

# Learning English in Malta

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The Maltese archipelago is located in the central part of the Mediterranean Sea. The country is situated around 58 miles south of Sicily and 180 miles north of Libya. Having gained its independence from the British Empire in 1964, the country considers English to be one of the most fundamental aspects of its colonial heritage. English is one of Malta's two official languages, the other being Maltese. Most Maltese people are bilingual from the early stages of their lives. The complexity of the country's linguistic landscape means that individuals make different choices as to which language to speak in which social domain. English is considered to be the second language for the majority of the population (Sciriha & Vassallo, 2006); however, a substantial number of families and individuals describe themselves as first language speakers of English. Besides being vital for the country's citizens, learning English is also valued by migrants and visitors.

Currently, Malta's population amounts to around 434,000 (National Statistics Office, 2017) and it is one of the most densely populated European Union members. Since joining the EU in 2004, Malta has seen a steady increase in the number of migrants choosing to work and live in the country. A number of industries capitalize on the country's English speaking workforce and various international companies have established offices and factories in Malta partly because of this. However, for some migrants both English and Maltese are new foreign languages. While adults may seek to improve their proficiency on the job or else through specialized courses, migrant children benefit from the fact that the learning of the two languages is catered for throughout compulsory education.

Education in Malta is compulsory up to the age of 16 and English is taught on a daily basis from the early years of primary schooling. While certain subjects are taught in English, others are taught in Maltese. In addition, code switching between the two languages is a widespread phenomenon in education in Malta and is used both as a communicative resource and as part of one's identity (Camilleri, 1996). Since a high level of proficiency in English is deemed essential in order for one to operate effectively in different domains, a lot of emphasis is placed on students' mastery of the language. In addition to its importance as the global language, English is considered pivotal because it is used on a daily basis in different sectors of Maltese society.

The prevalence of English in Malta has fostered the growth of the English Language Teaching sector, which is an important source of revenue for the country (Xerri, 2017). This started with the opening of the first language school for foreign students in the 1960s and has now become a significant contributor to the country's tourism industry. For example, in 2017 more than 87,000 students from a wide range of countries visited Malta

to learn English (National Statistics Office, 2018). These amounted to almost 4% of all inbound tourists. The biggest proportion of students who choose to study the language in Malta are aged 15 years or less. They largely opt for General English courses that on average last two to three weeks. The country's 38 licensed language schools employ around 1,200 teachers, more than a third of them aged between 18 and 24. Given that Malta was one of the first countries to regulate its ELT sector, all teachers are obliged to have a teaching permit that is awarded on the basis of a set of minimum requirements. These include holding qualifications in language teaching methodology, language awareness, and English language proficiency. With respect to the latter, applicants for a teaching permit need to attain an operational band in the Spoken English Proficiency Test for Teachers. This test provides evidence that a candidate possesses a satisfactory level of English-for-Teaching.

In Malta, people from diverse backgrounds learn English for a host of different reasons. The country's citizens learn the language because it constitutes part of their national identity, as well as it being an important tool to navigate their social landscape and interact with rest of the world. Migrants in Malta learn English because it provides them with better job opportunities and the possibility to integrate in Maltese society. Short-term visitors attending English courses at one of the country's specialised schools are seeking to enhance their prospects by learning the global language. The learning of English is most likely to continue growing in significance in Malta as its residents and visitors place more value on the individual and social possibilities that a good level of proficiency in the language can provide.

## References

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