see how the perceived difficulty of this language along with other factors led French to lose its popularity at Post-Secondary level.

5.4.2 *Reasons why French is no longer popular at Post-Secondary level.*

5.4.2.1 *The perception that French is difficult.*

The declining number of students studying French at Secondary level and registering for a French SEC examination by the end of SE, is definitely a sign that French is no longer popular at Post-Secondary level.

Basing our study both on a local and on the international scenario, it is believed that along with other negative perceptions on French, the perceived difficulty of this FL might also be causing some students to avoid it at Post-Secondary level. In Abdilla's (2020) study Year 8 students who planned not to pursue studies in French after compulsory FLL or who were undecided regarding this issue, provided the difficulty of this FL as one of the main reasons. Studies which took place overseas with 16-year-old learners such as that of Graham (2004), further confirm that the perceived difficulty of French stops a considerable number of students from choosing this FL at Post-Secondary level. As indicated earlier, 66% of participants in this study also perceive French as hard or very hard. Whilst taking into consideration previous findings, it is believed that the perceived difficulty of French, which seems to be a common perception held by Maltese students, is probably one of the factors discouraging pupils from choosing it at Post-Secondary level, since as previous research shows, students tend to avoid subjects which they regard as difficult (Abdilla, 2020, Graham, 2004).

5.4.2.2 The significant workload that French entails.

A closer look at the responses obtained regarding the amount of work students had during their FLL in SE, also leads to the question whether the workload that students experienced in the past with French, discouraged them from choosing it at Post-Secondary level. Out of 76 students who rate the amount of workload as very high, 55.3% had French as a FL in Secondary level. Besides, in line with Graham's (2004) findings, the majority of Advanced level learners of French in our research claim that they work hard or very hard to achieve their desired grades in this language. It is believed that the idea that French at Post-Secondary level might entail more efforts than the hard work that it already entails in SE, may discourage some students from persisting with studies in French.

5.4.2.3 Low grades achieved in French.

The low marks achieved in this FL might also discourage some students from studying French after SE. In fact, in this research nearly half of the participants (44.3% out of 79 students)

whose average mark in FLs was 50 or below, studied French in SE. Similar results were obtained with participants whose average mark in FLs was 51-60, as 51.3% of these students (113 participants) also had French in Secondary schools. As previously indicated, students will be demotivated to pursue studies in areas they have trouble in. The fact that the vast majority of our participants attribute success or failure in languages to personal aptitude, leads us to the assumption that students who used to achieve low grades in French considered their poor skills in this language as permanent and as a result, they were discouraged from making more efforts and improve in the language after SE (Graham, 2004).

5.4.2.4 Negative experience of learning French in SE.

As it was found in other studies with students of French at Secondary level (Williams et al., 2002) a significant number of our participants who had French in SE, claim that they had a boring experience of FLL. In fact, out of 55 participants who regard their past FLL as boring, 67.3% were studying French, and another 33.3% out of 63 students who considered previous FLL as very boring, also had French at Secondary level. Certain responses in our questionnaire further confirm how the teaching methods used in FL classrooms in SE are leaving a negative impact on the students' perspectives on FLL, on French and on their desire to pursue studies in this language once it is no longer compulsory. In fact, some students state:

Student A: "I never found French interesting".

Student B: "Personally, I feel that when you learn a language at school, it is very exam based. Instead of fluency being the main objective, getting a good grade and answering exam questions takes more importance. At the moment I am studying Korean and over the course of a year I have learned a lot more than I did in the 3 years I spent studying French in Secondary school".

Once again, it is evident that certain students are experiencing discontinuity between what is taught during French lessons in Secondary schools and what should actually be taught in order to be able to use the language in real circumstances. Results in this study demonstrate that

this feeling is equally experienced by some students who study French at Advanced level. As previously indicated, 2 Advanced level learners of French do not perceive their current French lessons as useful and they show concern regarding how much these lessons help them develop skills in order to be able to use the FL in everyday life. This makes FFL lessons irrelevant to the students' actual needs and thus students perceive such lessons as useless and boring. It is believed that this sense of irrelevance of FL lessons for the students' actual needs and the insufficient learning of how to use the language in real contexts, demotivate students from pursuing studies in this language in the future.

5.4.2.5 Negative perceptions on teachers of French in Malta.

Linked to the negative experience that certain students had with French in Secondary schools are the negative perceptions that some participants share on teachers of French. In fact, out of 35 students who perceived their past FL teacher as bad, 40% were referring to teachers of French and another 40% of 20 students who regard their past FL educators as very bad, were also students of French in SE. Although in our study no reasons are defined why some students perceive their past teachers of French as bad or very bad, it is believed that teachers perceived as such render the experience of learning this FL even more negative, and as a result students' perception towards French deteriorates and their desire to study it once it is no longer compulsory wanes.

5.4.2.6 The gap between French at SEC and French at Advanced level.

On the contrary to the results obtained in Graham's (2004) study, Advanced level learners of French in our research do not feel that they are being requested unrealistic demands. Besides, the fact that almost all Advanced level learners of French claim that they were prepared from their previous French language experience to the Post-Secondary French language curriculum, indicate that on the contrary to other students who did not pursue studies in this FL, Advanced level learners perceive their past learning experience of French in SE as successful.

However, our results correspond with Graham's (2004) study in that the majority of our participants who study French at Advanced level, perceive a large gap between French at SEC and at Advanced level. It is assumed that this large gap is perceived by many due to an increase in language, cultural and literary content that Advanced level students are entitled to know, as well as an increase in the level of spoken output that they are required to produce, when compared to the requisite knowledge that French at SEC level entails (Appendix 4 iii). Basing our assumptions on Graham's (2004) conclusion, students who might be aware of this gap, would be discouraged to cope with French at Advanced level.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter confirms our hypothesis on all three research questions. However, in addition to our assumptions, other outcomes which were not foreseen by the researcher were revealed.

For the first research question, we hypothesized that FLs in Malta are mostly studied by girls and they are studied mainly due to love for languages and the cultures they represent. In light of the low number of students choosing to learn FLs after compulsory FLL, we also presumed that the experience of learning FLs in SE is not a positive one, and that students perceive FLs as difficult subjects which require considerable efforts. In addition to these confirmed hypotheses, this study equally attests that the large majority of Post-Secondary students perceive their past FL teachers positively, and they attribute success or failure in FLs mostly to personal aptitude to learn new languages, to teachers and to motivation respectively.

Whilst taking into account the probability of preference towards other areas which are believed to be more important and profitable, for the second research question we hypothesized that the perception that languages are difficult, useless, and insignificant subjects, along with a negative past FL experience in SE, is discouraging students from choosing FLs as main areas. Besides, the advice provided by CGCs on taking languages as main areas was not believed to be very encouraging. Along with these hypotheses which are all confirmed, other less popular factors, such as the idea that with languages students are limited as to the choice of career and that with languages they cannot have a lucrative

profession, are among other reasons why some Post-Secondary students did not pursue FLL as main areas.

