

**Lost in Translation: Understanding Teachers' Perceptions of Language
and Communication Difficulties Experienced by Non-Maltese Speaking
Students in the Classroom.**

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the students who courageously navigate unfamiliar languages and cultures each day, striving to find belonging and connection. This is also for the educators who, with empathy and creativity, work tirelessly to include, support, and uplift these learners in their journey.

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Abstract

Maltese primary schools are experiencing a growing presence of non-Maltese speaking students, presenting unique challenges for educators in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. This study explores primary school teachers' perspectives on language barriers, student engagement, and inclusion of non-Maltese speaking students within Maltese state schools. Six teachers with experience working with at least one to three non-Maltese speaking students participated in semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, generating six key themes. Firstly, teachers identified significant language barriers and communication difficulties, requiring foundational language instruction and frequent code-switching. Secondly, student engagement, motivation, and social inclusion were shaped by linguistic competence, personality traits, and cultural or trauma-related factors. Thirdly, participants reflected on the role and limitations of the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU), particularly concerning student reintegration and systemic inefficiencies. The fourth theme focused on the emotional and practical challenges faced by teachers, including inadequate training and limited access to resources. Fifth, teachers shared strategies for promoting cultural and academic inclusion, such as multimodal teaching, peer collaboration, and integrating students' native languages. Finally, institutional gaps were identified, with participants calling for improved inter-service collaboration, enhanced teacher preparation, and the development of a multicultural framework promoting equity and inclusion. This study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of teachers navigating linguistic diversity in Malta and highlights key implications for policy, educational practice, and future research.

Keywords: Non-Maltese speaking students, Multicultural education, Multilingual classrooms, Language barriers, Migrant Learners' Unit

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List of Acronyms

ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development
BICS	Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills
CALP	Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
MLU	Migrant Learner's Unit
CLIL	Content and Language Integrated Learning
LSE	Learning Support Educator
MEYR	Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
FREC	Faculty Research Ethics Committee
ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
AI	Artificial Intelligence

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter presents the background of the study, the researcher's context, the guiding research questions, study design, and conceptual framework. It concludes with a brief overview of the dissertation structure.

Background of the Study

Malta's increasing cultural and linguistic diversity, driven by rising migration, has significantly impacted the educational landscape, presenting new challenges for schools in supporting non-Maltese speaking students. While existing research has largely focused on the experiences and academic outcomes of migrant learners, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the perspectives of teachers who work directly with these students. Understanding how educators navigate language barriers, foster inclusion, and adapt their teaching practices remains underexplored within the local context. This study aims to address this gap by examining primary school teachers' perceptions of the language and communication difficulties faced by non-Maltese speaking students. It seeks to explore how teachers respond to these challenges, the support they receive, and the systemic limitations they encounter. By doing so, the study aims to contribute valuable insights that can inform educational practices, policy development, and support structures to enhance the inclusion and academic success of linguistically diverse students in Malta.

Context of the Researcher

As a psychology trainee within Maltese state schools, I frequently encountered non-Maltese speaking students who had been referred for support due to significant language barriers that impeded both their academic progress and social integration. Throughout my placement, teachers often expressed feelings of uncertainty, frustration, and helplessness when working with these students, highlighting a lack of clear guidance and resources to

effectively address their linguistic and cultural needs. These experiences sparked my interest in exploring how educators navigate such challenges within increasingly multicultural classrooms. With a strong passion for multicultural education and the promotion of diversity and inclusion within schools, I was motivated to gain deeper insight into teachers' perspectives on this issue. Specifically, I aimed to understand the strategies and adaptations being employed to support non-Maltese speaking students, as well as the systemic factors influencing these practices. This research was driven by a desire to contribute to a more inclusive educational environment where linguistic diversity is acknowledged and celebrated.

Research Design

This study will consider the following research questions:

1. What are Maltese primary school teachers' perceptions of the effects of language and communication barriers on the inclusion and active participation of non-Maltese speaking students who lack proficiency in the languages of instruction?
2. How do Maltese primary school teachers support the linguistic and academic development of non-Maltese speaking students?

A qualitative design was adopted. The study involved six participants, all primary school teachers employed in Maltese state schools or Migrant Induction Hubs, each with experience teaching non-Maltese speaking students. Guided by a thorough review of relevant literature, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore the research questions. The data collected from these interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis.

Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Considerations

This study is anchored in a conceptual framework that integrates key theories from multicultural education, sociocultural perspectives, and second language acquisition. At its core, multicultural education emphasizes the need for educational systems to promote inclusivity, equity, and the celebration of cultural and linguistic diversity (Banks & Banks, 2019; Gay, 2018). This framework encourages schools to move beyond assimilationist practices and instead create environments where students' cultural identities are acknowledged and valued—an approach highly relevant to the Maltese educational context given the increasing presence of migrant students.

Additionally, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) provides an important lens through which to understand the interactions between language, learning, and social context. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights the critical role of teacher support and peer collaboration in facilitating learning, particularly for students navigating new linguistic and cultural environments. This perspective underscores the importance of adaptive teaching strategies, scaffolding, and social interaction in supporting non-Maltese speaking students.

Furthermore, the study draws on Cummins' (1979) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which is essential for understanding the complexities of language acquisition in educational settings. While students may quickly develop conversational fluency (BICS), achieving academic language proficiency (CALP) requires several years and targeted instructional support. This theoretical consideration is central to interpreting the challenges described by teachers when supporting students with limited proficiency in both Maltese and English.

Together, these theoretical foundations guided the design, analysis, and interpretation of this study by framing language barriers not merely as individual student deficits, but as challenges situated within broader educational, cultural, and systemic contexts.

General Outline of the Study

Following the introduction, Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature related to language barriers, multicultural education, and the inclusion of non-Maltese speaking students. Chapter Three outlines the qualitative research design, detailing the use of semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis for data collection and interpretation. Chapter Four presents and discusses the six key themes that emerged from the data, linking them to relevant scholarly work. Finally, Chapter Five concludes the study by summarising the main findings, discussing their practical implications, and offering recommendations for future research, while reflecting on the study's strengths and limitations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding how language barriers affect the educational experience of non-Maltese speaking students in Maltese schools. It explores key themes such as the role of language in academic success and social integration; the evolution of Malta's bilingual context and shifting language preferences; the impact of increasing immigration on the education system; strategies used to support multilingual learners; the academic, emotional, and social challenges faced by non-Maltese students; the role and limitations of the Migrant Learners Unit; teacher preparedness, training, and attitudes; and recommendations for fostering inclusive and culturally responsive educational practices.

Language, Education and Social Integration

Language serves as a fundamental element in shaping students' educational experiences and broader social integration (Kim, 2020). Proficiency in the host country's language is not merely a skill, but a determinant of school inclusion and the formation of positive peer relationships (Cavicchiolo et al., 2023). Mirowsky (2017) emphasizes that education is more than the accumulation of grades; it is a powerful socializing force essential for fostering societal cohesion. The author cautions that failing to support immigrant children's language development risks creating social divisions that could undermine societal unity.

Language Proficiency as a Gatekeeper to Academic Success

Language is intertwined with all educational activities, and competence in the language of instruction is essential for accessing content in various subjects, ranging from mathematics to physical education (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014). For non-native students, language learning

becomes a dual endeavour: they must simultaneously master the new language and grasp complex subject matter through it (King & Scott, 2014). Indeed, a cross-national study by Gabrielli et al. (2022) examines the gap in educational achievements between native and non-native speakers, emphasizing that this disparity is influenced by various factors, including language and cultural barriers. Their research confirms that proficiency in the language of instruction is critical for accessing educational content, and discrepancies often persist even when socioeconomic factors are controlled. These studies collectively illustrate that language proficiency is not just a neutral skill but a significant determinant of academic access and success, reinforcing its gatekeeping role in educational systems.

The Role of Language in Shaping Students' Sense of Belonging

Beyond academic achievement, language proficiency significantly contributes to students' self-esteem, sense of mastery, and overall school adjustment (Schachner et al., 2018). Research suggests that migrant students who are proficient in the host country's language are more likely to engage socially and academically, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing the risk of social exclusion (OECD, 2018). Conversely, students with limited language proficiency often struggle to express themselves, which can lead to disengagement and marginalization (OECD, 2014). This lack of engagement can result in these students becoming "silent," socially isolated, and perceived as less capable by their peers and teachers (Schachner et al., 2014). Indeed, a local study by Baschiera & Caruana (2020) provided insights into the experiences of Italian students in Malta's bilingual educational system. According to the authors of this study, Italian students in Maltese schools face significant linguistic challenges, particularly when navigating both Maltese and English as the main languages of instruction. While Italian students with some knowledge of English performed better academically, many struggled when Maltese was predominantly used, affecting their

comprehension and participation. Additionally, the study revealed that Italian learners often faced difficulties in socializing with their Maltese peers, especially when Maltese was used extensively for informal communication. This situation led to segregation, as many Italian students preferred to interact with other foreign students or form Italian-speaking peer groups.

Moreover, language barriers can expose migrant students to discrimination and victimization, impacting their educational outcomes and sense of belonging (Mohamed & Thomas, 2017). In accordance with this, a local study by Cassar & Attard Tonna (2018) explored how language proficiency is central to migrant students' school experiences, shaping their ability to integrate socially and perform academically. The study revealed that language proficiency, or the lack thereof, could lead to the creation of power differentials among students, where linguistic competence in English or Maltese can either facilitate or hinder friendships. Migrant students who struggle with language acquisition are often sidelined and may become targets for racialized teasing and discrimination, which further entrenches social exclusion (Bracken, 2014).

Furthermore, linguistic barriers in educational setting have also been noted to negatively affect student engagement and participation in the classroom. Indeed, the study "A Passage to Malta: The Health and Wellbeing of Foreign Children in Malta" by Cefai et al, (2019), outlined a number of barriers to learning experienced by foreign students in Malta as a result of poor proficiency in the languages of instruction in the classroom. Teachers reported that while most foreign students are engaged and included in school activities, students with limited language proficiency struggle more with engagement. These students are less likely to participate in classroom activities, make friends, and be included in social activities compared to peers.

The Maltese Linguistic Landscape

Malta's unique geographical location and complex historical developments have shaped Maltese into a distinctive language, reflecting a blend of various linguistic influences (Friggieri, 2016). In contemporary Malta, Maltese coexists with English in various domains (Sciriha, 2022). The extensive use of both languages in administration, media, and social settings results in early bilingual exposure for most children, making it “practically impossible for a child to grow up in a strictly monolingual environment” (Vella, 2013). Although the vast majority of the population identifies Maltese as their first language (Council of Europe, 2015), Maltese and English are used interchangeably across many spheres of public and private life. Consequently, the evolution and status of Maltese as a language reveal a complex interplay between historical forces, political decisions, and sociolinguistic dynamics (Gauci, 2017).

Shifting Linguistic Preferences Among Maltese Youth

Locally, several researchers have highlighted a growing concern surrounding the preferred use of the English language rather than Maltese among young people in Malta (Camenzuli et al., 2023; Camilleri Grima, 2018; Sciriha, 2024). Indeed, while English is valued for its role as a global language that opens up opportunities for employment and higher education, teachers expressed concerns that its dominance might marginalize the Maltese language, thereby impacting students' cultural identity and heritage (Vassallo & Sciriha, 2021). The shift towards English is seen not only in academic settings but also in social interactions among students, which further contributes to the perception that Maltese is being phased out in favour of English (Camilleri Grima, 2016). Indeed, according to Camilleri Grima (2018), teachers expressed concern that the prioritization of English could undermine students' linguistic identity and cultural heritage, particularly for those whose first language is Maltese.

Moreover, the study suggested that teachers often feel caught between external pressures to align with global standards and the local need to support the linguistic rights and identity of Maltese-speaking students. This ambivalence points to the need for clearer educational policies that support teachers in promoting linguistic diversity and fostering a more inclusive bilingual educational environment (Paris & Farrugia, 2019).

This local trend reflects a broader global phenomenon. Piller (2016) highlights how migrant families often make strategic decisions about which languages to prioritize based on their perceived value for future mobility, integration, and access to opportunities. In multilingual contexts, families may choose to invest in languages they view as globally useful—such as English—while deprioritizing local languages like Maltese, particularly when long-term residency in the host country is uncertain. This selective investment in language learning underscores deeper issues of linguistic inequality and reveals how migration trajectories and socio-economic goals shape attitudes toward language acquisition.

Multiculturalism and Immigration in Malta

Malta's experience with immigration and multiculturalism is relatively recent compared to other European countries, placing it in the early stages of adapting to its evolving role as a host nation (Sammut et al., 2022). The country has seen a rapid increase in its foreign population, now accounting for over 39,000 residents from both EU and non-EU countries (NSO, 2024). Malta's appeal as a destination for expatriates is driven by various factors, including its strategic location, tax benefits, proficient use of English, and stable political environment (Vella, 2020). Many foreign workers are employed in the iGaming industry, financial services, healthcare, construction, and other sectors (Barbaro-Sant, 2018). This demographic change has presented new challenges for Malta's educational system, particularly in accommodating the rising number of non-Maltese students (Arar, 2020).

Figure 1*Total Population in Malta by Citizenship Status at the End of 2023*

	Males	Females	Total
Population end 2022	284,821	257,230	542,051
Natural increase:			
+ Births ¹	2,279	2,183	4,462
- Deaths ²	2,034	1,996	4,030
Sub-total	285,066	257,417	542,483
Migration flows:			
+ Adoptions (foreign)	30	22	52
+ Immigration of Maltese citizens	1,127	1,129	2,256
- Emigration of Maltese citizens	883	884	1,767
+ Immigration of other EU citizens	3,937	2,919	6,856
- Emigration of other EU citizens	3,503	2,449	5,952
+ Immigration of non-EU citizens ³	22,237	10,838	33,075
- Emigration of non-EU citizens ³	9,265	4,295	13,560
Population end 2023	298,746	264,697	563,443

Note. Data from *National Statistics Office* (NSO, 2024).

Implications of Increased Immigration for the Education System

The recent influx of non-Maltese students has highlighted the need for effective multicultural education frameworks, which aim to support the integration of diverse student groups while promoting cultural diversity and inclusion (Vassallo, 2014). Multiculturalism, as defined by Banks & Banks (2019), encompasses groups differentiated by race, ethnicity, language, and other factors, and seeks to foster a social environment that respects and values these differences. This approach enables immigrant students to maintain their cultural identity while integrating into the broader school community (Grant, 2014). However, it also requires careful balancing to prevent social fragmentation and to address the concerns of host communities who may perceive immigration as a threat (Scott & Safdar, 2017).

Educational policy in the EU has increasingly prioritized the integration of immigrant students. The European Commission's Action Plan on the Integration of Third-Country Nationals (2016) outlined measures for promoting intercultural dialogue, supporting academic and social integration, and preventing educational underachievement among immigrant students. This has been echoed in Malta's Policy on Inclusive Education (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019), which emphasizes the need for all educators to be equipped to support the inclusion of students from ethnic minorities and those whose first language is not Maltese or English. The integration of immigrant students, therefore, requires a systemic approach that addresses both academic and social needs, ensuring that they have the opportunity to reach their full potential (Adelman & Taylor, 2015).

Strategies for Supporting Multilingual Learners in the Classroom

As classrooms in Malta become increasingly diverse, educators are adopting a range of strategies to support multilingual learners. These include the use of code-switching to facilitate understanding, peer mentoring systems and digital tools to bridge communication gaps, and foundational language support combined with flexible instructional approaches as will be explained below. Such strategies aim to enhance participation, promote linguistic inclusion, and ensure that students from diverse backgrounds can access the curriculum and engage fully in school life.

Code-Switching and Multilingual Realities in Classrooms

The linguistic landscape in Maltese classrooms is characterized by bilingualism and frequent code-switching, which reflect the complex historical and sociocultural context of the country (Mifsud & Vella, 2018). Malta's dual official languages—Maltese and English—coexist in the educational system, where both are used extensively across different subjects

and social interactions (Camilleri Grima, 2013). The concept of bilingualism in Malta is multifaceted, as it incorporates a fluid and dynamic use of both languages, with code-switching serving as a strategic pedagogical tool that enhances comprehension and communication (Grima, 2021). The country's bilingual identity is further reinforced in the Maltese educational system, where the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) mandates bilingual competence for all students by the end of their schooling (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016). The curriculum emphasizes the importance of both Maltese and English for academic success, as these languages serve different yet complementary roles: English is often associated with technology, professional advancement, and global communication, whereas Maltese is linked to cultural identity and tradition (Paggio & Gatt, 2018).

Teachers in Maltese classrooms frequently employ code-switching, shifting between Maltese and English to facilitate better understanding, manage classroom discourse, and promote active participation (Gwee & Saravanan, 2018). For instance, subjects like Mathematics and Science for which there are only English textbooks, are predominantly taught in English, yet teachers often switch to Maltese for explanations and informal interactions to bridge the gap between students and the subject content. This practice is particularly beneficial in non-language subjects, where no formal mathematical register exists in Maltese, making code-switching a necessary tool for enhancing clarity and engagement (Farrugia, 2017). As the number of immigrant students in Malta increases, these practices have become more prominent in accommodating students' diverse linguistic backgrounds. In fact, the Maltese educational policy encourages language mediation and positive attitudes towards both Maltese and English, supporting multilingual development and cultural appreciation (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016).