Our hypothesis for the third research question was that French is perceived as an unimportant language which is difficult and which requires high skills and daunting efforts. It was also assumed that French is no longer popular after SE because the above-mentioned perceptions make students perceive this FL as pointless to study, or lead to a feeling of incompetency towards learning French at Post-Secondary level. Although the above assumptions were all right, this study shows that a large percentage of Post-Secondary students also consider French positively and regard it as a beautifully sounding language, a language that can boast of a rich culture and literature, and a refined language. Despite the fact that the majority of participants do not perceive French as an important asset, many others claim that it is a useful language to know, while several others do not perceive this language any differently from other FLs.

Our study equally demonstrates that in addition to the above-mentioned negative perceptions on French, there are other factors which might be causing a low number of students choosing this FL at Post-Secondary level. These include previous low marks achieved in French, past boring experiences of learning this FL, inadequate teachers of French, and a perceived gap between French at SEC and at Advanced level.

In the next chapter, a general conclusion based on the results of this study will be provided and some measures that could be taken in order to improve the situation of MFLs in Malta, will be discussed. The limitations of this research together with recommendations for further studies can also be found in the following chapter.

6 Conclusion

This study provides insight into the perspectives of Post-Secondary students with regard to FLs and FLL. It could be an important contribution to the LL scenario locally as I believe it is the first study to have presented an analysis of the factors which are discouraging students from studying FLs at Post-Secondary level as expressed by the students themselves. This study has equally given particular attention to the students' perspectives on French so that a better understanding of why this FL is no longer trendy at Post-Secondary level, could be gained.

By adopting a quantitative methodology, data for this study has been collected through a Google Forms questionnaire which was anonymous and which was distributed electronically to all Post-Secondary students attending 4 Sixth Forms in Malta, 2 of which form part of the State educational system, 1 is a Church Sixth form, and another belongs to the UM. The data obtained was also analysed using Google Forms and it was mainly interpreted statistically.

Results in our study indicate that few students are studying FLs at Post-Secondary level in Malta, most particularly at Advanced level, and the majority of these students are girls. Although past FL teachers were mainly deemed to be very good, most of our participants consider their past FLL experience in SE as average. Findings in this study also confirm that for Post-Secondary students FLL in SE basically entails a moderate amount of workload, however, it is highly demanding. For our participants, the level of success in languages mostly depends on personal aptitude to learn a new language and those few Post-Secondary students who choose FLs as main areas, mainly do so due to their love and interest in a particular FL or languages in general.

This research also shows that the majority of Post-Secondary students do not regret their decision of avoiding FLs at Post-Secondary level and they have no plans to study one at University alongside their program of study. The main reason why students at this level ignore FLs and do not choose them as main areas of study, is because they prefer other areas, most notably the sciences domain. Students' belief that they were not doing well in the languages studied in SE, and previous negative FLL experiences, are two other major variables contributing to a decrease in the percentage of students choosing FLs at Advanced level. Furthermore, the fact that a large percentage of Post-Secondary students consider FLs of

average or of little importance for their planned career is believed to be another crucial demotivating factor which is heavily influencing the students' choice of FLs at Post-Secondary level. Results in this study also show that the advice provided by CGCs on studying languages at Post-Secondary level is not always positive and this could also possibly be leading to the decline of FL students at this level.

French also seems to be studied mainly by girls as in this research, all students studying this FL at Advanced level are females. Although Advanced level learners of French mainly agree that they are not being subjected to unrealistic demands, most of them work very hard to obtain their desired grades despite being adequately prepared by their Secondary French language curriculum for their Advanced French program. Moreover, not all Advanced level learners of French plan to pursue studies in this language at University level. A broader range of perspectives on this FL indicates that the majority perceive French as a beautiful sounding language, which is however difficult.

In fact, the perceived difficulty of French is believed to discourage students to study it at Post-Secondary level. A demanding workload during past French learning experiences, previous low grades achieved, inadequate past teachers of French and boring experiences of learning this language in SE, are other factors which are also believed to demotivate students from pursuing studies in French once it is no longer compulsory. Additionally, the possibility that some Secondary students might believe that there is a gap between French at SEC and French at Advanced level, as stated by the majority of our Advanced level French participants, might also be a contributing cause leading to the unpopularity of this FL at Advanced level.

Such results call for a need of measures to be taken in order to improve the situation. First of all, FLs should be promoted both in education and in society in general. It is of utmost importance that at Secondary level, the point at which learners start thinking about their future studies, students are well informed about the importance and utility of FLs and are given the opportunity to understand the relevance that FLs have to their everyday life. Notwithstanding the utmost importance of the provision of a wide range of opportunities and FL courses at multiple levels, this might not be enough to encourage students to take FLs seriously. Students should first understand the value of these courses, how they will benefit from them in the near future, and why they should be proficient in FLs. It is only when students

change their attitudes towards FLL and understand that FLs are important and useful, that they will be more motivated to study them once they are no longer compulsory.

In fact, this study also calls for a dire need to make FLs relevant to all learners and a useful requisite to students interested in different areas of study, most particularly in areas in which languages are considered as useless. Initiatives to improve the level of achievement obtained in FLs in SE, in addition to the ones already in place (Appendix 4 ii), are equally necessary in order to avoid poor grades obtained in FLs and an early sense of failure in this area which discourages students from pursuing FL study after SE. In fact, initiatives addressing FLL in Secondary schools are crucial and it is believed that measures aiming to improve the FLL experience in SE from average to excellent, are required in order to increase students' liking for FLs and their motivation to study them once they are no longer compulsory.

Just as importantly, FL teaching should be more interesting and appealing to students. Otherwise said, boring grammar and vocabulary traditional teaching that does not lead learners to be able to effectively communicate, should stop. The fact that some learners feel that they cannot even communicate on a basic level after 5 years of FL study is a serious concern which is unacceptable. Despite the efforts made to introduce an approach based on communicating in all language competencies in FL teaching in Malta, it seems that some FL lessons in SE are still repetitive in their structure. It is also evident that some students are experiencing FL teaching which is still teacher-centred and not learner-centred, in spite of centralized policy making to the contrary. Such lessons are boring to students who do not experience a ludic element and who are not given the chance to explore and to express themselves on a higher cognitive level than just producing 1 to 3 word answers about form and content, during classroom interaction, and only when solicited by the teachers.

Last but not least, although the initiative of a few years ago to make FL study compulsory at Post-Secondary level was not an adequate solution as it was immediately turned down, University entry requirements which were previously mentioned in this study, definitely need to be amended and give a greater possibility to Post-Secondary students to study languages other than English, at least at Intermediate level.

Also, the difficulties that French is facing at Secondary, Post-Secondary and University level in Malta cannot be ignored. Initiatives that address the declining popularity of this language and

that help it regain the importance that it once had for Maltese youths, would need to be implemented. Students at all levels should be better encouraged to choose this language and the first step to motivate pupils to learn it is by portraying French as useful and attractive to learn. The fact that French has a reputation of a beautiful language among Post-Secondary students is already a bright spot. What comes next is the abolition of the perception held by many that French is a difficult language to learn. At this point it is crucial that low students' performances in French in SE are deeply analysed to find out why a significant number of students of French do not perform well. Actions that improve the situation should be taken accordingly. If Secondary students of French keep on performing badly in the language and if learning French keeps being portrayed as a negative experience in SE, fewer students will choose to learn it at higher educational levels and fewer will be those who encourage younger learners to choose it.

Some limitations of this study include the absence of triangulation of data. The incorporation of interviews with Post-Secondary FL teachers in our study, would have provided us with additional information that could not be obtained through our questionnaire. A mixed methodology could have given us a broader idea from the perspectives of both Post-Secondary students and FL teachers, on the issues that are hindering students from choosing FLs at Post-Secondary level. A comparison between questionnaire and interview responses might have provided richer and more valid data on the matter. Besides, although this study confirms that most Post-Secondary students perceive FLL as highly demanding, it does not provide clear explanations on what actually makes it so. This study is also limited as to the reasons why French is considered difficult by many. Questions directly addressing such reasons, would have provided a better picture of the students' perspectives on FLL and on French.

This study calls for more research into how students would like FLL to be implemented. This would allow us not only to obtain a better knowledge of what students expect from FLL, but it would also lead to clearer solutions for making FLL more relevant and responsive to the students' needs. Further research on what is leading students to obtain poor grades in FLs in SE is also necessary in order to improve the situation. Although participants in this study attribute the level of success in languages to personal aptitude for learning a new language, studies identifying why students have low language aptitude and what factors are leading a

considerable amount of learners to obtain low grades in FLs, need to be carried out so as to find solutions and avoid demotivation towards FLL due to low grades achieved.

This study also calls for further research into why some past learners of French perceive their previous French teachers and FLL experience in SE, as bad or very bad. Understanding the factors which make past learners retain negative attitudes towards French teachers and lessons, would enable us to provide adequate teacher training, improve lessons of French and work towards increasing students' likelihood and enthusiasm towards the French language. It is believed that the above proposed studies, along with the present research, would serve as an informative "ladder" to reach the final objective and improve the local situation of FLs and of French.

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8 Appendix

Appendix 1:

- i. Letter of Permission to the Secretariat for Catholic Education.
- ii. Information letter and Request for Permission to the Principal of the Sixth Form belonging to the University of Malta.
- iii. Research Authorisation letter from the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability.
- iv. Research Authorisation letter from the Secretariat for Catholic Education.
- v. Research Authorisation letter from the Principal of the Sixth Form belonging to the University of Malta.
- vi. Final FREC approval.

Letter of Permission to the Secretariat for Catholic Education

Dear Reverend Dr. Charles Mallia,
(*Delegate for Catholic Education*)

I am a first-year student at the University of Malta currently reading for an MTL Degree in French with Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. In part fulfilment of my course, I am undertaking a dissertation with the following title: “*Why not study languages? Reasons explaining language student number trends at post-secondary level in Malta.*”, under the supervision of Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina. This dissertation aims to understand the aspects leading to the decline of the number of language students in Malta, after post-compulsory language learning, by analysing students’ perspectives regarding foreign language learning, French in particular, and the factors that are encouraging or discouraging students to choose languages.

Data for this study will be collected through an electronic questionnaire which will be addressed to all students attending four Sixth Forms in Malta. The questionnaire is anonymous and will take around 25 minutes to answer. Participation in this questionnaire is voluntary. Replying to the questionnaire will be taken as granting consent to participate.

I would appreciate if you could kindly grant me permission to conduct my research in your post-secondary institution _____ . Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,
Jessica Sultana (Researcher)
M: 79008277 jessica.sultana.16@um.edu.mt

Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina (Supervisor)
Office tel.: 23403447 anne-marie.bezzina@um.edu.mt

Signature (Researcher):



Signature (Supervisor):



Letter of Permission to the Principal of the Sixth Form belonging to the University of Malta.

Dear Mr. _____

I am a first-year student at the University of Malta currently reading for an MTL Degree in French with Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. In part fulfilment of my course, I am undertaking a dissertation with the following title: “*Why not study languages? Reasons explaining language student number trends at post-secondary level in Malta.*”, under the supervision of Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina. This dissertation aims to understand the aspects leading to the decline of the number of language students in Malta, after post-compulsory language learning, by analysing students’ perspectives regarding foreign language learning, French in particular, and the factors that are encouraging or discouraging students to choose languages.

Data for this study will be collected through an electronic questionnaire which will be addressed to all students attending four Sixth Forms in Malta. The questionnaire is anonymous and will take around 25 minutes to answer. Participation in this questionnaire is voluntary. Replying to the questionnaire will be taken as granting consent to participate.

I would appreciate if you could kindly grant me permission to conduct my research in your post-secondary institution, and help me send the questionnaire out electronically to your students. Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Jessica Sultana (Researcher)

M: 79008277 jessica.sultana.16@um.edu.mt

Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina (Supervisor)

Office tel.: 23403447 anne-marie.bezzina@um.edu.mt

Signature (Researcher):



Signature (Supervisor):





Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

Tel: 25982743

researchandinnovation@ilearn.edu.mt

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

Date: 18th December 2020

Ref: R12-2020 625

To: Head of School

From: Director

Title of Research Study: *Why not study languages? Reasons explaining language student number trends at post-secondary level in Malta.*

The Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability would like to inform that approval is granted to **Jessica Sultana** to conduct the research in State Schools according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the Ethics Committee of the respective Higher Educational Institution.

The researcher is committed to comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. The researcher will be sending letters with clear information about the research, as well as consent forms to all data subjects and their parents/guardians when minors are involved. Consent forms should be signed in all cases particularly for the participation of minors in research.

For further details about our policy for research in schools, kindly visit www.research.gov.mt.

Thank you for your attention and cooperation.

Claire Mamo

MA Ed (Open)
Research Support Teacher
Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

f/ Alex Farrugia

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Secretariat for Catholic Education,
16, The Mall, Floriana FRN 1472
Tel. No. 27790060
Fax No. 27790078

The Head

18th December 2020

Ms Jessica Sultana, currently reading for a Masters Degree in French with Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning, requests permission to distribute online questionnaires to All Sixth Forms Students at the above mentioned school.

The Secretariat for Catholic Education finds no objection for Ms Jessica Sultana, to carry out the stated exercises subject to adhering to the policies and directives of the school concerned.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'C. Mallia'.

Rev Dr. Charles Mallia
Delegate for Catholic Education



L-Università
ta' Malta

OFFICE OF THE PRINCIPAL

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secretary.jc@um.edu.mt

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7 December 2020

Ms Jessica Sultana
<jessica.sultana.16@um.edu.mt>

Dear Ms Sultana

I refer to your request for permission to carry out research about reasons explaining language student number trends at post-secondary level in Malta, among Junior College students.

The Office of the Principal at _____ finds no objection to your request, subject to your adhering to policies and regulations of _____. Research may be carried out at Junior College following confirmation of approval from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC). Once FREC approval is provided, kindly forward a link to your questionnaire which will be sent once to all students at _____.

Please note that only the distribution of an online questionnaire is allowed. Students' participation in this study is completely voluntary.

Principal



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15th January 2021

RE: Application for Research Ethics Clearance 7301_03122020_Jessica Sultana

Dear Jessica Sultana,

With reference to your application 7301_03122020_Jessica Sultana for Research Ethics clearance, I am pleased to inform you that **FREC finds no ethical or data protection issues in terms of content and procedure.**

You may therefore proceed to approach potential informants to collect data using the tools/documents outlined in this application.

You are reminded that it is your responsibility - under the guidance of your supervisor - to distribute Information Letters and Consent/Assent Forms that are written in appropriate and correct English and Maltese.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Suzanne Gatt', written over a faint grid background.