Peer Support and Digital Tools in Enhancing Inclusion

Peer mentoring strategies such as buddy systems have emerged as effective tools to support the linguistic and social inclusion of migrant students (Messiou & Azaola, 2018). The EU-funded Language Buddy Project, implemented in Malta and other European countries, demonstrates that personalised peer mentoring can significantly enhance migrant students' language acquisition, school engagement, and cultural adjustment (Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, 2025). By pairing newly arrived students with trained local peers, the programme fosters intercultural understanding in a safe, informal learning environment where students feel seen and supported. The buddy system not only improves language skills but also strengthens social bonds, reducing isolation and dropout rates while promoting a greater sense of belonging within the school community (Symplexis, 2024).

In response to increasing linguistic diversity in the classroom, many educators are also turning to digital tools and online translation platforms to bridge communication gaps with students and their families (Lake & Beisly, 2019). These technologies are increasingly used to translate notes, simplify classroom materials, and enhance parental engagement, particularly when traditional language support is lacking (Siefert et al., 2019). While such tools are not a substitute for professional interpretation or long-term language acquisition, they offer practical, immediate solutions that facilitate inclusion and improve understanding across language barriers (Levy & Kennedy, 2023; European Commission, 2020).

Foundational Language Support and Instructional Flexibility in Multilingual Classrooms

In multilingual classrooms where students lack proficiency in the language of instruction, teaching must start at a foundational level. Vella (2021) highlights that these students require a focus on basic vocabulary and communication before addressing complex subjects.

Drawing on Cummins (1979) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS)—everyday conversational language acquired relatively quickly—and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)—the ability to understand and use academic language, which takes years to develop—Vella (2021) emphasizes the need for structured, long-term language support. Similarly, Smit (2013) advocates for a "building the field" phase to co-construct background knowledge and vocabulary, supported by systemic and point-of-need scaffolding. Both authors stress that effective scaffolding balances cognitive challenge with gradual language development, ensuring meaningful participation and sustained academic growth in linguistically diverse classrooms.

Research also highlights the need for teacher flexibility with regards to lesson planning and implementation. Parsons and Vaughn (2016) provide empirical support for the importance of teacher adaptability in dynamic classroom settings, particularly in response to unanticipated student needs. In their case study of a sixth-grade classroom, they document how the teacher frequently deviated from her lesson plans to provide real-time scaffolding when students struggled with understanding. These adaptations ranged from modelling, thinking aloud to restructuring tasks and offering individualised prompts based on students' levels and needs. The study highlights that such instructional flexibility—rooted in teachers' metacognitive awareness and deep knowledge of their students—enhances engagement and comprehension.

In addition to classroom-based strategies, national initiatives also contribute to foundational language support for migrant learners. The National Literacy Agency (NLA) supports migrant students by promoting bilingual literacy through programmes like *Read with Me*, *Seher l-Istejjer*, and the *Reading Recovery Programme*. These initiatives help students develop proficiency in Maltese and English while encouraging parental involvement.

The NLA also assists schools through the *Language Policy for Junior Years* and literacy support teams, providing migrant learners with ongoing language support to ease integration and enhance academic participation (National Literacy Agency, 2023).

Academic, Social and Emotional Challenges Faced by Students Lacking Proficiency in the Instructional Languages in Maltese Schools.

The challenges faced by non-Maltese speaking students in Maltese classrooms are multifaceted and deeply tied to their linguistic and cultural adaptation processes (Panzavecchia, 2020). These challenges are further exacerbated in academic settings, where students are expected to acquire a new language while simultaneously keeping up with the curriculum taught through that language, often leaving them struggling to catch up with their native-speaking peers (Żammit, 2021). The pressure to perform well in assessments, combined with language barriers, leads to heightened anxiety, particularly among migrant students who fear not meeting parental and teacher expectations due to their limited proficiency (Schembri, 2020).

Linguistic barriers also affect students' social integration (Cerna, 2019). Migrant students frequently face exclusion from peer groups, and in some cases, episodes of bullying and racial stereotyping are reported (Plenty & Jonsson, 2017). Cassar & Attard Tonna (2018) revealed how teachers often view the language barriers faced by migrant students as a “deficiency,” framing them as academically weaker. The authors discussed how this labelling can create a self-fulfilling prophecy where students’ potential is undermined due to perceived linguistic limitations.

Language Attrition and Identity Loss

Emerging research shows that migrant students may have limited proficiency in both the language of instruction and their native language when exposure and use are minimal (Ma & Vanek, 2024). Li (2022) terms this first language loss or language attrition, common among those who immigrate young or are born in the host country, where the dominant language prevails. This attrition often leads to a loss of cultural identity, especially in subtractive bilingual contexts where learning a second language erodes the first (Alasgarova et al., 2024). Similarly, Flores (2015) documents a bilingual child's rapid loss of German after moving to an environment where it wasn't spoken. Both studies highlight the fragile nature of language development and the need to support migrant learners in maintaining their linguistic and cultural heritage.

The Impact of War Related Trauma on Migrant Learners

Refugee students who have fled war, persecution, and displacement often carry the psychological burden of traumatic experiences, including exposure to violence, separation from family, and the loss of safety and stability (Mohammed, 2022). According to Lembke et al. (2024), such trauma can significantly impair cognitive and emotional functioning, leading to difficulties with concentration, emotional regulation, and learning in school settings. These challenges may be misinterpreted as behavioral issues or learning disabilities if educators are not equipped with trauma-informed training (Wilson, 2019). Research also highlights that refugee students face a dual burden: the effects of pre-migration trauma and the stress of adjusting to a new educational and cultural environment (Tran, 2014). Additionally, teachers may experience emotional distress or secondary trauma as they support students with complex personal histories, underscoring the need for professional development and psychological support (Smith, 2021).

The Migrant Learners Unit (MLU)

The above-mentioned challenges faced by non-Maltese students in schools, particularly those related to language barriers and cultural integration, are being actively addressed by the Migrant Learners Unit (MLU) in Malta. The NCF acknowledges Malta's growing multicultural diversity and emphasizes the need for flexible learning programmes that consider the varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012). Despite these policy recommendations, empirical studies indicate that maintaining a child's language and culture of origin is often seen as an impediment to integration, revealing a disconnect between policy and practice (Martinelli, 2012).

The MLU in Malta was established in 2014 to address the educational and integration needs of newly arrived migrant students who often face significant linguistic and sociocultural challenges. The Unit aims to facilitate the inclusion of these learners by providing tailored language and cultural support through a structured induction programme. This initiative is particularly vital as many migrant students arrive with limited or no proficiency in the two official languages of Malta—English and Maltese—which are essential for academic success and social integration (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). Its mission statement, “Value, Include, Succeed,” reflects a holistic commitment to the well-being and academic success of migrant students, emphasizing the importance of linguistic, cultural, and social competences (Debono, 2020).

The Induction Hub

The MLU offers a comprehensive one-year induction programme focused on building basic linguistic proficiency in Maltese and English, using a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach (Schembri, 2020). This programme is tailored to the educational

and social needs of each student, ensuring a smoother transition into mainstream schooling. A local study by Buhagiar (2021), examined how induction courses in Malta, designed to assist migrant students with Maltese and English language acquisition, impact their integration into mainstream classrooms. The author critiqued these courses for adhering to the "Banking Model" of education, where knowledge is passively transferred from teacher to student, potentially hindering active participation and holistic development. This approach often results in focusing solely on language acquisition, sometimes at the expense of broader academic and social skills, which limits the students' holistic development. By isolating migrant students from their local peers, these courses can hinder the development of social capital and cultural understanding, both of which are crucial for long-term integration.

Critiques of the MLU's Approach

A local study by Gambin (2024), also identified several limitations in the induction programme offered by the MLU namely, the short duration of these induction courses which often proves insufficient for thorough language acquisition, particularly in the dual-language context of Maltese schools. Moreover, the author described how students frequently experience "mute syndrome," refraining from active participation due to linguistic insecurities. The MLU's reliance on a one-size-fits-all model was also noted as it risks neglecting the diverse cultural, emotional, and psychological needs of students. This undermines the holistic approach required for true inclusion. Additionally, the isolation of migrant learners in induction settings limits their interaction with local peers, hindering the development of social capital and cultural understanding. Lastly, there is a notable lack of follow-up support once students transition into mainstream classrooms, which educators perceive as a critical gap in the system.

Teachers Feeling Unprepared for this Novel Situation in Maltese Schools

The growing number of migrant learners in Maltese primary state schools has introduced several challenges for teachers, particularly in navigating the complexities of multilingual classrooms (Mifsud & Vella, 2020). The presence of 8,354 migrant students in the 2021-2022 academic year (see Table 2) has increased the demand for teachers to adapt their pedagogical strategies to diverse linguistic and cultural needs (European Commission, 2015).

Figure 2

Enrolment of Maltese and Non-Maltese Students in Pre-Primary, Primary, and Secondary Education in Malta (2020–2022)

Table 7. Number of students¹ enrolled by academic year and citizenship

Citizenship	Academic year		Change	Percentage change
	2020-2021	2021-2022	2021-2022/2020-2021	
Maltese	49,954	50,023	69	0.1
Other EU	3,257	3,342	85	2.6
<i>of which:</i>				
Italian	1,121	1,123	2	0.2
Bulgarian	378	345	-33	-8.7
Romanian	225	233	8	3.6
Hungarian	165	176	11	6.7
French	164	176	12	7.3
Non-EU	4,833	5,010	177	3.7
<i>of which:</i>				
British	785	670	-115	-14.6
Syrian	517	604	87	16.8
Serbian	533	527	-6	-1.1
Libyan	590	499	-91	-15.4
Chinese	185	254	69	37.3
Unspecified	3	2	-1	-33.3
Total	58,047	58,377	330	0.6

Includes students attending pre-primary (excluding childcare), primary and secondary education only.

Note. Data from National Statistics Office (NSO, 2023).

One of the primary challenges faced by teachers is determining the appropriate language of instruction (Hall, 2017). Many teachers struggle to decide when to use English or Maltese, making it difficult to ensure that all students, regardless of linguistic background, are able to

participate meaningfully in classroom activities (Parnis & Schembri, 2023). This situation is further complicated by external pressures to meet curriculum standards and accountability requirements, which can conflict with the need to provide individualised support for non-native speakers (Sutcher et al., 2019). Teachers often express frustration when the standardised curriculum fails to accommodate the unique linguistic and cognitive development of migrant students, who may require differentiated instruction and non-standardised assessment methods to accurately reflect their learning progress (Free et al., 2014). Additionally, teachers often face difficulties in engaging and communicating with parents of migrant students (Schneider & Arnot, 2018). Parents' limited proficiency in English or Maltese hampers their ability to support their children's academic progress or communicate effectively with teachers (Gauci, 2017). Parental attitudes and involvement are known to influence children's motivation and success in learning a new language (Gardner, 2014). Therefore, when parents are unable to participate in their child's education due to language barriers, it can undermine the child's educational outcomes and further isolate the family from the school community (Forey et al., 2016).

Insufficient Training in Culturally Competent Education and Practices

To address the needs of linguistically diverse students, Maltese schools must equip teachers with the skills necessary to engage in culturally responsive teaching (Vassallo, 2020). However, recent studies indicate that Maltese teachers feel unprepared for translingual practices and struggle to adapt their teaching strategies to accommodate multilingual students (Panzavecchia & Little, 2020; Caruana et al., 2019; Cassar & Attard Tonna, 2018). According to Cioffi (2018), many Maltese teachers seem to lack adequate understanding of multicultural education, leading to misconceptions that teaching foreign students is not significantly different from teaching local students. The author argues that this is largely due

to the absence of proper training in multicultural pedagogy. In accordance to this, a study by Bezzina & Vassallo (2019) revealed that teachers tended to treat all students the same, disregarding the unique cultural and linguistic needs of non-Maltese students. Moreover, studies have shown that newly qualified teachers feel unprepared to handle culturally diverse classrooms, while experienced teachers often rely on past teaching strategies that may not align with the current needs of a heterogeneous classroom (Debono, 2020).

This gap is attributed to a lack of professional training and support, which hinders the implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices (European Commission, 2019). As a result, there is a discrepancy between teachers' beliefs about multilingualism and their classroom practices, influenced by external pressures to maintain a monolingual approach (García & Otheguy, 2020). Teacher training that emphasizes the benefits of multilingualism and introduces practical strategies for managing diverse classrooms has been shown to result in more positive attitudes towards migrant students and increased adoption of inclusive practices (Lundberg, 2019; European Commission, 2017). However, professional development opportunities in Malta are often limited, with more than half of in-service teachers reporting that they are unable or unmotivated to attend training due to competing responsibilities (European Commission, 2019).

Resource Constraints and Challenges to Multicultural Education

The increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in Maltese classrooms requires teachers to go beyond traditional pedagogy and develop culturally responsive teaching practices that address the varied needs of their students. Gay (2015), defines culturally responsive teaching as the use of students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and perspectives as conduits for teaching. It emphasizes integrating diverse ethnic and racial groups' heritages to make academic content more meaningful and accessible, which enhances personal, social and

cultural development. However, many teachers report feeling unprepared for such a role due to insufficient training and professional development opportunities focused on multicultural education (Panzavecchia & Little, 2020). Indeed, many teachers reported receiving inadequate training on culturally responsive teaching, classroom management, and assessment strategies during their teacher education programs (Warren, 2018). Moreover, teachers have also reported that they do not have adequate access to resources, including teaching aids, language support, and mental health professionals, which exacerbates the difficulties they face in creating a conducive learning environment for all students (Banerjee, 2019). The absence of interpreters and specialized support staff means that teachers are often left to navigate complex cultural and linguistic barriers on their own (Burke & Goldman, 2018). Due to the high demands and lack of external support, many teachers experience feelings of inadequacy, burnout and frustration, feeling that they are unable to provide quality education to both local and migrant students (Arvidsson et al., 2019).

Learning Difficulties vs Language Barriers

Accurately identifying learning disabilities in multilingual learners remains a significant challenge, particularly when language acquisition difficulties are misinterpreted as cognitive or developmental delays (Cevheroglu, 2023). Both WIDA (2023) and Rodríguez and Rodríguez (2017) highlight the risks of misdiagnosis, noting that limited training in second language development and the use of culturally unresponsive assessment tools often lead educators to confuse language-related challenges with learning disabilities. These issues are further exacerbated by inconsistent evaluation practices and the lack of standardized procedures across educational settings. As a result, multilingual learners face both over-identification—where typical language development is mistaken for impairment—and under-identification—where real learning needs are dismissed as temporary language issues (Alford

& Tancredi, 2023). Studies emphasize the need for comprehensive, culturally and linguistically responsive assessment approaches that consider students' educational backgrounds, language histories, and socio-cultural contexts (Snyder & Fenner, 2021; Yoon, 2023). They also advocate for increased professional development and cross-disciplinary collaboration to ensure that student difficulties are accurately interpreted and appropriately addressed.

Teacher's Personal Attitudes as Bridges or Barriers to Inclusive Practices

The integration of migrant students into Maltese schools presents unique educational challenges, particularly due to the linguistic and cultural diversity they bring to the classroom (Vassallo, 2024). Effective education for these students relies heavily on the attitudes, cultural competence, and professional training of teachers, as well as the implementation of inclusive practices that promote bilingualism and multicultural education (Panzavecchia, & Little, 2020). Multicultural classrooms, therefore, require teachers who are skilled in creating inclusive learning environments that recognize and value the diverse linguistic backgrounds of their pupils (Banks & Banks, 2019).

Teachers' attitudes toward multicultural education significantly impact student success and inclusion in the classroom (Karacabey et al., 2019). Positive attitudes towards multiculturalism, are more likely to result in the implementation of inclusive teaching strategies that accommodate the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students (Forrest et al., 2016). This, in turn, promotes a sense of belonging and acceptance among students, which is essential for their academic and social development (Arndt, 2018). Indeed, positive teacher attitudes are associated with the use of culturally responsive teaching practices, such as recognizing and valuing students' cultural identities, incorporating diverse perspectives into the curriculum, and addressing the specific needs of minority students (Gay,

2015). These practices enhance student engagement, foster a positive self-concept, and improve academic performance by making students feel seen and respected within the learning environment (Gay, 2018). Conversely, a lack of understanding or negative attitudes towards multiculturalism, can lead to exclusionary practices leading to feelings of marginalization and disconnection by students from the school community (Sleeter, 2018). Such attitudes can create a classroom climate where students are less motivated to participate, resulting in lower academic achievement and increased absenteeism (Abacioglu et al., 2020).

Xenophobia in Malta influences both student attitudes and teacher practices, often reinforcing exclusion in schools. Wright (2020) found that educators feel unprepared to challenge xenophobic views among students, which are often shaped by family and media. Chircop (2022) similarly observed that many teachers adopt assimilationist approaches, viewing migrant students as a burden and supporting practices like segregation due to language barriers. These attitudes are reinforced by wider societal discourse, with Vella Muskat (2024) showing how online comments frequently construct migrants as threats, contributing to a school climate that marginalises rather than includes.

While much of the literature emphasizes the challenges of teaching in multicultural and multilingual classrooms, recent studies highlight the intrinsic rewards educators experience when supporting migrant students. Liu (2024) found that teachers derive a strong sense of fulfilment from witnessing improvements in migrant students' engagement, linguistic competence, and social integration, noting that such progress enhances both student and teacher satisfaction. Similarly, Premier and Parr (2019) reported that teachers working with students with diverse needs develop a stronger professional identity and greater job satisfaction through their contribution to inclusive education. These findings suggest that,

despite the difficulties, working with migrant learners can offer meaningful professional and personal rewards for educators committed to fostering inclusion.