Prof. Suzanne Gatt
Chairperson Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Education

Appendix 2:

- i. Information letter to the Head of School for State Sixth Form A.
- ii. Information letter to the Head of School for State Sixth Form B.
- iii. Information letter to the Head of School for Church Sixth Form.
- iv. Information letter to participants in English.
- v. Information letter to participants in Maltese.

Information Letter and Request for Permission to carry out Research Addressed to Mr _____

Name of the Researcher: Jessica Sultana

Title of Research: “Why not study languages? Reasons explaining language student number trends at post-secondary level in Malta.”

Dear Head of School,

I am a second-year student at the University of Malta currently reading for an MTL Degree in French with Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. In part fulfilment of my course, I am undertaking a dissertation of the above-mentioned title, under the supervision of Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina. This dissertation aims to understand the aspects leading to the decline of the number of language students in Malta, after compulsory language learning.

In fact, this study focuses on the situation of foreign languages, especially of French, in Maltese schools. The low number of students pursuing language education in Malta, has recently given rise to concern. Thus, this study aims to understand the perspectives of post-secondary students with regards to foreign language learning in Malta and the factors that are discouraging learners from choosing languages as their main area of study. This research will also give a particular attention to the French language as it equally aims understand how the French language is perceived by students and why is it no longer popular at Post-Secondary level.

Data for this study will be collected through an electronic questionnaire which will be addressed to students coming from the Post-secondary sector in Malta. This anonymous questionnaire will be created using Google Forms and it will be distributed through a link to all students in four Sixth Forms. The research will then be based upon the actual response rate. The questionnaire will consist of multiple-choice, scale, closed and open-ended questions in order to analyse the perspective of Maltese students with regard to choice of languages at post-secondary level. It will take around 25 minutes to answer and it can be easily done online. Upon agreement, Post-secondary students will be asked to answer a questionnaire of around 30 questions about; their viewpoint of languages especially of French, the factors that may have influenced their motivation to persist or not to persist with foreign languages as their main area of study, and their reasons for choosing or not choosing French. Thus, this study does not include questions on sensitive personal data that might be offensive, distressing or deeply personal. By filling in and sending the questionnaire, participants will be giving consent to their participation. They will not be asked to give their name or any form of identity during this research. As soon as the students submit the form, the researcher will receive the respective responses. Around 350 questionnaires will be collected and once the maximum number of responses is obtained the online questionnaire will be closed.

Post-secondary students will be chosen as participants because they already had a foreign language learning experience. Furthermore, it is at Post-Secondary level that learners choose whether or not to take foreign languages as their main area of study. In fact, their viewpoint of languages not only will explain why French and other foreign languages are not popular at Post-Secondary level, but it will also give a clear indication of the factors that may have influenced their motivation to persist with or avoid foreign languages as their main area of study.

Participation in this questionnaire is voluntary and refusal to participate will involve no penalty. Hence, whether the participants choose to participate or not will not affect them adversely in any way. Moreover, participants may discontinue participation at any time without giving any reason and without any consequence.

Data collection should not take longer than a month or two. Furthermore, no risks nor benefits are foreseen for taking part in this research and participants will not be offered any inducements, rewards or compensations. Confidentiality of records will be maintained and the data will only be accessed by the researcher and the supervisor. Once the research is done, the data will no longer be stored. Furthermore, research participants will be informed about their rights, under the Data Protection Act Chapter 586 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (EU2016/679), to access, rectify or erase the data concerning them.

Once this study is concluded, I would be more than pleased to share the outcome of this dissertation with your school. Research findings of this study might also be shared more broadly through publications.

For this reason, I would appreciate if you kindly grant me permission to conduct my research and administer my questionnaire to post-secondary first and second year students in _____ Sixth Form. I hereby confirm that my research project will abide by the General Data Protection Regulations at all times. I hereby also declare that the study has been approved by the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability (DRLLE) within the Ministry of Education and Employment. I would like to take the opportunity to thank you for your time and consideration. Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be pleased to answer your queries.

Yours sincerely,
Jessica Sultana.

Date: 10/12/20

Supervisor:

Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina B.A. (Hons.), M.A., D.E.A. (Rouen), Ph.D.
(Melit./Paris Ouest)
Senior Lecturer
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Researcher:

Jessica Sultana
79008277
jessica.sultana.16@um.edu.mt



Information Letter and Request for Permission to carry out Research Addressed to Mr _____

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anne-marie.bezzina@um.edu.mt

Researcher:

Jessica Sultana
79008277
jessica.sultana.16@um.edu.mt



Letter requesting institutional permission.

Dear Head of school,

I am a second-year student at the University of Malta currently reading for an MTL Degree in French with Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. In part fulfilment of my course, I am undertaking a dissertation with the following title: “*Why not study languages? Reasons explaining language student number trends at post-secondary level in Malta.*”, under the supervision of Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina. This dissertation aims to understand the aspects leading to the decline of the number of language students in Malta, after post-compulsory language learning, by analysing students’ perspectives regarding foreign language learning, French in particular, and the factors that are encouraging or discouraging students to choose languages.

Data for this study will be collected through an electronic questionnaire which will be addressed to all students attending four Sixth Forms in Malta. The questionnaire is anonymous and will take around 25 minutes to answer. Participation in this questionnaire is voluntary. Replying to the questionnaire will be taken as granting consent to participate.

I would appreciate if you could kindly grant me permission to conduct my research in your post-secondary institution, and help me send the questionnaire out electronically to your students. Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Jessica Sultana (Researcher)

M: 79008277 jessica.sultana.16@um.edu.mt

Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina (Supervisor)

Office tel.: 23403447 anne-marie.bezzina@um.edu.mt

Signature (Researcher):



Signature (Supervisor):



Information letter to participants

Dear Participants,

I am a second-year student at the University of Malta currently reading for an MTL Degree in French with Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. In part fulfilment of my course, I am undertaking a dissertation with the following title: "Why not study languages? Reasons explaining language student number trends at Post-Secondary level in Malta.", under the supervision of Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina. This dissertation aims to understand the aspects leading to the decline of the number of language students in Malta, after compulsory language learning, by analysing students' perspectives regarding foreign language learning, French in particular, and the factors that are encouraging or discouraging students to choose languages.

Data collection for this study will take place through an anonymous questionnaire which will take around 25 minutes to answer and which can be easily done online. Please note that participation in this questionnaire is entirely voluntary. By filling in and sending me the questionnaire, you will be giving consent to your participation. You will not be asked to give your name or any form of identity during this research. The data will only be accessed by the researcher and the supervisor, but the analysis of its results will of course appear in my dissertation write-up.

It is understood that in pressing submit to the filled-in questionnaire means that you are giving consent to participating in the study in line with the guarantees stated.

I would appreciate it if you could kindly submit this questionnaire till the 22nd February 2021. I would like to take the opportunity to thank you for your time to participate in this research. Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor and we would be pleased to answer your questions.