Recommendations for Inclusive Practices

The above-mentioned studies advocate for a rethinking of educational principles in Maltese schools to promote inclusion through pedagogical paradigms that recognize the educational potential of all learners. This includes adopting flexible teaching strategies that cater to diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Baschiera & Caruana, 2020). The introduction of linguistic and cultural mediators, coupled with professional development for teachers and learning support educators, is recommended to better address the needs of non-Maltese speaking learners and other migrant students in increasingly multicultural and multilingual classrooms (Chircop, 2018). Indeed, these studies recommend implementing structured language support and teacher training programs to promote linguistic inclusion and mitigate the negative impacts of labelling and marginalization. A more inclusive educational approach that values linguistic diversity and supports bilingual and multilingual students is essential for equitable educational outcomes (Smythe, 2020).

While language proficiency is a critical factor in students' academic success and social inclusion, limited research has examined teachers' perspectives on this issue in Malta. Locally, researchers have predominantly focused on the experiences of migrant students, with little attention given to how teachers navigate and adapt to these linguistic challenges in their classrooms. By investigating how teachers address these barriers, this study aims to provide valuable insights into developing more inclusive teaching practices and informing policies that support both teachers and students in multicultural and multilingual educational settings.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology adopted for this study. It discusses the qualitative research design and its justification, the process of participant recruitment and the methods of data collection and analysis. Additionally, it addresses ethical considerations, as well as issues of reliability and validity.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was adopted in order to answer the research questions:

1. What are Maltese primary school teachers' perceptions of the effects of language and communication barriers on the inclusion and active participation of non-Maltese speaking students who lack proficiency in the languages of instruction?
2. How do Maltese primary school teachers support the linguistic and academic development of non-Maltese speaking students?

Qualitative research is a methodological approach that focuses on understanding phenomena from the perspective of participants, emphasizing experiences, meanings, and interpretations (Lim, 2024). Unlike quantitative research, which relies on statistical analysis and numerical data, qualitative inquiry adopts a naturalistic approach to explore the rich, contextual dimensions of human behavior, relationships, and social phenomena (Cypress, 2015). Creswell (2015) highlights key characteristics of qualitative research, such as data collection in natural settings, the researcher as the primary instrument, the use of multiple data sources and an inductive approach to data analysis that moves from specific observations to broader themes and theories. Additionally, qualitative research prioritizes participants' meanings over the researchers' assumptions and adopts an emergent design that evolves as

the study progresses (Anderson, 2017). This interpretive inquiry considers social, cultural, and historical contexts, striving for a holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Daher et al., 2017).

Qualitative research methods are particularly valuable for addressing questions about experience, meaning, and perspective (Hammarberg et al., 2016; Austin & Sutton, 2014). By focusing on participants' lived experiences, qualitative inquiry provides a depth of insight into how individuals perceive and navigate their worlds, offering nuanced perspectives that quantitative methods often cannot capture (Butler-Kisber, 2018). This approach not only uncovers the nature of a phenomenon within its specific context but also contributes to social justice by challenging assumptions, exposing biases, and suggesting alternative interpretations to inform policy and practice (Ellingson, 2017). In clinical and organizational settings, qualitative research is increasingly recognized as a legitimate and necessary mode of inquiry, enabling researchers to address complex questions about human subjectivity that quantitative methods cannot fully answer (Ormston et al., 2014).

A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate for this study because it enabled an in-depth exploration of Maltese primary school teachers' perceptions, experiences, and practices regarding language and communication barriers faced by non-Maltese speaking students. The focus of the research was on understanding the subjective experiences and meanings that teachers attribute to these challenges, as well as the strategies they employ to support students, which aligned with the strengths of qualitative research. By focusing on teachers' narratives and interpretations, the implementation of a qualitative approach allowed for the discovery of diverse strategies and perspectives that may not have been anticipated in advance, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the topic (Hennink et al., 2020).

Research Paradigm

The interpretivist paradigm was adopted for this study as it aligned with its aim of exploring the subjective perceptions and experiences of Maltese primary school teachers regarding language and communication barriers faced by non-Maltese speaking students. Interpretivism is rooted in the belief that human beings cannot be studied in the same way as physical phenomena due to the complexity of human experiences and the richness of meaning they create (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Unlike positivism, which seeks universal laws, interpretivism focuses on the uniqueness of social contexts, cultures, and individual circumstances, allowing for the exploration of socially constructed realities rather than definitive truths (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

Ontologically, interpretivism adopts a relativist perspective, acknowledging multiple, socially constructed realities that are understood through the intersubjective experiences of individuals (Ryan, 2018). Epistemologically, it is subjective, emphasizing that the researcher is inherently part of the social reality being studied (Chowdhury, 2014). Knowledge is co-created through interaction, as external reality cannot be accessed without being influenced by the researcher's own worldviews and context (Hiller, 2016). This paradigm rejects the idea of a single, verifiable reality and instead embraces the coexistence of multiple interpretations, each shaped by individual and social experiences (McPhail & Lourie, 2017).

Methodologically, interpretivism prioritizes understanding social phenomena through the perspectives of participants (Scauso, 2020). It employs qualitative methods such as interviews and observations, allowing the researcher to gather rich, contextualized data that is analysed inductively to identify patterns and generate themes (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). This approach is particularly suited to this study's goal of capturing teachers' insights on how language barriers impact students' participation, inclusion, and academic performance. The

interpretivist paradigm also enabled an in-depth understanding of how teachers adapt their teaching strategies within the unique sociolinguistic and cultural context of Maltese state schools, ensuring the research remains context-specific and avoiding overgeneralization (Brady et al., 2018).

Participants

A study by Boddy (2016), emphasized that large sample sizes have no place in qualitative research since a large sample inhibits the generation of in-depth knowledge and inquiry which is the foundation of this particular methodology. In fact, the author insists that a large magnitude of data does not allow for purposeful qualitative analysis. In accordance to this, Malterud et al (2016), insist that the use of six to eight in depth interviews with a given homogenous population is enough to reach “information power”. For this reason, six participants were recruited to participate in the study.

Inclusion Criteria

In order to participate in the study, participants had to occupy the role of a primary school teacher currently employed at a Maltese state school or Migrant Induction hub, ranging from year 1 to year 6, irrespective of gender. The teachers had to have experience working with a minimum of 1-3 non-Maltese speaking students in their classroom in order to be able to share their perceptions and experiences of working with these students while exploring potential challenges and necessary adaptations made. Teachers were specifically selected as participants rather than learning support educators (LSEs) or other educational staff because teachers play a central role in designing, delivering, and adapting instructional content within the classroom (Peterson et al., 2018). The participants’ position provided a unique and comprehensive perspective on how language and communication barriers impacted non-Maltese speaking students’ participation, inclusion, and academic performance. While LSEs

and other staff contribute to supporting students, their focus is often more individualized or auxiliary, whereas teachers oversee the broader instructional and classroom management aspects essential to this study's aims.

The study was based in primary schools due to the importance of early education in shaping foundational skills for academic and social development. Language acquisition and communication skills are particularly emphasized during the primary years, making this stage crucial for understanding how barriers in these areas impacted students' ability to integrate and succeed academically (Alqahtani, 2015). Furthermore, primary school teachers are often tasked with fostering inclusive practices at a formative stage, providing a rich context for exploring how they address linguistic challenges in diverse classrooms (Monsen et al., 2014). Additionally, state schools were chosen over church or private schools because, statistically, state schools have a higher enrolment rate of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds with data showing a 700% increase in non-Maltese students between 2008 and 2017 (Malta Today, 2021), thus offering a more representative sample for studying the challenges and adaptations necessitated by language barriers. The findings derived from this context are likely to have broader relevance for addressing the needs of non-Maltese speaking students in the local educational system. By focusing on state schools, the study captured the experiences of teachers working in classrooms where language diversity was more prevalent, aligning with the research's aim of exploring how these barriers were perceived and addressed in practice.

Since the study required teachers to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions while working with non-Maltese speaking students, the inclusion criteria for this research study also depended on the educators' work experience since participants were required to have at least one year of experience working with non-Maltese students in the classroom. A minimum requirement of one year ensured that participants had sufficient time to engage

with and adapt to the unique needs of non-Maltese speaking students, allowing them to reflect meaningfully on their experiences and practices.

Sampling and Recruitment

Purposive sampling entails recruiting participants who possess extensive knowledge and experience on the phenomenon under study (Campbell et al., 2020). The researcher seeks individuals who are available and willing to share their expertise in order to collect rich data which reflects the individuals' opinions and perspectives (Andrade, 2021). For this reason, this sampling method was adopted for this research since participants were required to have experience working with non-Maltese speaking students with a language and communication barrier.

Prior to commencing the research process, permission was granted by the MEYR Research Ethics Committee (Education Division) (Appendix A), as well as the relevant state schools (Appendix B). The researcher then liaised with the heads of school who accepted to participate (Appendix C, D and E). A total of three heads of school agreed to act as gatekeepers for the study. The Heads of school distributed the information sheet to potential participants who met the established inclusion criteria. A total of twelve potential participants were identified and of these twelve, six agreed to participate in the study, while the remaining either declined or did not respond to the invitation.

Data Collection

The semi structured interview is the optimal data collection tool to be used when the aim of the researcher is to explore the perspectives and fundamental truths of the research participants (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2019). Since this study aimed to understand teachers' perceptions of the effects that language and communication barriers have on the social inclusion and active participation of non-Maltese speaking students in the classroom,

semi structured interviews were employed to gather information from the teachers who had personal experiences, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs related to the education and practices when working with these students in the classroom. This data collection method allowed for in-depth, personal views and expression. According to Anyan (2013), the interpretation and thorough understanding of personal experiences is best accessed through in depth questioning similar to a conversation. This is possible through the use of semi-structured interviews as a qualitative data collection tool (Galletta, 2013). Such interviews allow for the exploration of the participants' perceptions by allowing the individual to speak freely and openly about their experiences (Marshall et al., 2015). These interviews are conducted using open-ended questions and the use of a flexible interview schedule (Appendix F and G), which encourage the emergence of subsequent themes and ideas (Evans & Lewis, 2018).

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of the study. Each participant was contacted by the researcher to schedule the interview at a mutually convenient date and time. Participants were also asked whether they preferred to conduct the interview online or face-to-face. All six of the participants chose to conduct the interview face-to-face in a location of their choosing. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with an information sheet (Appendix H) outlining the research process, their rights, and their responsibilities, ensuring informed consent. They were required to review and sign a consent form (Appendix I) before data collection began. During the interviews, the researcher observed and noted non-verbal communication, as such cues often reveal deeper emotions and attitudes (Oltmann, 2016). To encourage participants to fully articulate their thoughts, the researcher avoided interrupting their responses, even if they momentarily digressed. This approach allowed for a richer understanding of the meaning participants attributed to their experiences.

The researcher made use of an interview guide containing thirteen open-ended questions designed to prompt participants to reflect on and analyse their own experiences. The

interview guide was thoughtfully designed to address the research question by eliciting detailed insights into teachers' perceptions and experiences with language and communication barriers faced by non-Maltese speaking students. Its structure ensured that both student and teacher experiences were explored comprehensively, with questions strategically aligned to the study's objectives.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and took place between October 22nd 2024, and December 29th 2024. Participants were asked to choose quiet locations for the interviews, ensuring an environment conducive to thoughtful discussion. Participants also were asked to select their preferred language (English or Maltese), with four out of six participants choosing to respond in Maltese. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher, with those conducted in Maltese translated into English for data analysis purposes.

Data Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was considered the most suitable method for analysing this study's data because it allows for a rich, flexible exploration of Maltese primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding language and communication barriers. RTA emphasizes subjective meanings and context, aligning with the study's focus on understanding how teachers navigate these challenges in Maltese state schools. Its iterative nature supports the development of nuanced themes grounded in the data while incorporating the researcher's reflexivity, ensuring transparency and rigor. By capturing both explicit and underlying meanings, RTA provides deeper insights into teachers' strategies and challenges, making it an effective and context-sensitive approach for addressing the research question. RTA as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), emphasizes the active role of the

researcher in theme development and the importance of reflexivity throughout the analytical process. Indeed, the authors provide an in-depth exploration of the six phases of RTA:

Phase 1: Familiarization with Data

Following the interviews, the researcher carefully transcribed the audio recordings verbatim, which enabled an in-depth immersion into the content. This transcription process required the researcher to repeatedly listen to the interviews, aiding the development of an initial sense of the participants' perspectives and the topics that frequently arose. Following transcription, the transcripts were read and re-read in their entirety, noting key observations, striking statements, and recurring patterns that related to the research question. Close attention to the nuances of participants' language choices and their non-verbal cues, as noted during the interviews, offered additional insight into their sentiments and attitudes. Throughout this process, the researcher also reflected on how my own positionality and preconceptions might influence what stood out to me. Initial thoughts and reflections about the data were documented in a journal. This included potential areas of interest, such as the challenges teachers face with language barriers, their strategies for adaptation, and their perceptions of non-Maltese speaking students' experiences.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

This phase involved systematically identifying and labelling meaningful features within the data that were relevant to my research question. The researcher began the coding process by working through the data line by line, highlighting segments of text that captured significant ideas, patterns, or recurring themes and generating code labels (Appendix J). Both semantic and latent codes were generated. Throughout this phase, the researcher reflected on how assumptions might have shaped the coding process. To mitigate bias, the codes were

revisited multiple times ensuring they aligned with the participants' words and context rather than preconceived ideas.

Phase 3: Constructing Initial Themes

Phase 3 involved organizing initial codes into broader patterns that addressed the research question. Related codes were clustered to identify overarching ideas, with careful reflection to ensure themes captured participants' experiences without oversimplification. Frequent reference to the original transcripts ensured themes remained grounded in the data. Subthemes were explored to capture nuanced elements, and visual tools like thematic maps were used to refine overlaps, identify gaps, and ensure themes were distinct yet interconnected.

Phase 4: Reviewing and Developing Themes

The initial themes were reviewed to ensure they provided a compelling and coherent narrative about the dataset. The transcripts and coding were revisited to verify that the themes were grounded in the data. This involved refining the scope and focus of each theme. During this phase, weaker themes that lacked enough supporting data were discarded.

Phase 5: Refining, Defining, and Naming Themes

At this stage, the themes were refined to ensure each was distinct, clearly defined, and centred around a strong core concept. Questions like, "*What story does this theme tell?*" and "*How does this theme contribute to my overall narrative?*" guided the researcher to further refine each theme. Additionally, the researcher noted down brief descriptions of each theme, outlining its scope and focus. Each theme was given a concise, descriptive name that captured its essence. This process helped clarify the overall story emerging from the data while ensuring the themes aligned with the research objectives.

Phase 6: Writing the Report

The writing process began informally during earlier phases, through reflexive journaling and notes, but became more formalized in this phase. The refined themes were integrated into an analytic narrative, weaving vivid data extracts with interpretation to tell a coherent and persuasive story about the dataset. Multiple rounds of editing helped refine the narrative and ensure clarity, coherence, and alignment with the research question. This final phase allowed the researcher to present a thorough and compelling account of the findings.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure trustworthiness and rigor in this study, the researcher took deliberate steps to avoid speculation and maintain credibility and transferability. Credibility was addressed by grounding all findings directly in the data. This was achieved by using verbatim quotes from participants to support interpretations, ensuring that conclusions accurately reflected the participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's assumptions or biases. Additionally, the researcher employed member checking by sharing final transcripts with participants to verify the accuracy of the data collected during the interviews. Yardley (2015) outlined four key dimensions to ensure trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative research, which were applied in this study:

1. Sensitivity to Context

The researcher demonstrated sensitivity to the study's context by thoroughly reviewing relevant literature on language and communication barriers in education, particularly in multilingual classrooms. This preparation provided a strong foundation for understanding the research topic and designing the study. To ensure participants felt comfortable and provided accurate information, they were allowed to choose the time, location, and language of the interview. This approach fostered a safe and supportive environment, encouraging open and

honest disclosures. Additionally, participants were invited to review their interview transcripts to confirm the accuracy of the data collected, further enhancing credibility.

2. Commitment and Rigor

Commitment was shown through careful attention to each stage of the research process. The researcher extensively analysed the data, taking care to explore each participant's experiences in depth. Efforts were made to make participants feel at ease during interviews, encouraging richer responses by asking follow-up questions and noting non-verbal cues that provided additional insight into their perspectives.

3. Transparency and Coherence

Transparency was achieved by providing a detailed account of every step in the research process, including participant recruitment, data collection, and the method of analysis. The findings were presented clearly and coherently, with themes logically developed and supported by evidence from the data. This ensured the arguments and conclusions drawn were well-structured and easy to follow.

4. Impact and Importance

This study contributes to the understanding of how language and communication barriers impact non-Maltese speaking students in Maltese primary schools, as well as how teachers adapt their teaching strategies to support these students. By addressing a critical issue in educational inclusion, the study provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers, aligning with Yardley's emphasis on qualitative research's potential to educate and influence.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity in research acknowledges that a researcher's biases can influence various aspects of the qualitative research process (Dodgson, 2019). Personal beliefs and experiences may shape elements such as the choice of the research question or the interpretation of data (Clancy, 2013). Therefore, it is essential for researchers to recognize these biases and take steps to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the data and analysis. My positionality in this study was shaped by both personal and professional experiences. As a student who comes from a different ethnic background than most of my peers, I was aware from a young age that this influenced how I was perceived and treated within the school environment. These early experiences made me particularly sensitive to issues of language, inclusion, and belonging. Now, as an educational psychology trainee, I have worked with students from diverse backgrounds who struggle to engage in the classroom due to language barriers and a lack of adequate support for teachers. Despite this, I tried to be as objective as possible, putting such preconceptions aside. In fact, as discussed in the findings, real quotations were utilised to support the final themes and discussion, thereby safeguarding the study's validity and allowing participants' voices to speak for themselves.

In order to remain aware of and process my engagement as a researcher, a reflective journal was kept throughout the study in which I recorded thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the research process (McGrath, 2021). At times, I found myself emotionally affected by some of the perspectives shared. For example, I felt a sense of anger and frustration when one teacher described how she found a non-Maltese-speaking student in her class to be distracting during Maltese lessons, and would instruct the student to listen to Maltese vocabulary through headphones while the rest of the class continued with the lesson. I noted in my journal:

“I felt uncomfortable and upset by this comment — it felt like the student was being excluded rather than supported. I need to be careful not to let my emotions cloud my interpretation of the teacher’s perspective who may also be feeling overwhelmed and unsupported.”

This reflective diary helped me to acknowledge and bracket my own preconceptions and subjectivity (Vicary et al., 2017), thus ensuring they did not influence the analysis or interpretation of the data (Lutz & Paretti, 2019).

Ethical Issues

Before the study commenced, ethical clearance was sought from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) at the University of Malta. The application was approved in October 2024 (Appendix K), and the data collection process began immediately after. Informed consent is a fundamental aspect of ethical research, ensuring that all participants provide their voluntary agreement to take part (Schofield, 2014). Participants were recruited through gatekeepers, namely the Heads of School, who distributed the information sheet to eligible staff members, ensuring that participation in the study was entirely voluntary. The information sheet outlined the research’s aims, objectives, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participants were required to read, understand, and sign a consent form, confirming their informed consent and willingness to participate. To avoid misunderstandings, participants were encouraged to ask questions, with the researcher’s and supervisor’s contact details made available for further clarification.

Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained throughout the research. The researcher had sole access to audio recordings and transcripts, ensuring data security. To enhance credibility, participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of their final transcripts. Pseudonyms replaced participants’ names, and any

identifiable information was excluded from the transcripts. All data, including transcriptions and analysis, was stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher. The data will be securely retained for up to one year after the study's submission before being permanently deleted.

Conclusion

The methodology employed in this study was carefully designed to explore how Maltese primary school teachers perceive and address language and communication barriers faced by non-Maltese speaking students. A qualitative approach, guided by the interpretivist paradigm and Reflexive Thematic Analysis, allowed for a deep and nuanced understanding of teachers' experiences and strategies within the unique sociolinguistic context of Maltese state schools. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and data security, were rigorously upheld, ensuring the trustworthiness and credibility of the research. Through these methods, the study provides a robust foundation for answering the research questions and generating meaningful insights into this critical area of education.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study, organised into six main themes and their corresponding subthemes. Direct quotations from participants are included to illustrate key points, with several excerpts translated from Maltese to English. Care has been taken to preserve the original meaning of these quotations, and the original Maltese versions are provided in Appendix L. The findings are subsequently discussed in relation to the relevant literature to contextualise and support the emerging insights.

Participant Information

The six participants (see Table 1) all met the established inclusion criteria. Four were primary school teachers currently employed in mainstream state schools, while two were teaching at a Migrant Induction Hub within primary schools. All participants had experience working with between one and three non-Maltese speaking students in their classrooms at the time of the study. These students came from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and in some cases, multiple non-Maltese speaking students were present in the same classroom. Table 1 provides an overview of the key characteristics of each participant.

Table 1

Main Characteristics of the Participants

Teacher's Pseudonym	Years of Experience	Educational Setting	Grade Level	Nationalities Encountered in the Classroom
Elena	20	Mainstream	Year 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maltese • Ethiopian

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syrian • Egyptian
Daniel	34	Mainstream	Year 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maltese • Spanish • Russian • Indian • Syrian • Egyptian
Rachel	21	Mainstream	Year 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maltese • Ethiopia • Syria • Libya
May	26	Mainstream	Year 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maltese • Indian • Filipino • Syrian • Egyptian • Pakistani • Somali
Joseph	13	Induction Hub	Year 3– Year 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syrian • Italian • Filipino • Indian • Albanian • Colombian • Chinese
Claire	2	Induction Hub	Year 3- Year 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spanish • Italian • Indian • Chinese • Japanese • American

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serbian • Libyan • Yemeni • Mauritian • Polish
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Overview of Findings

Six main themes were identified from the data (see Table 2), highlighting key challenges and dynamics within multilingual primary classrooms. These include communication difficulties arising from language barriers, obstacles to student participation and peer integration, inconsistencies in external support services, emotional and practical pressures experienced by educators, and broader systemic gaps within the educational framework.

Table 2

Themes and subthemes identified in the findings

Theme	Subthemes
Academic and Social Challenges Faced by Non-Maltese Speaking Students	Very Limited Language Proficiency
	Significant Language Barriers
	Social Integration Challenges
	Cultural and trauma related challenges faced by non-Maltese speaking students in the classroom

	Contrasting experiences of acceptance and otherness
	Students' Intrinsic Motivation and Desire to Learn
Teachers' Emotional and Practical Challenges	Novelty of Multicultural and Multilingual Classroom Dynamics
	Frustrations faced by teachers
	Gaps in Training and Professional Preparation
Contributions and Limitations of the Migrant Learner's Unit	Assessment and placement in the induction hub
	Challenges in Student Readiness and Reintegration Post-Hub
	Systemic and Operational Limitations of the MLU
Strategies used for Promoting Cultural and Academic Inclusion	The use of alternative tools and non-verbal communication strategies
	Cultural Integration and incorporating students' native languages
Professional Support and Fulfilment in Multilingual Classrooms	Support Networks and Collaborative Practices
	Teacher Fulfilment, Motivation, and Advocacy
Institutional gaps and recommendations for improvement	The need for a Multicultural Framework in Education encouraging inclusion and acceptance
	A lack of communication between services and the need for bridging

	The need for further training and the provision of resources
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Theme 1: Academic and Social Challenges Faced by Non-Maltese Speaking Students

This theme explores the multifaceted academic and social challenges faced by non-Maltese speaking students as described by participants. Participants reported that limited language proficiency and significant language barriers were central obstacles affecting students' learning and participation. These difficulties often intersected with social integration issues, cultural differences, and, in some cases, trauma-related experiences. While some students expressed a strong desire to learn, their experiences of inclusion varied, ranging from acceptance to feelings of otherness within the classroom context.

Very Limited Language Proficiency

Participants reported that non-Maltese speaking students, particularly those of different nationalities, often demonstrated limited proficiency in both of the school's instructional languages—Maltese and English. This lack of basic vocabulary was seen as a significant barrier to effective communication and classroom participation. As Daniel explained:

They lack the vocabulary. I know that in their minds, they probably have an answer if I asked them in their own language, but in Maltese or English, we don't get anywhere.¹ (Daniel)

Rachel echoed this sentiment, highlighting the linguistic difficulties faced by non-Maltese speaking students from diverse backgrounds:

I have three children, one from Pakistan, one from Spain and one from India [...] they don't even know simple words in Maltese. (Rachel)

These classroom observations are consistent with findings from Falzon et al. (2012), whose study revealed that many migrant students were unfamiliar with both English and Maltese prior to their arrival in Malta. This lack of exposure leads to significant difficulties in communication and learning during the initial stages of schooling (Żammit, 2021). Participants expressed that these language limitations made it particularly challenging to engage students in more meaningful or reflective classroom dialogue as both Daniel and Rachel noted:

When I need to push for deeper understanding, that's where I get stuck—really stuck.²
(Daniel)

I start with basic questions like, “What’s your name?” and “How old are you?” But when I move beyond that—say, to more creative questions [...] they lack the vocabulary. (Rachel)

Given the students’ limited language proficiency and restricted vocabulary, participants emphasized the need to begin instruction at a very fundamental level, often focusing on the foundational aspects of both Maltese and English:

I have to do really basic Maltese and even, like right now we were doing sentences like: “Din ommi”, this is my mother. (Rachel)

I have to go back to basic vocabulary—word lists from the dictionary and such.³
(May)

These practices reflect what Vella (2021) refers to as language scaffolding, which involves providing structured and responsive support to help students access the curriculum. Similarly, Smit (2013) highlights the importance of the “building the field” phase, where teachers co-construct basic knowledge and vocabulary before introducing abstract concepts. Indeed, May

elaborated on how she would begin by introducing key vocabulary related to the classroom environment, in order to help students make sense of the words they encounter daily:

I start with basic classroom vocabulary so they know what's happening around them—words like student, boy, girl, class, school, pen, pencil, book [...] so, I always start with vocabulary related to the classroom—things they use every day. (May)

Interestingly, two participants observed that some non-Maltese speaking students not only demonstrated limited proficiency in Maltese and English, but also lacked fluency in their native language. This was attributed to minimal exposure to their mother tongue, often resulting from being raised in a different linguistic environment or having left their country of origin at a young age. Such observations are supported by research on first language attrition, which refers to the gradual loss of a previously acquired language when it is no longer used regularly (Flores, 2015). Li (2022) found that immigrant youth frequently lose competence in their first language when it is not reinforced through home or school:

I have a Spanish student who, despite being Spanish, does not know Spanish because her parents taught her English.⁴ (Daniel)

I've had children who don't know their native language that well.⁵ (Joseph)

Significant Language Barriers

Participants described the language barrier as a major obstacle to effective communication and learning. Elena, for instance, reflected on the ongoing uncertainty surrounding one student's comprehension:

There is a barrier, in fact this year I still can't understand if he's really understanding me or not in basic instructions. Sometimes, we realize because I tell them take this out and he takes out something else. (Elena)

These accounts resonate with findings by Baschiera and Caruana (2020), who highlight the significant linguistic challenges faced by non-Maltese speaking students, particularly as they are required to navigate both Maltese and English as primary languages of instruction.

Participants expressed uncertainty about whether students' struggles were solely related to limited language proficiency or whether they reflected broader educational or developmental needs that had yet to be identified:

We are still discussing if he has other learning difficulties besides the language barrier. (Elena)

Are their difficulties due to language barriers? Or are there other challenges, such as educational difficulties, learning disabilities, dyslexia, or ADHD? ⁶ (Daniel)

This dilemma was particularly evident in the context of transition from specialised settings to mainstream classrooms. Joseph, who works at an induction hub for newly arrived migrant students, reflected on how students are sometimes misinterpreted as having psychological or developmental disorders upon their integration into mainstream schools. He explained that such concerns are often premature and may instead reflect students' difficulty adjusting to a new and unfamiliar environment:

I had cases of Filipino students who, when I sent them to mainstream classes, were thought not to speak—do they have selective mutism? Because they are very quiet. (Joseph)

This dilemma is echoed in the literature, where WIDA (2023) and Rodríguez and Rodríguez (2017) highlight the persistent challenge of accurately identifying learning disabilities in multilingual learners.

Social Integration Challenges

Participants observed that non-Maltese speaking students often remained withdrawn in the classroom, primarily due to their limited language proficiency and restricted ability to communicate. This lack of linguistic competence negatively impacted their level of engagement during lessons and hindered their ability to form social connections with peers:

He didn't play during break, his communication was minimal, his understanding was a bit more than basic perhaps. (Elena)

These kids are smart but they keep quiet, they don't participate as much as I would like them because they don't know how to speak. (Rachel)

These findings are supported by literature which positions language proficiency as a key determinant of school inclusion and social integration (Cavicchiolo et al., 2023; Mirowsky, 2017). Research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2014) and Schachner et al. (2014) shows that students with limited language skills often struggle to express themselves, leading to disengagement and social isolation. However, participant accounts also suggested that language proficiency alone does not fully account for students' experiences of integration. Student personality was identified as an equally important factor, with more extroverted and assertive students appearing better able to navigate language limitations and initiate peer interactions, compared to those who were more introverted or reserved:

In the end, it depends on the student's personality—those who are outspoken and willing to ask questions will integrate more quickly than those who are quiet and shy.⁷ (Daniel)

It really depends on their personality—how outgoing you are, whether you enjoy being alone, and how much you put yourself out there.⁸ (May)

Cultural and trauma related challenges faced by non-Maltese speaking students in the classroom

A common consensus among participants was that foreign, non-Maltese speaking students face a multitude of challenges within the school environment, encompassing academic, social, and emotional domains (Falzon et al., 2012; Caruana, 2011; Arar, 2020). Teachers expressed a strong sense of empathy toward these students, acknowledging the psychological and interpersonal difficulties that arise from being unable to communicate effectively or understand those around them:

I don't imagine myself in China attending a full day of school without understanding anything—no instructions, the fear that someone might ask me something and that I'm supposed to answer.⁹ (Daniel)

They don't know anyone, they don't know how to speak to anyone [...] these are students who just came to Malta trying to figure it all out. (Claire)

Interestingly, several participants observed that students from certain national backgrounds appeared to face greater academic challenges than others. In particular, Elena and May noted that Syrian students often struggled more with academic tasks when compared to their peers from other countries:

In general, Syrian students struggle more academically. (Elena)

The majority of the new arrivals are Syrians, and they tend to struggle more academically.¹⁰ (May)

Participants attributed these challenges to a combination of factors, including disrupted educational histories and limited prior exposure to formal schooling. Additionally, cultural

attitudes toward education were mentioned by some teachers as influencing school attendance and engagement:

The Syrians, for whom school is not much of a priority—some of the children are frequently absent, and you have to constantly chase after them to get them to come to school. ¹¹ (Joseph)

Participants also spoke of the significant psychological and emotional challenges faced by students who have experienced war, displacement, and traumatic life events in their countries of origin. These accounts are supported by Lembke, Linderkamp, and Casale (2024), who emphasize that refugee students frequently experience trauma-related difficulties such as impaired concentration, emotional dysregulation, and disrupted learning:

I had a boy from Ukraine, and this was during the time when the war in Ukraine broke out. He came with trauma because they had been through everything—they fled their country to come to Malta. [...] The Syrians who came had also gone through war and experienced it firsthand, and they would tell you about it. ¹² (Joseph)

This student, I think I will remember him for life, he's from Yemen, and we were doing something [...] He told me, miss, my school, they shoot there, it went down, and now I'm here. So, he saw his school literally coming into bits and pieces in front of him, and he flew the country because of that. (Claire)

As a consequence of trauma and adverse early experiences, some students were reported to exhibit challenging behaviours that extended beyond the scope of what could be addressed solely within the classroom setting:

Because the boy started to show violent behaviour, not only because of the war but also due to the kind of upbringing he had in the country where he lived before. So, at times, I need interventions from professionals outside the classroom. ¹³ (Joseph)

Contrasting experiences of acceptance and otherness

Participants highlighted the natural and inclusive ways in which children interact and form connections, often transcending language barriers through play. They observed that, in their experience, students tend to accept diversity instinctively and do not place significant importance on differences in nationality or background:

Students today accept diversity much more quickly than before [...] they are simply classmates, they are friends, they integrate without any problem. ¹⁴ (Daniel)

If you give children a ball in the yard you will see everyone play, it doesn't matter which country you come from or what language you speak, and I truly see this in front of me, if you throw them a ball, they will all play together. ¹⁵ (Joseph)

Participants observed a growing trend among Maltese-speaking students to favour English over Maltese in their everyday communication, expressing concern that the Maltese language is being increasingly sidelined by younger generations. As previously discussed by Camilleri Grima (2018) and Sciriha (2024), the increased use of English among Maltese youth is reshaping linguistic norms in schools. While this linguistic shift raises questions about language preservation, teachers acknowledged that it inadvertently benefits non-Maltese speaking students, as the widespread use of English facilitates peer interaction and inclusion:

Maltese as a language is being lost because most of the children are speaking in English, they prefer English. (Elena)

If a foreign student comes and knows even a little English, they actually have an advantage, because everyone speaks English. The bigger issue now is how to teach Maltese to Maltese students, because they are abandoning it—they barely use it anymore. ¹⁶ (Daniel)

In contrast to the generally positive accounts of peer acceptance described in mainstream settings, teachers with experience at the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU) Induction Hubs, which are also located within mainstream schools, reported markedly different experiences regarding inclusion and acceptance within the broader school environment. Both Joseph and Claire described feelings of otherness and hostility, particularly from school staff. Claire highlighted a symbolic yet impactful practice in which students attending the induction hub were instructed to wear casual clothing instead of the school uniform, reinforcing a visible distinction between them and their mainstream peers:

The induction students are told to come to school in casual clothes so [...] without wanting to, you are already making it seem that alright school students wear a uniform and the others are casual so there is already that difference. (Claire)

Both induction teacher participants also reported feeling marginalised and unwelcome by staff members within the mainstream school setting. They described experiencing exclusion and a lack of professional acceptance, which contributed to a broader sense of being treated as outsiders:

I honestly used to feel a certain hostility from the staff as well — to them, we were outsiders [...] I didn't really feel welcomed. ¹⁷ (Joseph)

The Head of the first school I was at didn't even want me there because she didn't want foreigners in her school [...] even the sign on the door — she put 'Migrant's Hub', not 'Learner's Hub', so you could tell from the hostility of the staff as well. ¹⁸ (Claire)

These observations reflect wider concerns identified in the literature, where migrant students are often subjected to stereotyping and exclusion (Bracken, 2014; Plenty & Jonsson,

2017). This exclusion is further reinforced by xenophobic attitudes present in both schools and wider society (Wright, 2020; Chircop, 2022; Vella Muskat, 2024). These experiences also echo critiques in the literature, where studies by Buhagiar (2021) and Gambin (2024) argue that the physical and social separation of migrant students in induction settings can hinder the development of social capital, perpetuate a sense of exclusion, and limit meaningful integration into the broader school community.