Yours truly,
Jessica Sultana (Researcher)
M: 79008277
jessica.sultana.16@um.edu.mt



Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina (Supervisor)
Office tel.: 23403447
anne-marie.bezzina@um.edu.mt



Ittra ta' informazzjoni lill-partecipanti

Għażiż/a Partecipant/a,

Jiena studenta tat-tieni sena fl-Università ta' Malta u qed insegwi l-kors *MTL in French with Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*. Bħala parti minn dan il-kors, qed nagħmel riċerka ta' dan it-titlu: "Why not study languages? Reasons explaining language student number trends at Post-Secondary level in Malta.", taħt is-superviżjoni ta' Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina. Din ir-riċerka tikkonċerna in-nuqqas fin-numru ta' studenti li qed ikomplu bl-istudji tal-lingwi f'Malta. L-għan tagħha huwa li tanalizza l-perspettivi tal-istudenti rigward it-tagħlim tal-lingwi barranin, partikolarment il-Franċiż, u l-fatturi li qed jinkorraġġuhom jew jiskorraġġuhom milli jagħzlu l-lingwi.

L-informazzjoni għal dan l-istudju se tingabar permezz ta' kwestjonarju anonimu li għandu jieħu madwar 25 minuta biex jitwieġeb u li jista' jsir faċilment online. Il-partecipazzjoni f'dan il-kwestjonarju hija volontarja. Billi tirrispondi għal dan il-kwestjonarju, ser tkun qed tagħti l-kunsens lir-riċerkatur biex tipparteċipa. Mintix se tiġi mitlub/a tagħti ismek jew xi forma ta' identità oħra tul din ir-riċerka. L-informazzjoni se tkun aċċessata biss mir-riċerkatur u mis-supervisor, għalkemm l-analiżi tar-riżultati naturalment se tidher fit-teżi.

Huwa mifhum illi xhin tissubmittja dan il- kwestjonarju mimli ifisser illi inti qed tagħti l-kunsens għall-partecipazzjoni tiegħek f'din ir-riċerka hekk skont kin inhu ddikjarat hawn fuq.

Napprezza jekk tista' ġentilment tissottometti dan il-kwestjonarju sat-22 ta' Frar 2021. Nixtieq nieħu din l-opportunità sabiex nirringrazzjak għall- ħin tiegħek biex tipparteċipa f'din ir-riċerka. Jekk tkun teħtieġ aktar informazzjoni, jekk jogħġbok ikkuntattja lili jew lis-supervisor u aħna nkunu disponibbli għall-mistoqsijiet tiegħek.

Dejjem tiegħek,

Jessica Sultana (Riċerkatur)

M: 79008277

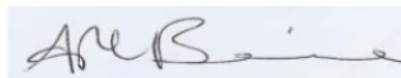
jessica.sultana.16@um.edu.mt



Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina (Supervisor)

T: 23403447

anne-marie.bezzina@um.edu.mt



Appendix 3:

- i. Questionnaire.



Why not study languages? Reasons explaining language student number trends at Post-Secondary level in Malta.

Information letter

Dear Participants,

I am a second-year student at the University of Malta currently reading for an MTL Degree in French with Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. In part fulfilment of my course, I am undertaking a dissertation with the following title: "Why not study languages? Reasons explaining language student number trends at Post-Secondary level in Malta.", under the supervision of Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina. This dissertation aims to understand the aspects leading to the decline of the number of language students in Malta, after compulsory language learning, by analysing students' perspectives regarding foreign language learning, French in particular, and the factors that are encouraging or discouraging students to choose languages.

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Yours truly,
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M: 79008277 jessica.sultana.16@um.edu.mt
Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina (Supervisor)
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Ittra ta' informazzjoni

Għażiż/a Partecipant/a,

Jiena studenta tat-tieni sena fl-Università ta' Malta u qed insegwi l-kors MTL in French with Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. Bħala parti minn dan il-kors, qed nagħmel riċerka ta' dan it-titlu: "Why not study languages? Reasons explaining language student number trends at Post-Secondary level in Malta.", taħt is-superviżjoni ta' Dr. Anne-Marie Bezzina. Din ir-riċerka tikkonċerna in-nuqqas fin-numru ta' studenti li qed ikomplu bl-istudji tal-lingwi f'Malta. L-għan tagħha huwa li tanalizza l-perspettivi tal-istudenti rigward it-tagħlim tal-lingwi barranin, partikolarment il-Franċiż, u l-fatturi li qed jinkorraġġuhom jew jiskoraġġuhom milli jagħzlu l-lingwi.

L-informazzjoni għal dan l-istudju se tingabar permezz ta' kwestjonarju anonimu li għandu jieħu madwar 25 minuta biex jitwieġeb u li jista' jsir faċilment online. Il-partecipazzjoni f'dan il-kwestjonarju hija volontarja. Billi tirrispondi għal dan il-kwestjonarju, ser tkun qed tagħti l-kunsens lir-riċerkatur biex tippartecipa. Mintix se tiġi mitlub/a tagħti ismek jew xi forma ta' identità oħra tul din r-riċerka. L-informazzjoni se tkun aċċessata biss mir-riċerkatur u mis-supervisor, għalkemm l-analiżi tar-riżultati naturalment se tidher fit-teżi.

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Dejjem tiegħek,
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Section A

If you have accepted to participate in this questionnaire, please fill in all the questions of this section.

1. Age: *

Your answer _____

2. Gender *

- Male
- Female

3. Indicate the group/s of your main areas of study: *

- Languages
- Sciences
- Commerce
- Humanities
- Vocational
- Other: _____

4. If you have languages in your areas of study please tick them below:

- Arabic
- English
- French
- German
- Italian
- Maltese
- Russian
- Spanish
- Other: _____



5. If you have languages in your areas of study please indicate at which level:

- Advanced level
- Intermediate level
- Both

6. If you don't have foreign languages as your MAIN AREAS of study, please tick one or more reasons why you didn't persist with language learning.

- With languages I cannot have a lucrative profession...
- With languages I am limited as to the choice of profession...
- I had such a bad experience with compulsory foreign language learning at Secondary level
- I felt I was not doing well in the language I was studying
- I prefer the area of ...
- Other: _____

7. If you chose the fifth answer in the previous question, please specify which area you prefer.

Your answer _____

8. What foreign language/s have you studied in Secondary education? *

- Arabic
- French
- German
- Italian
- Russian
- Spanish

9. Tick the average mark you normally achieve/achieved in foreign languages: *

- 50 or below
- 51-60
- 61-70
- 71-80
- 81-90
- 91-100

10. To what do you attribute your low or high success in languages? *

- Personal aptitude for learning a new language
- Task difficulty or easiness
- Teacher
- Strategies used to work and study
- Motivation
- Other: _____

11. Rate your past foreign language experience in Secondary education: *

- Very pleasant
- Pleasant
- Average
- Boring
- Very boring

12. How was/were your foreign language teacher/s who left the greatest impression on you? *

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Not bad
- Bad
- Very bad



13. Rate the amount of workload you had: *

- High
- Moderate
- Low

14. How much do you think that foreign languages are important for your planned career? *

- Not important at all
- Of little importance
- Of average importance
- Very important
- Absolutely essential

15. Do you think that foreign language learning is highly demanding? *

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

16. If you are studying a foreign language, what was/were the reason/s that motivated you to study it?

Your answer _____

17. If you are NOT studying a foreign language, do you regret not doing so?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No



18. If you are NOT studying a foreign language, would you take up the opportunity at University to study one along with your main course?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

19. How do you perceive the degree of difficulty of the French language in general? *

- Very easy
- Easy
- Moderate
- Difficult
- Very difficult

20. How do you perceive the French language compared to other foreign languages? (You may tick more than one answer) *

- A language for snobs
- A language mostly for girls
- A language spoken by proud, unwelcoming people
- A beautiful sounding language
- A refined language
- A foreign language like any other
- A useful language to know
- An important asset
- A language that can boast of a rich culture and literature
- Other: _____

21. Have you ever sought career guidance from professional councillors? *

- Yes
- No



22. Have you ever discussed the possibility of taking up languages with a career councillor? *

Yes

No

23. If you answered YES in the previous question, were you encouraged to take languages by the career councillor?

Yes

No

24. If you were encouraged to take languages, what reason/s were provided by the career councillor?

Your answer

25. If you were NOT encouraged to take languages, what reason/s were provided by the career councillor?

Your answer

26. Do you study French? *

At Advanced level

At Intermediate level

Not at all

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Why not study languages? Reasons explaining language student number trends at Post-Secondary level in Malta.