Students' Intrinsic Motivation and Desire to Learn

Participants remarked on the strong intrinsic motivation demonstrated by non-Maltese speaking students in relation to learning and academic progress. Several teachers expressed admiration for their students' eagerness to acquire knowledge and improve, often contrasting this drive with what they perceived as lower levels of motivation among their Maltese-speaking peers:

One great asset I've noticed among foreign students is their willingness to learn. If you teach them, they will learn—unlike Maltese students, who often need to be chased down to get them to work. Foreign students want to learn, and they ask for more—they're motivated! ¹⁹ (May)

As noted by Cefai et al. (2019), foreign students in Maltese schools frequently exhibit a strong drive to learn and actively participate in school life, which may stem from their desire to integrate and succeed in a new educational environment. Indeed, the findings indicate that non-Maltese speaking students often express a strong interest in learning the Maltese language and display genuine enthusiasm toward acquiring it. Joseph described this positive attitude, noting that:

Maltese is very much loved by everyone; foreigners love it, and foreign children enjoy learning Maltese. ²⁰ (Joseph)

While participants generally agreed that most non-Maltese speaking students demonstrated a strong desire to learn, several also noted that attitudes toward education can vary depending on cultural background and family circumstances. Some participants observed that in certain cases the value placed on learning Maltese did not appear to be a priority within the family. Given that Maltese is a language used primarily within Malta, some families, particularly those with transient or uncertain residency, may not view it as essential, especially if they intend to relocate to other countries where Maltese is not spoken:

I had a student who told me, 'My mummy told me that I don't need to learn Maltese, so I'm not going to study Maltese.'²¹ (Claire)

Such attitudes align with Piller's (2016) argument that migrant families often make strategic decisions about language learning based on the perceived long-term value of a language, prioritizing those seen as more globally relevant, such as English.

Theme 2: Teachers' Emotional and Practical Challenges

This theme focuses on the emotional and practical challenges faced by teachers when working in increasingly multicultural and multilingual classroom settings. Participants described the novelty of navigating such diverse environments, often without prior preparation or adequate training. Many expressed feelings of frustration and uncertainty when trying to meet the needs of non-Maltese speaking students, particularly in the absence of structured guidance.

Novelty of Multicultural and Multilingual Classroom Dynamics

Participants in this study observed a marked rise in the number of foreign non-Maltese speaking students within their classrooms with Elena expressing that some schools now host a higher number of foreign students than Maltese students:

Since about 10 years ago things started to increase in numbers [...] if you go to other schools, I mean sometimes it's more foreigners than Maltese. (Elena)

In the past five to six years, we've had a large influx of foreign students. Before that, it wasn't like this.²² (May)

Attracted by Malta's strategic location, tax incentives, widespread use of English, and political stability, many expatriates relocate for employment opportunities, particularly in sectors such as iGaming, financial services, healthcare, and construction (Vella, 2020; Barbaro-Sant, 2018). In recent years, Malta has experienced a notable increase in migration, leading to greater cultural and linguistic diversity within the national education system (Vassallo, 2014). As a result, Maltese schools have had to adapt to the needs of students from a wide range of nationalities and ethnic backgrounds (Arar, 2020). Consistent with national trends, participants also highlighted that many of these students arrive in Malta due to their parents' employment, particularly in industries such as iGaming and healthcare as Claire explained:

the students are there because their parents have a really good job. Because of iGaming or something [...] I had one student who doesn't even see his mom every day because she works at the hospital. (Claire)

The growing diversity and multiculturalism within Maltese schools is reflected in the increasingly wide range of nationalities represented in the classroom (Panzavecchia, 2020). Participants reported working with students from a broad spectrum of cultural and ethnic backgrounds:

Spanish, Russian, Indian, Syrian, Egyptian... I've had quite a few, so it's been a wonderful experience.²³ (Daniel)

Spanish, Italians, Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Americans, Serbians, Libyans, we have a lot. From everywhere, really. (Claire)

In response to the increasing cultural diversity in their classrooms, participants described the need to develop greater cultural sensitivity and adaptability in their teaching practices (Banks & Banks, 2019; Gay, 2015). Claire, for instance, highlighted the importance of recognising and respecting differing cultural norms and behaviours, particularly when these diverge from local expectations:

I had students from Iraq taking off their shoes and putting their feet on the table, whilst I'm doing the lessons. I had some starting to interrupt [...] because that's what they're used to in their country. (Claire)

Participants described how the medium of instruction in their classrooms often varies depending on the subject being taught. These classroom practices are consistent with Malta's bilingual education policy, which designates English as the language of instruction for mathematics and science, and Maltese for subjects such as religion and social studies (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012):

we try to stick with the English for maths and also for the English language and even science, but then we have social studies, science, religion, that we do in Maltese.

(Rachel)

As highlighted in the literature, code-switching is a common pedagogical strategy in Maltese classrooms, where teachers frequently alternate between Maltese and English to enhance understanding, regulate classroom discourse, and encourage student engagement (Gwee & Saravanan, 2018; Caruana & Spagnol, 2020). This practice was echoed by most participants in the current study, who described intentionally shifting between languages or translating content to support the comprehension of non-Maltese speaking students:

I shift from one language to another [...] I don't get stuck on one language. (Elena)

Every word that I give in Maltese I am translating it. (Rachel)

I'm constantly code-switching.²⁴ (May)

Participants described how limited student comprehension often necessitated spontaneous changes to their planned lessons. Several educators reported abandoning pre-prepared lesson plans upon realising that students were unable to grasp the intended content, highlighting the need for real-time adaptability in multilingual classrooms. These findings align with Parsons and Vaughn (2016), who highlight the importance of teacher adaptability in diverse classrooms. Joseph and Claire, in particular, recounted instances where they had to significantly modify or entirely discard their teaching plans due to communication barriers:

There were moments when even I said to myself, look, I'll stop here—I had planned more, but these children... I don't think we're understanding each other enough.²⁵

(Joseph)

I remember once I had prepared a lesson on Malta's currency, [...] but they didn't understand anything I was saying! [...] So the lesson I had planned, I had to scrap it.²⁶

(Claire)

Frustrations faced by teachers

Participants reported experiencing a range of practical and emotional challenges while working with non-Maltese speaking students in linguistically diverse classrooms. Feelings of helplessness, frustration, and heartbreak were commonly expressed, particularly in relation to communication barriers that hindered effective interaction with students:

I tend to feel helpless. The fact that I cannot be understood. It's frustrating not to be understood, it's frustrating for them that they can't communicate well enough with me. (Elena)

I would start by saying it's heartbreaking, in a way that, when you're trying to communicate with someone and they're not understanding you, it's tough, yes. (Claire)

The literature supports these experiences, noting that teachers working in linguistically diverse classrooms frequently report feelings of frustration, inadequacy, and burnout due to communication barriers and insufficient support when engaging with non-Maltese speaking students (Panzavecchia & Little, 2020; Arvidsson et al., 2019).

Beyond emotional difficulties, participants highlighted the significant practical demands placed on them, particularly the need to create customised resources to address the varied linguistic needs within their classrooms:

You have to create resources yourself, always searching—there is a lot of work.²⁷ (Joseph)

Sometimes, I stay up late at night creating tailored resources to fit the needs of my students.²⁸ (Daniel)

The literature highlights the significant pressures teachers face in managing linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms, particularly as they are expected to meet curriculum demands while simultaneously addressing varied student needs, often without sufficient resources or support (Free et al., 2014; Banerjee, 2019). Indeed, participants also expressed concern over balancing these demands with the broader responsibilities of classroom management, especially when teaching large, diverse groups that include students with special educational needs:

When you have a large class of fifteen students, including children with special needs and others with their own difficulties, you start wondering, “How am I going to reach all of them?”²⁹ (Daniel)

A teacher cannot do everything alone—there simply isn’t enough time. It’s simply not feasible! (May)

During the lesson, she stands up and asks me questions, and at that moment, while I’m teaching Year Six Maltese, it becomes too much—I have to tell her, “Not now.” (Rachel)

Gaps in Training and Professional Preparation

Participants consistently reported that their formal teacher training did not adequately prepare them to address the challenges of working with students who have limited proficiency in the languages of instruction, nor to manage the complexities of multicultural and multilingual classrooms. This lack of preparation was perceived as a significant setback, leaving educators to navigate these challenges independently:

I have no training in teaching Maltese and English as foreign languages, and that sets me back.³⁰ (Daniel)

As a classroom teacher, you think, “I don’t have the necessary training! How can I support them?” We never receive training sessions or even a simple service course on these situations, so it’s difficult. (Elena)

Nothing. I had no training whatsoever. It's like I was put in a class trying to figure it out all on my own with them. (Claire)

The literature consistently highlights that formal teacher training in Malta does not adequately prepare educators to manage the challenges of multicultural and multilingual classrooms, nor to support students with limited proficiency in the languages of instruction (Panzavecchia & Little, 2020; Cioffi, 2018; Bezzina & Vassallo, 2019). Participants attributed this gap in training to the relatively recent emergence of multiculturalism within Maltese classrooms, noting that during their studies, the presence of foreign students was rare and largely unanticipated:

There weren't any credits allocated for teaching Maltese to foreigners because back then Malta didn't have that problem—Malta was a different reality. ³¹ (Daniel)

Twenty-five years ago, we never imagined we would have so many foreign students. ³² (May)

In response to this lack of formal preparation, participants described relying on self-directed learning to develop the necessary skills and knowledge. This included independent research, reading, and informal learning strategies to adapt their teaching practices:

There's this "hidden curriculum" that isn't taught. I learned that I needed to be ready to learn other things on my own. ³³ (Daniel)

You research, read, consult professionals and you try to figure out your own path. (Claire)

Theme 3: Contributions and Limitations of the Migrant Learner's Unit

This theme explores the role and limitations of the Migrant Learner's Unit (MLU) in supporting non-Maltese speaking students. It examines key aspects such as the assessment and placement process within the induction hub, challenges related to student readiness and

reintegration into mainstream classrooms, teachers' preference for targeted pull-out support over standard induction courses, and broader systemic and operational constraints affecting the effectiveness of the MLU.

Assessment and placement in the induction hub

Drawing on their experience within the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU), Claire and Joseph provided detailed insights into the structure and services offered by the unit. Consistent with the literature, they explained that the MLU is designed to support migrant students who arrive in Malta with minimal or no proficiency in the languages of instruction (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014; Malta Journal of Education, 2020). According to the participants, students typically spend between one to two years in the induction hub, where they receive focused language support before being reintegrated into mainstream schooling:

The process of the hub is that they come here for a year and then reintegrate into the school they came from [...] so if I had twelve students by the end of the year, all of them would move on to other schools. ³⁴ (Joseph)

Both Joseph and Claire highlighted the unique challenges of teaching within the induction hub, where classrooms comprise students of varying ages, typically ranging from Year 1 to Year 6. They explained that this diversity required significant flexibility, as they needed to adjust their expectations and instructional approaches to accommodate students at different developmental stages and linguistic abilities within the same classroom environment:

We have instances where we have children from Year 1 to Year 6, and you have to teach them. ³⁵ (Claire)

I have Year 1 to Year 6 students together [...] the class is mixed with all these ages and different nationalities, and they arrive at different times throughout the year [...]

there is a lot of work, and you must adapt it to different levels because what I expect from a Year 3 student is not what I would expect from a Year 6 student.³⁶ (Joseph)

Claire explained that upon completing one year at the induction hub, students underwent a basic assessment to evaluate their proficiency in the Maltese language prior to transitioning into mainstream education. She described the assessment as consisting of simple comprehension tasks, where students were required to answer fundamental questions based on a short reading passage:

Around three really basic questions, and the students would have to answer with me by their side. So, you read them a small passage, I remember it was about a dog, and then they had three questions on the passage. So, for example, what was the colour of the dog? And they would have to say, in Maltese, of course. (Claire)

Challenges in Student Readiness and Reintegration Post-Hub

Participants with experience working in the induction hubs highlighted the significant challenges faced by students during the transition from the hub environment to mainstream classrooms. They described this process as often being anxiety-inducing for students, particularly due to the stark contrast between the smaller, supportive setting of the induction hub and the larger, less personalized mainstream classrooms:

They see it as something overwhelming, a hard shock for them—they tell me they don't want to leave, they want to stay here. I even had students who tried to fail just to remain here because they were afraid to move to another school.³⁷ (Joseph)

These insights are consistent with findings by Gambin (2024) and Buhagiar (2021), who noted that the lack of structured follow-up and the narrow focus on language acquisition within induction programmes can leave students underprepared for the social and academic complexities of mainstream education. The participants also noted that students often

struggled academically upon reintegration, as the mainstream curriculum was considerably more demanding compared to the basic, foundational language instruction provided at the hub:

Look at the gap this child will face between the basics done here and Year Six—there's nothing in between.³⁸ (Claire)

Indeed, a common concern expressed by participants regarding students transitioning from the induction hub was the persistent gap between students' language proficiency and the academic demands of the mainstream curriculum. Participants noted that, despite the support provided within the hub, many students re-enter mainstream classrooms without having developed sufficient linguistic competence to engage meaningfully with grade-level content. This aligns with critiques by Gambin (2024) and Buhagiar (2021), who noted that the limited duration and standardized structure of the MLU often fail to equip students with the necessary language skills for academic success:

Imagine a Year Five student arrives from the hub, and the teacher finds out that all they can do is write the alphabet, form simple CVC words, and construct a few sentences. But the Year Five syllabus is already way ahead! What happens? The student just sits there!³⁹ (Daniel)

Participants highlighted the existence of unrealistic expectations placed on students following their completion of one year at the induction hub. They expressed concern that students are often assumed to have achieved a high level of proficiency in both Maltese and English within a limited timeframe:

We expect them that in one year they are exceptional in Maltese, exceptional in English, when it's tough. (Claire)

Participants expressed frustration regarding the lack of communication and coordination between the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU) and mainstream schools. They emphasized that reintegration processes often fail to account for the individual needs and readiness of students, leading to challenges for both learners and classroom teachers. This observation is consistent with the literature and highlights the reliance on a standardized approach that fails to accommodate the diverse linguistic, academic, and socio-emotional needs of migrant students (Gambin, 2024; Buhagiar, 2021).

Programs should be designed based on the needs of students, and only then should they be reintegrated. Otherwise, the classroom teacher will be driven crazy. (Rachel)

While these initiatives are good and on the right track, there is no communication between the starting point and the reintegration phase. This results in a huge waste of time and resources.⁴⁰ (Daniel)

Systemic and Operational Limitations of the MLU

When asked about their perceptions of the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU), participants expressed significant frustration and disappointment regarding its management and operational effectiveness. Teacher 6 described the unit as lacking clear structure and direction, stating:

The unit is not well managed at all, and as a result, the children are not truly benefiting from it because there is no specific structure.⁴¹ (Claire)

Mainstream teachers receiving students from the induction hub echoed similar concerns, with May remarking, “The children know nothing”⁴², highlighting perceived inadequacies in student preparedness. Teachers working within the hub reported feeling burdened by unrealistic expectations, noting that they were required to accelerate language acquisition processes that typically span several years:

I cannot take a child who is just starting to learn the language and have them reach Year Five level by the end of the year to be ready for Year Six. ⁴³ (Joseph)

Concerns were also raised about the qualifications and experience of MLU staff. Participants noted that a significant proportion of induction teachers lacked formal training in education or experience working with linguistically diverse students:

If you speak to MLU teachers, 45% come from backgrounds where they just have an A-level and some intermediate qualifications, so they don't really know anything. One of them, for example, was a school clerk who applied to join the unit and was accepted—it's a disaster. ⁴⁴ (Claire)

Additionally, participants expressed concern over low levels of motivation among some induction hub teachers, with Claire stating:

There are many induction teachers who take a very casual attitude, thinking it's just about teaching a bit of Maltese and English, without real commitment. ⁴⁵ (Claire)

These findings are supported by the literature, which highlights criticisms of the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU) for its standardized approach, insufficient timeframes for language acquisition, and failure to address the diverse needs of migrant students (Gambin, 2024; Buhagiar, 2021). Additionally, limited teacher training in multicultural education has been noted as a factor that further undermines the unit's effectiveness (Panzavecchia & Little, 2020).

Theme 4: Strategies Used for Promoting Cultural and Academic Inclusion

This theme examines the strategies participants employed to foster both cultural and academic inclusion for non-Maltese speaking students. In the face of language barriers, participants highlighted the use of alternative tools and non-verbal communication methods

to support student understanding and engagement. Additionally, efforts to integrate students' cultural backgrounds—such as incorporating their native languages and traditions—were seen as valuable steps toward creating a more inclusive and affirming classroom environment.

The use of alternative tools and non-verbal communication strategies

The findings revealed that participants often employed creative and flexible teaching strategies to accommodate students with limited proficiency in the languages of instruction. To ensure comprehension and active learning, teachers adapted their lesson planning and delivery by integrating a variety of multimodal resources and interactive methods. These included the use of questioning, visual aids, music, drama, and consistent routines:

Questions, lots of questions! I also use pictures and encourage dialogue through drama [...] if pictures don't work, we try miming! Or we incorporate singing.⁴⁶

(Daniel)

Honestly, pictures and videos saved me and sort of a routine, so doing the same thing every day. (Claire)

This aligns with existing literature, which highlights the importance of multimodal and culturally responsive pedagogies in linguistically diverse classrooms (Gay, 2015; Banerjee, 2019). As noted in the literature review, the growing presence of multilingual learners in Maltese schools has encouraged educators to move beyond traditional methods and adopt more adaptive and inclusive teaching practices. Additionally, participants reported using hand gestures as alternative means of communication, particularly when students appeared to struggle with understanding verbal instructions. These non-verbal strategies were viewed as essential tools for facilitating basic comprehension and maintaining engagement in the absence of shared language proficiency:

I go in front of him and try with sign language to show him things physically so that perhaps he will understand. (Elena)

With gestures, at first with gestures.⁴⁷ (Joseph)

Participants expressed the view that non-Maltese speaking students often acquired language and social skills more effectively through peer interaction than through formal instruction alone. This perception aligns with findings from the EU-funded *Language Buddy Project*, which highlights how peer mentoring strategies, such as buddy systems, can significantly enhance migrant students' language acquisition, school engagement, and cultural adjustment (Symplexis, 2024). As a result, many teachers deliberately incorporated group work and peer mentoring strategies into their classroom practices, such as the use of a buddy system:

I do group work because I think that from the other kids they learn more, not from my instruction. (Rachel)

Most of the time I work as group work so I try to buddy them with someone who is quite good in class so he helps them along. (Elena)

Participants also reported making use of digital tools, including internet-based platforms and artificial intelligence (AI), to translate classroom materials and facilitate communication with students and their families. As highlighted by Levy and Kennedy (2023) and the European Commission (2020), digital translation tools provide practical, real-time support that aids comprehension. These technologies were employed to adapt notes and resources into students' native languages, thereby promoting comprehension and parental engagement:

For certain notes that I send to parents, I tried to go to Gemini, the AI translator, I did the note to English and it changes it to Arabic. (Elena)

I use MS Teams, I utilize ChatGPT and Gemini AI for translation—from Maltese to Arabic or English to Arabic. That way, I can integrate their language where needed.⁴⁸

(Daniel)

Cultural Integration and incorporating students' native languages

Participants emphasised the importance of fostering an inclusive classroom environment where students from diverse national and cultural backgrounds could share their personal experiences and traditions. This approach was intended to promote mutual understanding, cultural appreciation, and a sense of belonging among all students. This approach reflects principles of multicultural education, which aim to respect and value students' diverse cultural identities within the learning process (Banks & Banks, 2019; Gay, 2015). Teachers described how class discussions and activities were structured to create opportunities for cultural exchange, allowing students to learn from one another in a respectful and engaging setting:

When we talk about food, they all get involved! One talks about couscous, another about spicy chili dishes, and we integrate their cultures that way. I enjoy it! I'm also curious and love to learn. We share experiences, and they feel comfortable (Daniel)

Teachers also described efforts to incorporate students' native languages into classroom activities, noting the positive impact this had on student engagement and sense of inclusion. Such practices were seen as affirming students' linguistic identities and fostering a more welcoming learning environment:

I've been lucky because I know Arabic. So sometimes, I write their names in Arabic for them, and they love it!⁴⁹ (Daniel)

I like to ask them how they say things in their language, and I also enjoy incorporating things from their culture into the lessons, especially when I'm preparing topics.⁵⁰ (Joseph)

This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that multilingual education enhances students' sense of belonging and supports the development of cultural identity (Csata & Marącz, 2021; Ghosh & Galczynski, 2014). As García and Otheguy (2020) argue, embracing translanguaging practices in schools reflects a commitment to equity and inclusion by valuing students' full linguistic repertoires.

Theme 5: Professional Support and Fulfilment in Multilingual Classrooms

This theme explores the professional experiences of teachers navigating multilingual classrooms, focusing on both the support systems available to them and the personal fulfilment derived from their work. Participants described the value of collaborative practices and support networks, including the contributions of colleagues, literacy teams, and educational agencies.

Support Networks and Collaborative Practices

It is worth noting that these participants did not just paint a picture of doom and gloom. They also identified several sources of support that assisted them in addressing the diverse needs within their classrooms. They highlighted the collaborative role of staff members, such as Learning Support Educators and complementary teachers, in facilitating student engagement and providing additional instructional assistance:

I also try to put them as near as possible to the LSE, if she can't help them at least they listen to the extra explanations she does to the other children and even to keep an eye on them so, somehow, we try to manage. (Elena)

We are lucky enough in this school that we still have a complimentary [teacher], she helps them a lot, both in English and in Maltese. (Rachel)

Participants also acknowledged the valuable support provided by literacy teams within the educational sector, particularly the National Literacy Agency, which promotes bilingual literacy and assists migrant students in developing proficiency in both Maltese and English while providing ongoing language assistance that helps teachers address the diverse linguistic needs in their classrooms (National Literacy Agency, 2023):

The educational officer, when we have these difficulties, she gives us hints on how to approach them and how to help them to acquire the language so we have this support system coming from the literacy team. (Rachel)

I truly find great support from the National Literacy Agency—they help me a lot, whatever I ask for, they send it to me, so I find resources. ⁵¹ (Joseph)

Participants working within the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU) also reported receiving consistent support from the agency:

I find great support from the Migrant Learners' Unit—there are people who value our work. ⁵² (Joseph)

The literature emphasizes the importance of collaborative support as a means to facilitate inclusion and address diverse student needs. (Chircop, 2018).

Teacher Fulfilment, Motivation and Advocacy

Despite acknowledging the inherent difficulties of their roles, participants expressed a strong sense of fulfilment and satisfaction, particularly when witnessing the progress of their students in both linguistic competence and social integration:

It's a challenge, but it's a fulfilling challenge. Imagine little eggshells in your classroom and you're seeing them break and flourish in a way, so, it's nice. (Claire)

At least my satisfaction would be that they learned ten new words.⁵³ (May)

This sense of reward aligns with recent studies highlighting the intrinsic motivation educators derive from supporting migrant learners (Liu, 2024; Premier & Parr, 2019). Moreover, participants emphasized the importance of resilience and advocacy in their work, particularly when addressing instances of injustice or marginalization faced by their students:

Working in this setting you have to be really, really open-minded and you have to fight for the kids. (Claire)

Finally, participants highlighted their commitment to fostering ambition and self-confidence among their students, regardless of linguistic limitations. The participants' commitment to fostering ambition and self-confidence among their students, reflects principles of culturally responsive teaching. As Gay (2018) emphasizes, inclusive practices that recognize and value students' identities contribute to a positive self-concept, encouraging engagement and resilience in diverse classrooms:

I want to give them the confidence to feel like they belong. I don't believe in putting up barriers. If they ask me, "Can I become a doctor? Can I do this?" My answer is always: Yes! Work hard, push yourself, and you will get there! I want to motivate them because they deserve to dream big!⁵⁴ (Daniel)

Theme 6: Institutional Gaps and Recommendations for Improvement

This theme addresses the institutional gaps identified by participants and their recommendations for improving support for non-Maltese speaking students within the educational system. It emphasizes the call for a structured multicultural framework in

education to promote inclusion, cultural sensitivity, and acceptance within schools. It explores the lack of communication and coordination between services, highlighting the need for better bridging mechanisms to ensure continuity of support. Additionally, the theme discusses the necessity for enhanced teacher training and access to appropriate resources.

The need for a multicultural framework in education encouraging inclusion and acceptance

Participants emphasized the importance of implementing tangible measures within schools to celebrate diversity and promote multiculturalism. Simple initiatives, such as displaying national flags representing students' countries of origin, were seen as ways to foster belonging and inclusion for non-Maltese speaking students. This aligns with multicultural education frameworks, which advocate for practices that recognize and value students' cultural identities as a means of supporting integration and enhancing student wellbeing (Banks & Banks, 2019; Gay, 2018):

If a school receives three Egyptian students and a Syrian student, we could display posters of their national flags in the classroom. ⁵⁶ (Daniel)

In discussing inclusion more broadly, participants with experience in the MLU induction hubs expressed concern that genuine inclusion is not always prioritized for students or staff within these settings. This reflects broader critiques in the literature, where researchers argue that the structural separation inherent in induction programmes can undermine long-term integration and foster a sense of isolation for migrant learners (Gambin, 2024; Buhagiar, 2021). While these studies focus on student experiences, participants in this study highlighted that similar dynamics affect staff, calling for greater recognition and respect from mainstream colleagues:

Being treated as if I am a mainstream class. It is as important as in front of me I don't have puppets or animals, I have students, just like the mainstream year one teacher has students in front of her. We speak so much on inclusion that... Is it really there? Are we really implementing inclusion? (Claire)

Both Claire and Joseph stressed the need to raise awareness among mainstream staff regarding the role and function of the induction hub, aiming to dispel misconceptions that these classes are limited to non-academic activities:

I feel that mainstream classes should at least have one session to understand what the induction class is and its role. They might have the impression that students just go there to do crafts all day. ⁵⁷ (Joseph).

A lack of communication between services and the need for bridging

A common concern expressed by participants was that, despite the existence of multiple services within the education sector aimed at supporting language development, there is a significant lack of communication and collaboration between these services. This fragmentation was perceived to create confusion and inefficiencies, as various departments and initiatives operated in isolation:

There are many great initiatives, such as the complementary education sector, literacy support, Maltese for foreigners, and English for foreigners. Everyone works passionately within their own sector, but there is no liaison between them. So, everyone works independently. ⁵⁸ (Daniel)

They run parallel to each other like two straight lines that never meet. And if they never meet, they won't communicate, and that's a mistake! ⁵⁹ (May)

Participants emphasized the need for greater coordination through the establishment of bridging mechanisms that facilitate collaboration, resource sharing, and continuity of support—particularly during critical transitions, such as from the induction hub to mainstream classrooms:

We need a merging of sectors. Everyone working on the same area should collaborate. Maybe I can provide you with a resource, and you can share one with me, so we work together. ⁶⁰ (Daniel)

There should be liaison between all sectors—if we have the Maltese Education Officer, Literacy Officer, and Migrant Learners Unit, I believe they need to bridge their work. (Rachel)

The above reflect broader concerns about fragmentation within the education sector, where limited coordination between services can lead to confusion, inefficiencies, and inadequate continuity of support for migrant students. Gambin (2024) too highlights systemic gaps, particularly the lack of follow-up support when students transition from the MLU to mainstream classrooms.

The need for further training and the provision of resources

Participants highlighted the urgent need for enhanced training in multicultural education, emphasizing that current teacher preparation programs fail to equip educators for the realities of linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms:

I hope that at university they expose the new students because it is very important, preparing new teachers I think it should be a must. (Elena)

I would like to be trained more on how to tackle the understanding of the most simple and basic because with some students we don't even have the simple and basic with them. (Rachel)

This concern is echoed in the literature, where numerous studies point to a lack of formal training in multicultural pedagogy and translingual practices, leaving teachers underprepared to address the needs of migrant students (Panzavecchia & Little, 2020; Cioffi, 2018; Bezzina & Vassallo, 2019). Researchers have advocated for systematic revisions to teacher education curricula to ensure that future educators are better prepared to foster inclusive learning environments (European Commission, 2019).

In addition to training, participants stressed the necessity for increased access to structured resources that would alleviate educators from feelings of overwhelm while supporting inclusive practices and celebrating cultural diversity within schools:

More resources should be created, and structured materials should be distributed by the Department of Education to schools so that teachers are facilitated rather than overwhelmed. ⁶¹ (Daniel)

This concern is reflected in the literature, which highlights that limited access to teaching aids, language support, and specialized staff often leaves educators struggling to manage the demands of diverse classrooms (Banerjee, 2019; Burke & Goldman, 2018). Furthermore, participants identified the provision of translators as a critical support mechanism to improve communication with parents of non-Maltese speaking students:

It's good to have like translators who can help us breakthrough with the parents and then perhaps basic words especially with those children who are new to the language. (Elena)

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the key findings of the study, highlighting the multifaceted challenges and experiences of teachers working with non-Maltese speaking students in primary schools. The six themes identified underscore the complexities of fostering effective education within multilingual and multicultural classrooms. Participants also pointed out significant gaps in systemic support, training, and collaboration across educational services. Furthermore, the need for a more structured, inclusive framework that promotes cultural sensitivity and celebrates diversity was evident. At the same time, participants highlighted the resilience of students and of themselves through creativity and commitment in addressing these challenges. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the current educational landscape and offer important considerations for future policy development and practice aimed at enhancing the inclusion and academic success of non-Maltese speaking students in Malta.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter summarizes the key findings of the study and discusses their implications for educational practice. It also outlines the study's strengths and limitations, followed by recommendations for future research in the field of multilingual and multicultural education.

Summary of Main Findings

This study explored the experiences and perspectives of primary school teachers in Malta regarding the academic and social challenges faced by non-Maltese speaking students. Participants highlighted that limited language proficiency in both Maltese and English remains a central barrier to student participation and learning. As echoed by Falzon et al. (2012) and Żammit (2021), many newly arrived students enter school without basic language skills, which impacts not only academic achievement but also social integration. Teachers reported that these students often struggle to express themselves, leading to disengagement and isolation (OECD, 2014; Schachner et al., 2014). Personality traits, such as assertiveness, were identified as mediating factors in social adaptation, reinforcing Mirowsky's (2017) argument that integration is shaped by both individual and systemic factors.

Cultural and trauma-related challenges were also significant, particularly among students from conflict-affected regions such as Syria and Ukraine. Teachers observed the emotional toll of displacement and war on students, often manifesting in behavioural or attentional difficulties. These findings are supported by Lembke, Linderkamp, and Casale (2024), who emphasize the impact of trauma on refugee students' capacity for learning and emotional regulation.

Teachers reported high levels of frustration and emotional strain especially when trying to communicate with students who lacked basic language skills. These findings reflect literature that highlights teacher burnout in multilingual settings due to communication barriers, heavy workloads, and inadequate systemic support (Arvidsson et al., 2019; Panzavecchia & Little, 2020). Furthermore, participants described the novelty of teaching in multicultural classrooms and the absence of adequate training, echoing concerns by Bezzina and Vassallo (2019) and Cioffi (2018) regarding gaps in teacher preparation programs in Malta.

Participants expressed concerns regarding the effectiveness of the MLU, particularly around unrealistic expectations, insufficient language preparation, and poor communication with mainstream schools. These findings are in line with literature criticizing the MLU's standardized approach and lack of individualized support for migrant students (Gambin, 2024; Buhagiar, 2021). Teachers also highlighted staffing issues and inadequate training within the unit, echoing research pointing to a lack of specialized educator preparation in such settings. The challenges faced by students during reintegration further support existing critiques that current induction programmes fail to ensure long-term academic readiness (Buhagiar, 2021).

Despite the obstacles, participants demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusion through the use of alternative strategies. Teachers employed non-verbal communication methods, visual aids, peer support systems, and digital tools to overcome language barriers. These approaches are consistent with culturally responsive pedagogy, which encourages flexibility and student-centred teaching (Gay, 2015; Banerjee, 2019). Teachers also embraced students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds by incorporating native languages and traditions into classroom activities, aligning with the principles of translingual and multicultural education (García & Otheguy, 2020; Banks & Banks, 2019).

Teachers identified support networks—such as Learning Support Educators, complementary teachers, and the National Literacy Agency—as vital in helping them manage diverse classrooms (Chircop, 2018). While structural challenges persisted, many participants expressed deep professional fulfilment when witnessing student progress. This sense of reward resonates with findings by Liu (2024) and Premier & Parr (2019), who highlight that supporting migrant learners can enhance teachers' intrinsic motivation and sense of purpose.

Finally, the study identified significant institutional gaps, particularly the lack of coordination between educational services supporting migrant students. These findings are in line with research highlighting systemic fragmentation and the need for integrated approaches to migrant education (Gambin, 2024). The call for enhanced teacher training and resource provision echoes widespread critiques regarding the inadequacy of current teacher education programmes in addressing multicultural realities (Panzavecchia & Little, 2020; Bezzina & Vassallo, 2019). Furthermore, participants' emphasis on fostering inclusion through multicultural initiatives supports literature advocating for culturally responsive frameworks within schools (Banks & Banks, 2019; Gay, 2018). The need to raise awareness about the role of induction hubs also reflects concerns about misconceptions and the marginalization of both migrant students and staff (Buhagiar, 2021; Gambin, 2024).