Section B

Please fill in all the questions of Section B if you have French foreign language as one of your main areas of study:

27. How hard do you work to achieve your hoped-for grades in tasks and exams?

- Very hard
- Hard
- Moderately
- Slightly
- Very slightly

28. How would you rate the gap between French O-level and French A-level?

- Large
- Moderate
- Small
- No gap at all

29. Were you prepared from your previous French language experience to the Post-Secondary French language curriculum?

- Yes
- No

30. If you answered NO to the previous question, explain in what ways.

Your answer



31. Do you think that your foreign language lessons are being useful enough to improve your language skills?

Yes

No

32. If you answered NO to the previous question, please give reason/s for your answer.

Your answer _____

33. Do you feel that you are being requested unrealistic demands?

Yes

Maybe

No

34. Do you consider pursuing learning French in Tertiary education?

Yes

Maybe

No

35. If no, please give reason/s for your answer.

Your answer _____

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Appendix 4:

- i. FLs in Malta's educational system.
- ii. Initiatives taken to improve FLL.
- iii. The gap between French in Secondary and French at Advanced level in Post-Secondary Education.
- iv. Low number of FL students in Tertiary education.

i. FLs in Malta's educational system.

In Malta, the learning of at least one FL is only compulsory in Secondary Education (SE) (Council of Europe, 2015). By the end of Primary schooling, students choose from a selection of languages the FL that they will study throughout the 5 years of SE (Council of Europe, 2015). State Secondary Schools, catering for around 50% of the Maltese school population, offer the wide selection of Arabic, Italian, French, Spanish, German, and Russian. However, this selection is much more restricted in Church schools which cater for around 40% of the Maltese school population and Independent Schools (ca. 10%) where usually Italian, French, German, and rarely Spanish only are provided.

After 2 years of Secondary schooling, students have the opportunity to choose two other subjects from a wide selection of subjects, FLs included (Council of Europe, 2015). In this case, the choice of FLs is optional (Caruana, 2017).

In order to further their studies in Post-Secondary Sixth Forms in Malta, students have to pass at least 6 SEC examinations, among which FL SEC exams are not compulsory. This means that students do not need a SEC certification in FLs in order to continue their studies at Post-Secondary level.

In order to further their studies at the UM, students have to follow the Matriculation course where 2 subjects at Advanced level, and 4 subjects at Intermediate level need to be studied from both the Humanities and the Sciences domains (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). One should note that all Sixth Forms in Malta offer Advanced and Intermediate level courses in various FLs namely; Italian, French, German, Spanish, Arabic, Russian and Classical Languages. Nonetheless, the number of languages offered vary from one institution to another as it depends on the schools' availability of resources (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). Although the reform of having at least one FL at Intermediate or at Advanced level compulsory, has been proposed (MATSEC Examinations Board University of Malta, 2019), this reform was abandoned as it was massively shot down by the public and the media.

ii. Initiatives taken to improve FLL.

In 2007, Malta saw the introduction of the Foreign Language Awareness Programme (FLAP) which has been renovated and is nowadays provided in State Primary schools to children from 8 up to 11 years (Caruana, 2017). Some Church and Independent schools offer a similar programme. Through this course, young students start getting introduced to as many different FLs as possible namely Italian, French, German and Spanish as they get a basic taster of the FL.

Caruana (2017), who evaluates the FLAP of French, states that the current organization of these courses in Malta is on the whole well planned and he finds the playful aspect of the activities provided, as a strength that should be preserved as it makes the lessons more fun. However, Caruana (2017) argues that the promotion of the advantages of FFL learning is not given enough attention in these courses. In fact, he insists that the promotion of French as the language to be chosen in SE should be firmly introduced in all the lessons (Caruana, 2017). He also finds worrying the traditional tendencies usually found in the methods used during the unfolding of the lesson, and he suggests the prevention of such approaches.

Furthermore, in order to address the increasing problem of students quitting compulsory education with no qualification in FLs, as from 2014, the LPA programme has been introduced and is now provided on a national scale (Pace, 2015a). This course provides students with high risk of failure the possibility to achieve an accredited qualification in FLs by the end of SE. It is an alternative method to get certified in FL skills at Levels 1 and 2 of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF). In this way, students with a low level of motivation will also be able to obtain a basic qualification in FLs (Pace, 2015a), which is at an inferior level when compared with the SEC examination, but is a certification nonetheless. This was planned to revive FL teaching and learning in SE (Pace, 2015a).

Level 3 of the MQF in this course, can then be obtained in Post-Secondary and Tertiary institutions such as MCAST and Lifelong Learning Centers (LLCs) (Pace, 2018). For many years, a very minimal importance had been given to FLs at the MCAST, and the number of vocational students who study a FL is significantly lower than the number of students learning a FL during their general education. However, through this program, FL teaching and learning is provided

more on a personal level, according to the students' needs, abilities and motivation (Pace, 2015a).

In Post-Secondary institutions, FL proficiency courses at MQF level 3 are provided to those students who in addition to their Intermediate and Advanced subjects, wish to enhance their FL skills during their 2 years in Post-Secondary education (Pace, Office of the Permanent Secretary, & MEDE, 2018). In 2018 a total number of 141 Post-Secondary students registered for this course, however only 17 students actually started to follow it. This is because of an overwhelming MC timetable which does not permit students to broaden their knowledge in domains which are not relevant to the MC (Pace, Office of the Permanent Secretary, & MEDE, 2018). Thus, the current educational system at Post-Secondary level stopped 124 students who wished to develop their FL skills from doing so (Pace, Office of the Permanent Secretary, & MEDE, 2018).

The implementation of the LPA programme in Malta, has awakened the extreme need to broaden the sector of language teaching and learning, with more FL courses that target specific needs (Pace, 2015b). According to Pace (2015b), in certain vocational areas there is inadequate language teaching and learning and an increase in the number of learners studying languages at varying levels is needed.

In order to address this, in 2015, FL courses for specific purposes, including business, tourism, and commerce amongst others, were introduced (Pace, 2015b, 2016). These courses which firstly took place at the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) and the MCAST, (Pace, 2015b), focus on addressing the students' specific and immediate needs (Pace, 2016) and they provide learners with realistic possibilities in which they can put into practice their FL abilities and explore foreign civilisations in their respective area of specialisation (Pace, 2015b).

According to Pace (2015b), although FLL must stem from educational institutions, learning FLs through traditional formal education might not be the best way to encourage students to study languages. It is argued that even those students who succeed to obtain a qualification in a FL after SE, do not find any possibilities to enhance their FL competency in Post-Secondary or Tertiary institutions in Malta, given that in their courses of specialisation, no credits are attributed to languages (Pace, 2018).

After 5 years of compulsory LL, students can only get inspired to take FLs through the provision of appropriate opportunities that allow them to improve their competency in the language (Pace, 2018). In fact, given that through the LLCs, adults are being provided the right opportunities to further their language studies, FL teaching and learning among adult learners has improved a lot (Pace, 2018). However, the lack of FLL opportunities in Post-Secondary and Tertiary level, has caused this drastic decline in youth language students in Malta (Pace, 2018). Pace (2015b) insists that providing young and adult learners with “traditional language classes” (p.482) is not enough, and we need to move aside the “one size fits for all” (p. 411) system of Post-Secondary and Tertiary education (Pace, 2018).

As regards Tertiary education institutions in Malta, FLL is also highly insignificant. In the UM, only two faculties; the language departments of the Faculty of Arts and the Department of Languages and Humanities of the Faculty of Education, along with the Department of Interpretation and Translation Studies, offer FLL (Pace 2015a, 2018) at higher MQF levels and not only. Besides, improvement in FL skills at any level in this institution can only be done through the Degree Plus course where students coming from all faculties, have the possibility to learn a new FL or to improve their language skills whilst attending their course of specialization in University (Pace, 2018). Furthermore, Degrees of the UM are also combined with other universities across the world, an initiative which according to Pace (2018), through direct or indirect means, encourages undergraduate students to improve in their FL skills.

One should equally mention the Ministry of Education working group for the Awareness of promotion of FLs which is chaired by Dr. Mario Pace. This group which is made up of officials of the Ministry of Education, officials from the embassies concerned, University academics and academics from other entities such as MCAST, holds regular meetings and proposes strategies to promote FLs in Malta.

Although these are all good initiatives which help to address the unpopularity that FLs retain among Maltese youths, Pace (2018) insists that more measures should be taken so that more students take languages in Post-Secondary and Tertiary education. He proposes that FLs should also be included and combined with other courses, not only courses within the Humanities and Business fields, but also courses which form part of the sciences domain, something which is commonly found in foreign universities (Pace, 2018).

iii. The gap between French in Secondary and French at Advanced level in Post-Secondary Education.

In Malta, the SEC syllabus of French (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2020d) requires students to be able to effectively use the language for practical purposes of communication. In fact, by the end of SE, students are expected to be able to make written and oral descriptions, discuss, exchange information and share opinions in the FL, on every day, familiar and social topics. This syllabus also requires the comprehension and understanding of the main points of clear and short, written and oral texts, which are based on common topics.

On the other hand, the Advanced Matriculation (AM) Syllabus (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2020c), is described as providing the means to instil love for the French language and its speakers, in order to encourage students to continue with their studies in the language in Tertiary education. Advanced learners of French need to be capable of understanding and communicating accurately both in written and oral contexts through the use of different types of registers. Students are expected to exchange opinions, ideas and information in accurate, fluent and correct French. Correct pronunciation and articulation of French linguistic sounds is also expected. Students are equally required to reformulate data in their written tasks, form arguments, explain, justify, and master the use of correct grammar, syntax and a wide range of French vocabulary, with idiomatic expressions included. A deep analysis of a text, its style, intention, linguistic features, functional element, type, form and themes, written in the French language, is also required. In addition, students at this level must equally show a deep and critical cultural understanding by learning cultural facts in a set syllabus, on which they are assessed orally. Furthermore, a critical knowledge of French literature should also be developed. In the literature examination of the AM, the first part of the literary analysis needs to be done in French, and is based on a 17th century text, while the second part could be done in either, French, Maltese or English. Advanced learners of French are expected to meet the demands of this curriculum in two years.

A similar description of the French at Advanced level in England, has been given by Graham (2004). She argues that during the first year of language Advanced level courses, students are expected to acquire language skills and grammatical concepts in just a few months in order to be able to make accurate use of the FL. The subsequent year entails cultural in-depth and

critical reasoning where students use the TL to form arguments, make in-depth analysis, and hypothesise (Graham, 2004).

It is argued that those students who are used to achieving high grades and doing very well in FLs at Secondary level, may experience what (Graham, 2004, p.179) describes as an “acute” feeling and a “dip” as soon as they start the Advanced level course. This study also indicates that due to an undemanding GCSE, the idea that French is an easy subject among students who decide to continue studying French at Post-Secondary level, might be among the reasons why some choose this subject at Advanced level. However, the constant hard work that French at Advanced level requires might be what Graham (2004) calls a “rude awakening” (p. 179), where some students who obtain the highest scores in their GCSE end up with a low score in their first-year Advanced level examination.

iv. Low number of FL students in Tertiary education.

Both the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Education in the UM are at risk of serious repercussions (Pace, Office of the Permanent Secretary, & MEDE, 2018). Up till 2015, first year University students could study a FL either through a Bachelor of Arts (B.A) course or through a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) (Honours) course. In the B.A course students can study a FL along with another art subject which may include another language. In the B.Ed (Honours) course, students could study a FL while specializing in education and pedagogy. However, the B.Ed (Honours) course phased out progressively year by year until it closed down completely. Nowadays, all first-year University students wishing to study FLs as their area of specialization at the UM, can only do so through the B.A course. As from 2016, those students aspiring to become language teachers should first obtain an Undergraduate Degree in their area of specialization through the B.A course, and then specialize in pedagogy in the Master in Teaching and Learning course.

Scholastic Year	Number of FL students in the Bachelor of Arts Course	Number of FL students in the Bachelor of Education (Honours) Course	Total number of FL students at University
2004 - 2005	60	16	76
2009 - 2010	70	11	81
2014 - 2015	43	8	51
2019 - 2020	30	/	30
Source: Data adapted from the Office of the Registrar of the University of Malta. Retrieved on 19 th January, 2021.			

Table 9: Number of 1st Year University students registered in a FL course in scholastic years 2004/05, 2009/10, 2014/15 and 2019/20.

As indicated in Table 9, very few students study MFLs at University level in Malta, compared to the large number of students enrolled in other courses in other domains such as Accountancy, Banking and Finance, Medicine, or Advocacy. A close analysis of the number of students enrolled in FL courses at the UM, proves that MFLs have also experienced a huge downturn in the Tertiary sector of education during the past years. In fact, in both courses of the B.A and the B.Ed (Honours), the number of students studying FLs diminished significantly from 2004/05 and 2009/10 to 2014/15. While in scholastic years 2004/05 and 2009/10 the number of students enrolled in the courses of B.A and B.Ed (Honours) with 1 FL or more as their area of specialization amounted to 76 and 81 respectively, in scholastic year 2014/15 the number of students registered in both courses added up to 51. More recently, in scholastic year 2019/20 only 30 students were enrolled in a B.A Undergraduate course with at least 1 FL as their area of specialization (Data obtained from the Office of the Registrar of the University of Malta on the 19th January 2021).