Implications for Practice

The results may guide policy makers and the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU) in addressing systemic gaps, enhancing collaboration between services, and providing better resources and training for teachers. The insights into the challenges faced by teachers working with non-Maltese speaking students and the practical strategies they find effective can assist educators in adopting more effective, flexible, and inclusive teaching strategies to support language development, social integration, and academic progress. Additionally, these findings may be

valuable for educational psychologists in promoting culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices, while supporting both educators and students in navigating the complexities of multilingual and multicultural classrooms.

Strengths

This study offers several strengths that enhance its contribution to the existing literature on multicultural education in Malta. While previous local research has largely focused on the perspectives of migrant students, this study addresses a significant gap by exploring the experiences of teachers, providing valuable insights from an underrepresented viewpoint. The use of qualitative methods allowed for rich, in-depth data collection, capturing the complexities and emotional realities faced by educators in multilingual classrooms. By including participants from both mainstream schools and the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU), the study reflects diverse educational contexts, strengthening the applicability of its findings. Furthermore, given the recent rise in migration, the research is both timely and relevant, offering practical recommendations that can inform teachers, policymakers, and educational psychologists. Finally, the study contributes to the broader discourse on multicultural education in small states, providing context-specific insights with clear implications for practice and policy development.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. The small sample size of six participants limits the generalisability of the findings, as the experiences shared cannot fully represent those of all primary school teachers in Malta. Additionally, the study focused solely on teachers within state schools and the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU), excluding perspectives from educators in church or independent schools, where experiences may differ. The reliance on self-reported data through interviews may also introduce bias, as participants might have

presented their experiences in a socially desirable manner. Lastly, the study did not include the perspectives of other key stakeholders, such as students, parents, or school administrators, which could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and supports within multilingual educational settings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should consider expanding the sample size to include a more diverse range of educators across different school sectors, including church and independent schools, to enhance the generalisability of findings. Additionally, incorporating the perspectives of other stakeholders—such as non-Maltese speaking students, parents, educational psychologists, and school administrators—would provide a more holistic understanding of the challenges and supports within multilingual classrooms. Longitudinal studies could also be beneficial in examining the long-term effectiveness of current practices and the impact of systemic changes, particularly within the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU) and mainstream education. Finally, future research could explore the development and evaluation of targeted interventions, teacher training programs, and inclusive policies aimed at improving educational outcomes for non-Maltese speaking students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the experiences and challenges faced by teachers working with non-Maltese speaking students in primary schools. The findings highlight significant language barriers, gaps in systemic support, and the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by educators in fostering inclusion and academic progress. While the study sheds light on critical areas for improvement within Malta's educational framework, it also emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive practices, enhanced collaboration, and targeted training. It is hoped that this research will not only

contribute to the existing body of knowledge but also serve as a catalyst for positive change—informing educators, policymakers, the Migrant Learners’ Unit, and other professionals such as educational psychologists. Ultimately, this study’s aspiration is that these insights will lead to more inclusive, supportive, and equitable educational environments where all students, regardless of linguistic or cultural background, are empowered to thrive.

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Appendix A



MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION, SPORT,
YOUTH, RESEARCH & INNOVATION
Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department

Tel: 25982743

researchandinnovation@ilearn.edu.mt

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

Date: 11th August 2024

Ref: R06-2024 1952

To: Head of School – SBC Primary School

From: Senior Manager – Research and School Internal Review Unit

Title of Research Study: *Lost in Translation: Understanding Teachers' Perceptions of Language and Communication Difficulties Experienced by Non-Maltese Students in the Classroom.*

The MEYR Research Ethics Committee within the Research and School Internal Review Unit, Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department, would like to inform that approval is granted to **Janet Richard** 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 complying 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

MEYR Research Ethics Committee
Research and School Internal Review Unit
Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department

f/Jeannine Vassallo she/her

Senior Manager
Research and School Internal Review Unit
Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department

Appendix B

5/15/25, 3:57 PM

University of Malta Mail - Request to act as gatekeeper for research study



Janet Richard <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>

Request to act as gatekeeper for research study

Janet Richard <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>

19 August 2024 at 09:37

To: [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]

I hope this email finds you well,

My name is Janet Richard and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master of Psychology in Educational Psychology. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled "Lost in Translation: Understanding Teachers' Perceptions of Language and Communication Difficulties Experienced by Non-Maltese Students in the Classroom." This study aims to investigate teachers' understanding and experiences of how poor proficiency in the languages of instruction affect students' active and meaningful participation and inclusion in classroom activities as well as how academic performance and attainment may also be impacted. The study also aims to uncover how Maltese teachers adapt their teaching styles and materials in order to cater for and support non-Maltese students with poor proficiency in both English and Maltese. This project is being conducted under the supervision of Professor Paul Bartolo.

In order to carry out my research, I will need to conduct a series of interviews with teachers who have experience working with non-Maltese students who have poor proficiency in the languages of instruction in the classroom. A total of 6-8 participants are required for this study. Participants must occupy the role of a qualified primary school teacher currently employed at a Maltese state school ranging from year 1 to year 6, irrespective of gender. The teachers must have experience working with a minimum of 1-3 non-Maltese students in their classroom in order to be able to share their perceptions and experiences of working with these students while exploring potential challenges and necessary adaptations made. For this reason, I am currently reaching out to a number of Heads of primary state schools within St Benedict's College in order to recruit potential participants. Permission to conduct this research within state schools has been granted by the MEYR Research Ethics Committee within the Research and School Internal Review Unit, Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department.

Data collection methods will involve an interview with class teachers which will be scheduled at a time and location chosen by the participant either face-to-face or online, in order to gain an understanding of their experiences and perceptions of working with non-Maltese students and how language and communication difficulties affect the active participation of all students in the classroom. Participants will be provided with an information sheet explaining the aims of the study as well as details about what the interview entails and how they will be carried out. Individuals agreeing to take part in the study will also be given a consent form explaining their rights as well as the conditions of the research.

Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher for the purpose of data analysis. All data will be destroyed on completion of the study by December 2025.

I am therefore writing to ask whether you will be willing to pass along the enclosed information to potential participants who may be interested in learning about this research, thus acting as a gatekeeper in this study. I have provided you with a copy of the information sheet and consent forms to be used in the research process. Attached also find the official authorization letter to conduct research within state schools issued by the MEYR.

Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor; both our contact details are provided below.

Thank you for your kind consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Janet Richard

5/15/25, 3:57 PM
99714653

University of Malta Mail - Request to act as gatekeeper for research study

Supervisor Details:

Professor Paul Bartolo

paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt

23402927

3 attachments

 **Information Sheet English.docx**
24K

 **Participant Consent Form English.docx**
15K

 **RESEARCH AUTHORISATION Letter R06-2024 1952 Janet Richard HoSSBCPR.pdf**
99K

Appendix C

5/15/25, 4:26 PM

University of Malta Mail - Request to act as a gatekeeper



Janet Richard <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>

Request to act as a gatekeeper

22 October 2024 at 15:48

To: [REDACTED]

Cc: "janet.richard.17" <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>, [REDACTED]

Dear All

Could you please help Janet in this study? I chose 3 teachers who have a bagage of experience. Kindly liaise with Ms.Janet for the interview.

She is a trainee pshychologist who is giving service to our school and so I believe it is our duty to help her in her study.

Regards

[REDACTED]
Head of School
[REDACTED]

From: Janet Richard <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>**Sent:** Wednesday, October 16, 2024 12:41**To:** [REDACTED]**Cc:** [REDACTED]**Subject:** Request to act as a gatekeeper

[Quoted text hidden]

3 attachments

**Information Sheet English.docx**

24K

**RESEARCH AUTHORISATION Letter R06-2024 1952 Janet Richard HoSSBCPR (1).pdf**

99K

**Participant Consent Form English.docx**

15K

Appendix D

5/15/25, 4:28 PM

University of Malta Mail - Request to act as gatekeeper for research study



Janet Richard <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>

Request to act as gatekeeper for research study

[Redacted]
To: "janet.richard.17" <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>

1 October 2024 at 13:19

Dear Ms. Richard,

I trust this email finds you well. I am enclosing the consent form of 3 participants who are willing to take part in your research on non-Maltese children in state schools.

The teachers who consented are a year 2, a year 3 and the complementary teacher. Our teachers will be available for the interviews on a Thursday during peripatetic lessons.

Let's keep in touch.
Best regards,

--



From: Janet Richard <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>
Sent: 01 October 2024 05:55
To: [Redacted]
Subject: Fwd: Request to act as gatekeeper for research study

[Quoted text hidden]

Non-Maltese students.pdf
405K

Appendix E

5/15/25, 4:29 PM

University of Malta Mail - Request to act as gatekeeper for research study



Janet Richard <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>

Request to act as gatekeeper for research study

To: Janet Richard <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>

19 August 2024 at 10:23

Kindly contact me on [REDACTED] to help you.

Sent from [Outlook for Android](#)

From: Janet Richard <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>

Sent: Monday, August 19, 2024 10:06:55 AM

To: [REDACTED]

Subject: Request to act as gatekeeper for research study

[Quoted text hidden]

Appendix F

Interview Guide: English

1. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. How long have you been teaching in primary schools?
2. What different nationalities have you had in your classroom?
3. How would you describe your experience teaching non-Maltese students with low proficiency in both Maltese and English?
4. In your opinion, how do language and communication barriers affect the academic achievement and active participation of non-Maltese students in the classroom?
5. How would you describe the integration and social inclusion of non-Maltese students in the classroom and in the school in general?
6. What is your opinion on students coming from the migrants learning unit?
 - a. Can you describe the process these students go through when transitioning from the migrant learner's unit to mainstream education?
 - b. How do you think these students are supported with regards to language acquisition?
 - c. How are you prepared or notified that your class will receive a student coming from the migrant learner's unit?
 - i. Is there a hand-over of the children's work or progress?
7. What are the main challenges you face when planning and conducting lessons with students who have poor proficiency in the language/s of instruction?
8. Are there any particular ways in which you try to engage non-Maltese students with poor language proficiency in the classroom?
 - a. How do you ensure understanding?

9. What is your opinion on the use of non-Maltese students' diverse linguistic background in the classroom?
 - a. Have you ever adopted this approach in your classroom?
 - b. If so, how?

10. How do you feel your training to become a teacher prepared you to work with students with poor proficiency in the languages of instruction?

11. In your opinion, how can both educators and non-Maltese students be supported in navigating language barriers in the classroom?

12. What are the language policies in place in your current school?
 - a. What is/are the main language/s of instruction?
 - b. What about subjects where language is not the main focus such as religion/science/geography/maths?
 - c. Which language is mostly used in school? For example, during assemblies, talks, school circulars, certificates etc?

13. Do you have recommendations with regards to the education of non-Maltese students? Would you like to make any suggestions for further training or amendments in language policies?

Appendix G

Interview Guide: Maltese

1. Grazzi talli aċċettajt li tipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju. Kemm ilek tgħallem fl-iskejjel tal-primarja?
2. X'Nazjonalitajiet differenti ġieli kellek fil-klassi tiegħek?
3. Kif tiddekrivi l-esperjenza tiegħek tagħllem studenti mhux Maltin b'proficjenza baxxa kemm fil-Malti kif ukoll fl-Ingliż?
4. Fl-opinjoni tiegħek, kif taħseb li diffikulta fil-lingwa u l-komunikazzjoni jaffettwaw il-kisba akkademika u l-partecipazzjoni attiva ta' studenti mhux Maltin fil-klassi?
5. Kif tiddekrivi l-integrazzjoni u l-inkluzjoni soċjali ta' studenti mhux Maltin fil-klassi u fl-iskola inġenerali?
6. X'inhi l-opinjoni tiegħek dwar studenti li ġejjin mil migrant learner's unit?
 - a. Tista' tiddekrivi l-proċess li jgħaddu minnu dawn l-istudenti sabiex jiġu mil migrant learner's unit għal mainstream?
 - b. Kif taħseb li dawn l-istudenti huma appoġġjati fir-rigward tal-akkwist tal-lingwa?
 - c. Kif inti ppreparat/a jew innotifikat/a li l-klassi tiegħek se tircievi student/a ġej/ġejja mil migrant learner's unit?
 - i. Hemm trasferiment tax-xogħol jew progress tat-tfal?
7. X'inhuma l-isfidi ewlenin li tiffaċċja meta tippjana u tmexxi lezzjonijiet ma' studenti li għandhom proficjenza fqira fil-lingwa/i ta' istruzzjoni?
8. Hemm xi metodi partikolari li tuża sabiex tinvolvi studenti mhux Maltin b'proficjenza fqira fil-lingwa fil-klassi?
 - a. Kif tiżgura l-fehim?

9. X'inhum l-opinjoni tiegħek dwar l-użu ta' l-lingwa diversa ta' studenti mhux Maltin fil-klassi?
 - a. Qatt adottajt din il-prattika fil-klassi tiegħek?
 - b. Jekk iva, kif?

10. Kif thoss li t-taħriġ tiegħek biex issir għalliem/a ippreparak biex taħdem ma' studenti b'proficjenza fqira fil-lingwi tal-istruzzjoni?

11. Fl-opinjoni tiegħek, kif jistgħu kemm l-edukaturi kif ukoll l-istudenti mhux Maltin jiġu appoġġjati biex jinnavigaw l-ostakli tal-lingwa fil-klassi?

12. X'inhuma il- "language policies" li qieghdin fis-sehħ bhalissa fl-iskola fejn qieghda/qieghed taħdem?
 - a. Liema hi/huma l-lingwa/lingwi principali?
 - b. Xi tgħidli dwar sugġetti fejn il-lingwa mhijiex l-enfasi ewlieni bħar-religjon/xjenza/geografija/matematika?
 - c. Liema lingwa tintuża l-aktar fl-iskola? Per eżempju, waqt l-assemblea ta' l-iskola, taħditiet, ċirkulari tal-iskola, ċertifikati eċċ?

13. X'inhuma r-rakkomandazzjonijiet tiegħek fir-rigward ta' aktar taħriġ jew emendi fil-polza tal-lingwa fil-qasam ta' l-edukazzjoni?

Appendix H

Date:

Information letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Janet Richard and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master of Psychology in Educational Psychology. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled: “Lost in Translation: Understanding Teachers’ Perceptions of Language and Communication Difficulties Experienced by Non-Maltese Students in the Classroom”; this is being supervised by Professor Paul Bartolo. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to investigate teachers’ understanding and experiences of how poor proficiency in the languages of instruction affect students’ active and meaningful participation and inclusion in classroom activities as well as how academic performance and attainment may also be impacted. The study also aims to uncover how Maltese teachers adapt their teaching styles and materials in order to cater for and support non-Maltese students with poor proficiency in both English and Maltese. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of how educators adapt curriculum, teaching and communication methods in order to cater for non-Maltese students to become full members of the learning community. By addressing these issues, recommendations for amendments in policy and practice may be developed in order to effectively support both educators and non-Maltese students who are struggling to communicate effectively in the classroom. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form detailing your rights and responsibilities as a research participant. Subsequently, you will be asked to choose a convenient date and location for participation in an interview where you will be asked questions pertaining to your experience and perceptions of working with non-Maltese students who lack proficiency in the languages of instruction in the classroom. This interview will be audio recorded by the researcher and later transcribed for data analysis purposes.

Data collected including transcripts and data analysis, will be stored in a password-protected device which the researcher has sole access to. The use of pseudonyms replacing the participants’ names, will ensure anonymity and any identifiable information will be omitted from the final transcripts. Following the transcription of recordings, all audio files will be discarded.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time,

without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be stored in an anonymised form on completion of the study.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor over the phone: 23402927 or via email: paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JR' with a large loop and a trailing flourish.

Janet Richard

janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt

Professor Paul Bartolo

paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt

23402927

Appendix I

Participant's Consent Form

Lost in Translation: Understanding Teachers' Perceptions of Language and Communication Difficulties Experienced by Non-Maltese Students in the Classroom.

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Janet Richard. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in an interview in which the researcher will ask questions to explore how Maltese primary school teachers perceive language and communication barriers experienced by non-Maltese students in Maltese state schools. I am aware that the interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. I understand that the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me, either face-to-face or online.
4. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
5. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. I also understand that this research may benefit others by shedding a light on teachers' perceptions and experiences pertaining to the issue of language and communication barriers experienced by non-Maltese students in Maltese schools thus encouraging discussions and recommendations for amendments in policy and practice to be able to support both educators as well as non-Maltese students who are struggling to communicate effectively in the classroom.
6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.

7. I understand that all data collected will be stored in an anonymised form on completion of the study.

8. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

9. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this interview to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

10. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].

11. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised; i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cabinet/drawer. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study.

12. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- I agree to this interview being audio recorded.
- I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- I would like to review extracts of my interview transcript that the researcher would like to reproduce in research outputs before these are published.
- I would not like to review my interview transcript extracts that the researcher would like to reproduce in research outputs before these are published.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Janet Richard
janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt

Professor Paul Bartolo
paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt
23402927

Appendix J
Sample of Codes

Non-Maltese Students' Drive to Learn
<p>“Even though certain things he knew that he was not so able in them but still he gave his best and he tried. That’s ok there was the will to learn, the will to challenge oneself even though at the beginning it was difficult.” (Elena)</p>
<p>“The language barrier hinders and challenges the children but then the will to learn can move them on.” (Elena)</p>
<p>“I even tell some of my students, “One of you will be in Parliament one day!” because they have such a drive to learn.” (Daniel)</p>
<p>“They work really hard and they try to read, they show me.” (Rachel)</p>
<p>“One great asset I’ve noticed among foreign students is their willingness to learn. If you teach them, they will learn—unlike Maltese students, who often need to be chased down to get them to work. Foreign students want to learn, and they ask for more—they’re motivated!” (May)</p>
<p>“I had one student who took such a great interest that after each lesson he would go home and study.” (Claire)</p>

Low Proficiency in Instructional Languages
<p>“If you are not exposed to certain vocabulary, how can I make you understand that this is a noun if you don’t know, I don’t know for example, shoe, paper- certain words what they are, so if you don’t have a certain baggage of vocabulary, it grows always more difficult at the end.” (Elena)</p>
<p>“I start with basic questions like, “What’s your name?” and “How old are you?” But when I move beyond that—say, to more creative questions like, “If you could take someone on a boat ride, who would you take?”—they lack the vocabulary. I know that in their minds,</p>

they probably have an answer if I asked them in their own language, but in Maltese or English, we don't get anywhere." (Daniel)

"I have three children, one from Pakistan, one from Spain and one from India. These children were in year one last year here in Safi primary. They came in my class this year and they don't even know simple words in Maltese." (Rachel)

"I have to do basics like every word that I give in Maltese I am translating it but still, some of them, even the English is really basic and they are still learning so, that's hindering their learning." (Rachel)

"I start with basic classroom vocabulary so they know what's happening around them—words like student, boy, girl, class, school, pen, pencil, book. Because they don't even understand simple instructions like "Take out your book"—they don't know what 'book' or "copybook" means. So, I always start with vocabulary related to the classroom—things they use every day." (May)

"Sometimes, I notice that her understanding of English isn't very strong—even from her compositions and the way she expresses herself, I can tell that she's not fluent." (May)

"For example, the date. One of the first things I teach them is the days of the week. Every day, they write the date—Monday, Tuesday, etc.—so they start learning the days. Then, we move on to months, numbers, colours." (Joseph)

Appendix K

Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) Approval

5/15/25, 6:11 PM

University of Malta Mail - Research Ethics Application - Approved by FREC, no UREC decision needed



Janet Richard <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>

Research Ethics Application - Approved by FREC, no UREC decision needed

SWB FREC <research-ethics.fsw@um.edu.mt>

14 October 2024 at 14:42

To: Janet Richard <janet.richard.17@um.edu.mt>

Cc: Paul A Bartolo <paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt>, Dr Chantal Avellino <chantal.avellino@um.edu.mt>

Dear Janet Richard,

Since your supervisor has confirmed that the changes have been carried out AND/OR the gatekeepers' permissions have been obtained and uploaded (as per email below), your ethics application regarding your research titled *Lost in Translation: Understanding Teachers' Perceptions of Language and Communication Difficulties Experienced by Non-Maltese Students in the Classroom* has been **approved**.

Faculty Research Ethics Committees are authorised to review and approve research ethics applications on behalf of the University of Malta, except in the case of sensitive personal data. In this regard, your ethics proposal **does not need to be sent to UREC-DP**. Hence, **you may now start your research**.

Disclaimer: The research team should note that only the English versions of the documents submitted have been reviewed by FREC. It is the duty of the research team to ensure that all documents in Maltese (or any other language) are faithful translations of the English version.

Regards,



Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Faculty for Social Wellbeing
Room 113, Humanities A Building
+356 2340 2237 / 3220 / 3625

Website: www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing/students/researchethics



On Sun, 13 Oct 2024 at 19:27, Paul A Bartolo <paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt> wrote:

With regard to the ethical clearance application in subject, I confirm that I am aware that, as the dissertation supervisor, it is my responsibility to ensure that all feedback from FREC has been processed and any requested changes have been made.

I hereby confirm that I have reviewed the student's application and confirm that the student has implemented all the changes requested by FREC.

Thanks

Regards

Paul

Professor Paul A. Bartolo Ph.D(Lond.)

Coordinator MPsy

Department of Psychology

University of Malta

Msida MSD 2080

Malta

Tel: (00356)23402927

email: paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt

Recent publication:

Bartolo et al. (2023). Aspirations and accommodations for students with disability to equitably access higher education: A systematic scoping review. *Frontiers Education*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2023.1218120>

The contents of this email are subject to [these terms](#).

The contents of this email are subject to [these terms](#).

Appendix L

Original Maltese Quotations

- ¹ Huma neqsin il-vokabularju, naf li forsi f'moħħhom għandhom tip ta' risposta kieku għidtilhom bil-lingwa tagħhom, imma bil-Malti jew bl-Ingliż mhux ħa naslu
- ² Meta rrid noħroġ ftehim li jkun iktar impenjattiv hemmhekk inbġhati, hemmhekk neħel fil-veru sens tal-kelma neħel.
- ³ Nerga lura għal-kliem mid-dizzjunarju basic vokabolarju u hekk
- ⁴ Għandi studenta spanjola minkejja Spanjola ma tafx l-Ispanjol għax ommha u l-missier qishom għallmuha bl-Ingliż
- ⁵ Meta niġi biex nistaqsihom kif jgħidu pereżempju jien naf tuffieħa bil-lingwa tagħhom mhux dejjem ikunu jafu, u ġieli kelli t-tfal li ma jkunux jafu l-lingwa nattiva tagħhom daqshekk
- ⁶ Id-diffikultajiet tagħhom huma ta' barriera ta' lingwa? Jew għax hemm diffikultajiet oħrajn pereżempju edukattivi jew learning difficulties, dyslexia jew ADHD?
- ⁷ Jiġifieri skont il-karattru tal-istudent jekk l-istudent ikun maqluġ u lest li jsaqsi ħa jintegra iktar malajr minn oħrajn illi għandhom karattru kwiet u jistħu
- ⁸ Jiddependi mil- personalita mbaġħad kemm inti out going inti, jekk tħobbx toqġhod waħdek, taffettwa din.
- ⁹ Qas nimmaġinani nkun iċ-Ċina u ħa nagħmel ġurnata skola m'qed nifhem xejn, bla struzzjonijiet, il-biża' tiegħi li xi ħadd ħa jsaqsi u mela suppost inwieġeb
- ¹⁰ Il-maġġoranza Sirjani huma li ġejjin, academically huma batuti
- ¹¹ s-Sirjani li l-iskola għalihom mhijiex daqshekk prijorita, ifallu spiss ċertu tfal, ikollok toqġhod tigrri warajhom biex jiġu l-iskola
- ¹² Kelli tifel wieħed mill-Ukrajna, jiena fi żmien meta faqqgħet il-gwerra tal-Ukrajna u dan it-tifel kien ġie bit-trauma fuqu għax għaddew minn kollox jiġifieri dawn ħarbu mill-pajjiż biex jiġu Malta [...] is-Sirjani li kienu jiġu kienu jkunu għaddew minn gwerra wkoll u esperjenzawha first hand u jirrakkontawlek
- ¹³ Għaliex it-tifel beda jimmanifesta mġiba vjolenti imma mhux biss minħabba l-gwerra minħabba wkoll ċertu trobbija li kellu fil-pajjiż fejn kien qabel, jiġifieri ġieli jkollu bżonn interventi ta' professjonisti li huma barra mill-klassi
- ¹⁴ l-istudenti jaċċettaw id-diversità iktar malajr minn qatt qabel [...] huma ħbieb integraw flimkien u m'hemmx problema
- ¹⁵ Itfalhom ballun fil-biħa tfal u tara lil kulħadd jagħti int minn fejn inti, ġejt minn liema pajjiż ġejt, lingwa li titkellem u verament jien naraha tigrri quddiemni titfa' ballun u jilgħab kulħadd

¹⁶ Min jiġi minn barra minn Malta u jaf ftit Inġliż ħa jkun vantaġġat għax kulhadd bl-Inġliż jittkellem allura l-problema hi kif ħa ngħallmu l-Malti lill-Maltin għax qed ibarruh il-Malti jiġifieri lanqas jużawh, ftit li xejn.

¹⁷ Kont inħoss sinċerament ċertu ostilità min-naħa tal-istaff ukoll li għalihom aħna outsiders [...] ma tantx kont inħossni milqugħa

¹⁸ Il-Head stess ta fejn kont l-ewwel skola lanqas biss riditni nkun hemmhekk, għax hi ma riditx barranin fl-iskola tagħha [...] anke is-sign fuq il-bieb, 'Migrant's Hub' għamlithieli, mhux learner's hub iġifieri tinduna from the hostility of the staff ukoll

¹⁹ Huma għandhom asset li s'issa mill-barranin s'issa li rajt iridu jitgħallmu għandhom il-willingness li tihom u tihom ħa jitgħallmu mhux bħat-tfal tagħna, t-tfal tagħna trid tiġri warajhom biex jaħdmu, dawn iridu tihom u jridu iktar! Iridu jitgħallmu.

²⁰ l-Malti huwa maħbub ħafna minn kulhadd iħobbuh il-barranin, tfal barranin iħobbu jitgħallmu l-Malti

²¹ Kelli studenta minnhom qaltli "jiġna l-mummy qaltli, jiġna m'għandijx għalfejn nitgħallmu l-Malti so mhux ħa nistudja l-Malti"

²² Dan l-aħħar snin għana dawn il-barranin kollha għax dan l-aħħar ħames snin, sitta? qabel ma konniex hekk

²³ Spanjoli, Russi, Indjani, Sirjani, Eġizzjani...kelli mhux ħażin jiġifieri esperjenza sabiħa

²⁴ Il-ħin kollu code switching

²⁵ Kien hemm mumentu li anki jiġna stess għidt isma' ħa nieqaf s'hawn jiġna ppjanajt iktar imma dat-tfal...naħseb m'aħniex niftiehm u biżżejjed

²⁶ Darba minnhom niftakar ippreparajt lezzjoni fuq il currency ta Malta, [...] imma lanqas biss bdew jifmu xejn x'jiġen ngħid! [...] allura jiġna l-lezzjoni li ppjanajt, I had to scrap it

²⁷ Imma trid tikkrea inti wkoll trid dejjem tfittex hemm ħafna xogħol

²⁸ ġieli nibqa' sa bil-lejl għaddejja nohloq ir-rizorsi biex ikunu speċi made to fit skond l-istudent

²⁹ Meta jkollok klassi kbira b'ħmistax-il student, fosthom tfal b'bżonnijiet speċjali u oħrajn b'diffikultajiet tagħhom stess, tibda tistaqsi: "Kif se nasal għal kull wieħed minnhom?"

³⁰ M'għandi l-ebda taħriġ biex ngħallem il-Malti u l-Inġliż bħala lingwi barranin u dik il-ħaġa titfagħni lura

³¹ Ma kellix jiġifieri credits fejn ngħallem Malti l-barranin le għax dak iż-żmien ma kellniex dik il-problema Malta jiġifieri kienet realtà differenti.

³² Ħamsa u għoxrin sena ilu qatt ma bsarna li ħa jkun hawn da l-barranin

³³ Ikun hemm dak li jgħidulu hidden curriculum, ma kellix instructions u taġlim vera imma tgħallimt illi rrid inkun lesta nitgħallem affarijiet oħra waħdi

³⁴ Il-proċess tal-ħub huwa li jiġu hawnhekk sena u mbagħad jerggħu jintegraw fl-iskola li kienu ġejjin minnha [...] jiġifieri jekk jiena kelli tmax-il tifel u tifla fl-aħħar tas-sena dawk kollha se jtitlqu fi skejjel oħra

³⁵ Ikollna instances fejn ikollna tfal etajiet min year 1 sa year 6 u trid tghallimhom.

³⁶ Ikolli mill-year one sa l-year six kollha flimkien, [...] il-klassi hija mixed b'dawn l-etajiet kollha, nazzjonijiet differenti jiġuk perjodi varji matul is-sena [...] hemm ħafna xogħol u trid tagħmlu għal livelli differenti għax dak li nistenna minn tifel tal-Year three mhux ħa nistennieh minn tifel tal-year six

³⁷ Jarawha ħaġa kbira jarawha xokk iebša għalihom jgħiduli ma nixtqux irrid noqgħod hawn kelli t-tfal għamlu minn kollox sa anki they tried to fail biex jibqgħu hawn għax kienet biża' għalihom li jmorru school oħra [...] tgħid hawnhekk hawn familja qed tieħu ħsiebek u f'daqqa waħda inti klassi kbira ta' forsi ħamsa u għoxrin ruħ jew iktar it-teacher ma tistax tiffoka fuqek

³⁸ Ara x'qabza ħa jkollu dan it-tifel bejn il-baži li għamel hawn u l-Year six, m'hemm xejn in between

³⁹ Immaġina student tal-Ħames Sena jasal mill-hub, u l-għalliem jinduna li dak kollu li jaf jagħmel hu jikteb l-alfabett, jiffirma kliem sempliċi CVC, u jibni ftit sentenzi. Izda s-sillabu tal-Ħames Sena diġà miexi 'l quddiem! X'jiġri? L-istudent sempliċement joqgħod bilqiegħda.

⁴⁰ L-inizjattivi jkunu tajbin, ikunu on the right track imma m'hemmx komunikazzjoni bejn minn fejn ħa jitlaq għal fejn ħa jerga' jiġi allura nispiċċaw ħafna ħela ta' ħin u ta' rizorsi

⁴¹ Il-unit mhux immexxi tajjeb, lanqas xejn! U t-tfal għalekk mhux qed jibbenifikaw as such minnha għax m'hemmx struttura speċifika

⁴² It-tfal ma jafu xejn

⁴³ Jiena ma nistax tifel li għadu jibda fil-lingwa illum inwasslu jaf sal-Year five sal-aħħar tas-sena biex imbagħad ikun tajjeb għal Year six

⁴⁴ Jekk titkellem mat-teachers ta l-MLU 45% minnhom ġejjin min backgrounds fejn they have an A level and some intermediates and they can teach so they dont know anything [...] waħda minnhom eżempju kienet clerk ta skola, applikat biex tidhol mal-unit u daħlet imma there is no...it's a disaster.

⁴⁵ Hawn ħafna induction teachers where they think that uwijja mhux naqra Malti u Ingliz eja ħa mmorru

⁴⁶ Mistoqsijiet hux vera, mistoqsijiet, stampi, jiddjalogaw pereżempju drama pereżempju [...] jekk ma rnexxilix bl-istampi nibdew speċi nagħmlu bil-mima qed tifhem? jew bil-kant

⁴⁷ b'għesti għall-bidu b'għesti

⁴⁸ Nuża l-MS Teams nuża iċ-ChatGPT u l-gemini AI u jagħmilli traduzzjoni mill-Malti għall-Għarbi jew mill-Ingliz għall-Għarbi allura nkun nista' nintegra.

⁴⁹ Jiena kelli l-fortuna li naf l-Għarbi allura pereżempju ġieli hawn niktbilhom isimhom bl-Għarbi u mbagħad jieħdu pjaċir!

⁵⁰ Inħobb insaqsihom x'kif jgħidu fil-lingwa tagħhom u anki affarijiet mill-kultura tagħhom inħobb indaħħal anki fil-lezzjonijiet meta niġi biex nagħmel it-temi

⁵¹ Ngħid il-verità jiena nsib support kbir minn National literacy Agency li jgħinuni ħafna kulma nitlob jibagħtuli jiġifieri nsib riżorsi

⁵² Jiena nsib support kbir mill-Migrant Learners Units jiġifieri dejjem sibt u għadni nsib u ninsab ċert li ħa nibqa' nsib għax hemm nies li they value our work

⁵³ Għallinqas jiena s-sodisfazzjon tiegħi kien ikun li they learnt ten new words.

⁵⁵ Ma nħobbx nagħmel barrieri li ngħid daqshekk, allura inti meta ttihom dik id-drive “nista' nsir tabib? insir hekk?” iva! Aħdmu, trid tistinka trid tbatu għal kollox imma tista' tilhaq mela le

⁵⁶ Jekk skola tirċievi tliet studenti Eġizzjani u student Sirjan, nistgħu nwaħħlu posters bil-bnadar nazzjonali tagħhom fil-klassi.

⁵⁷ Jiena nħoss li l-mainstream classes l-ewwel nett għandhom ikollhom imqar session waħda ta' li jagħrfu x'inhil l-induction class, x'inhil r-role t'hawnhekk. Forsi jkollhom impressjoni li dawk imorru hemm biex jagħmlu l-crafts, dejjem jagħmlu l-crafts taf kif?

⁵⁸ Hemm ħafna inizjattivi sbieħ pereżempju settur tal-complementary, tal-literac, tal-Malti tal-barranin jew ta l-Ingliż għal l-barranin, u kulhadd jaħdem b' ilsienu barra fis-settur tiegħu, imma m'hemmx liason. Allura kulhadd jaħdem għalih

⁵⁹ Jiġru parallel ma' xulxin bħal żewġ linji dritti li qatt ma jiltaqgħu. U jekk qatt ma jiltaqgħu, ma jkunux jikkomunikaw, u dak hu żball!

⁶⁰ Għandna bżonn merging, kull min jaħdem fuq l-istess settur merge, forsi jien ngħaddi riżorsa li nista' nagħtihielek u inti t-ttini tiegħek u naħdmu flimkien

⁶¹ Għandu jinholqu aktar riżorsi, u materjal strutturat għandu jitqassam mill-Ministeru tal-Edukazzjoni lill-iskejjel sabiex l-għalliema jkunu ffacilitati minflok mgħobbija żzejjed