However, on the contrary to the low number of FL students in Post-Secondary and Tertiary education, there has been a significant rise in the number of lifelong learners opting to study FLs in Malta's LLCs (Pace, 2018). According to Pace (2018), this shows that recently there has been a drastic change in the need for academic opportunities after SE in Post-Secondary and Tertiary institutions. Thus, it is necessary to study carefully the future of education at Post-Secondary level in Malta, particularly when it comes to FL teaching and learning (Pace, 2018). It is believed that by doing so, some requisite changes will permit young students who wish to pursue their language studies after SE to find more opportunities that satisfy their specific needs (Pace, 2018).

Appendix 5:

- i. Table 10: Number of students studying FLs at the University of Malta in scholastic year 2004/05.
- ii. Table 11: Number of students studying FLs at the University of Malta in scholastic year 2009/10.
- iii. Table 12: Number of students studying FLs at the University of Malta in scholastic year 2014/15.
- iv. Table 13: Number of students studying FLs at the University of Malta in scholastic year 2019/20.

French				Italian				German			
<u>Bachelor of Arts</u>		<u>Bachelor of Education (Honours)</u>		<u>Bachelor of Arts</u>		<u>Bachelor of Education (Honours)</u>		<u>Bachelor of Arts</u>		<u>Bachelor of Education (Honours)</u>	
Archaeology and French	1	Education with French and German Studies	2	Communication Studies and Italian	8	Education with Art and Italian	2	German Studies and Linguistics	1	Education with German Studies and Maltese	2
English and French	2	Education with French and Maltese	3	Contemporary Mediterranean Studies and Italian	1	Education with English and Italian	1			Education with German Studies and Religion	1
French and Hispanic studies	2	Education with French and Religion	1	English and Italian	3	Education with Geography and Italian	1			Education with French and German Studies	2
French and Italian	3			Geography and Italian	5	Education with History and Italian	1				
French and Maltese	2			Hispanic Studies and Italian	3	Education with Italian and Religion	2				
French and Psychology	5			Italian and Linguistics	3						
French and Social Studies	1			Italian and Music Studies	1						
French and Sociology	3			Italian and Psychology	8						
				Italian and Social Studies	2						
				Italian and Sociology	5						
				Italian and Theatre Studies	1						
				French and Italian	3						
	19				6		43		7		1
Total:		25		50		6					

Table 10: Number of students studying FLs at the University of Malta in scholastic year 2004/05.

Source: Data adapted from the Office of the Registrar of the University of Malta. Retrieved on 19th January, 2021.

French			Italian				German				Spanish				
<i>Bachelor of Arts</i>		<i>Bachelor of Education (Honours)</i>		<i>Bachelor of Arts</i>		<i>Bachelor of Education (Honours)</i>		<i>Bachelor of Arts</i>		<i>Bachelor of Education (Honours)</i>		<i>Bachelor of Arts</i>		<i>Bachelor of Education (Honours)</i>	
Arabic and French	1	Education with English and French	1	Anthropology and Italian	1	Education with English and Italian	4	Communication Studies and German	1	Education with German and Maltese	2	Communication Studies and Spanish Studies	1		
English and French	6	Education with French and Italian	1	Communication Studies and Italian	2	Education with Italian and Music Studies	1	English and German	2			French and Spanish Studies	1		
French and History	1			Contemporary Mediterranean Studies and Italian	1	Education with Italian and Religious Education	2	German and International Relations	1			Italian and Spanish Studies	2		
French and International Relations	1			English and Italian	1	Education with French and Italian	1	German and Maltese	1			Linguistics and Spanish Studies	1		
French and Italian	3			French and Italian	3			German and Philosophy	1			Maltese and Spanish Studies	3		
French and Maltese	5			Geography and Italian	4			History of Art and German	1			Psychology and Spanish Studies	1		
French and Philosophy	1			History of Art and Italian	2										
French and Spanish Studies	1			International Relations and Italian	1										
				Italian and Linguistics	1										
				Italian and Maltese	13										
				Italian and Psychology	5										
				Italian and Spanish Studies	2										
				Italian and Theatre Studies	1										
				Classics and Italian	1										
				History and Italian	3										
	19		2		41		8		7		2		9		
Total:		21		49				9				9			

Table 11: Number of students studying FLs at the University of Malta in scholastic year 2009/10.

Source: Data adapted from the Office of the Registrar of the University of Malta. Data retrieved on 19th January, 2021.

French			Italian			German			Spanish				
<u>Bachelor of Arts</u>		<u>Bachelor of Education (Honours)</u>	<u>Bachelor of Arts</u>		<u>Bachelor of Education (Honours)</u>	<u>Bachelor of Arts</u>		<u>Bachelor of Education (Honours)</u>	<u>Bachelor of Arts</u>		<u>Bachelor of Education (Honours)</u>		
Classics and French	1	Education with French and Italian	1	Anthropology and Italian	1	Education with English and Italian	1	French and German	1	Education with German and Maltese	2	Anthropology and Spanish and Latin American Studies	3
English and French	3	Education with French and Maltese	1	English and Italian	6	Education with Italian and Maltese	3	German and Linguistics	1			History and Spanish and Latin American Studies	1
French and German	1			Geography and Italian	1	Education with French and Italian	1					Italian and Spanish and Latin American Studies	2
French and History	1			History and Italian	1							Oriental Studies (Chinese) and Spanish and Latin American Studies	1
French and Italian	1			History of Art and Italian	4							French and Spanish and Latin American Studies	1
French and Maltese	3			Italian and Maltese	2								
French and Psychology	1			Italian and Music Studies	1								
French and Spanish and Latin American Studies	1			Italian and Oriental Studies (Chinese)	1								
				Italian and Psychology	6								
				Italian and Spanish and Latin American Studies	2								
				French and Italian	1								
	12		2		26		5		2		2		8
Total:		14		31				4				8	

Table 12: Number of students studying FLs at the University of Malta in scholastic year 2014/15.

Source: Data adapted from the Office of the Registrar of the University of Malta. Data retrieved on 19th January, 2021.

French		Italian		German		Spanish	
<i>Bachelor of Arts</i>		<i>Bachelor of Arts</i>		<i>Bachelor of Arts</i>		<i>Bachelor of Arts</i>	
English and French	1	English and Italian	1	English and German	1	Anthropology and Spanish and Latin American Studies	2
French and Oriental Studies (Arabic)	1	International Relations and Italian	1	German and Maltese	1	Classics and Spanish and Latin American Studies	1
French and Theatre Studies	1	Italian and Linguistics	2			History of Art Spanish and Latin American Studies	1
		Italian and Maltese	6			International Relations and Spanish and Latin American Studies	2
		Italian and Oriental Studies (Chinese)	1			Maltese and Spanish and Latin American Studies	1
		Italian and Psychology	3			Oriental Studies (Chinese) and Spanish and Latin American Studies	1
		Italian and Spanish and Latin American Studies	1			Philosophy and Spanish and Latin American Studies	1
						Spanish and Latin American Studies and Theatre Studies	1
Total:	3		15		2		10

Table 13: Number of students studying FLs at the University of Malta in scholastic year 2019/20.

Source: Data adapted from the Office of the Registrar of the University of Malta. Data retrieved on 19th January, 2021.