

# Insights into Language Integration Programs: Perspectives from Adult Learners in a Bilingual Context

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**ABSTRACT:** This contribution examines the multifaceted challenges and opportunities associated with adult language integration programs, critical tools for fostering social cohesion and inclusion amid unprecedented global migration. Such programs equip migrants with essential linguistic skills to navigate new sociocultural landscapes, yet their design and implementation often face barriers, including resource limitations and mismatched learner needs. Using Malta, the smallest EU member state, as a compelling case study, this article explores language integration dynamics in a bilingual society where Maltese and English serve distinct roles.

Against the backdrop of Malta's Migrant Integration Strategy & Action Plan (Vision 2020), this study centers on the national Maltese language integration program, required for non-EU nationals seeking long-term residence status. Drawing on data from 359 adult learners who completed the program, it explores their experiences, the challenges encountered, and the program's efficacy in fostering meaningful language acquisition.

By providing empirical insights into learner perspectives on program effectiveness, this study contributes to the broader academic discourse on instructed second language acquisition and offers actionable recommendations for improving integration initiatives. The findings underscore the importance of tailoring language courses to adult learners' needs and highlight strategies for enhancing access, resources, and opportunities for real-world language practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Adult language learning, *I Belong* course, language integration course, Maltese as a foreign language

## Introduction

### *Language Integration Programs for Adult Migrants in Europe*

Language integration programs for adult migrants have become a cornerstone of integration policies across the world, reflecting the recognition that language

proficiency is a vital tool for participation in social, economic, and cultural life. These programs aim to equip migrants with the language skills necessary to navigate daily life, access education and employment opportunities, and engage in civic and community activities. The design and implementation of these programs vary significantly across countries, shaped by differing national priorities, integration philosophies, and legal frameworks.

The European Union (EU) has consistently emphasized the importance of language learning as part of its integration agenda. The European Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021–2027) highlights language learning as a key component of successful integration, recommending accessible, tailored, and flexible programs to address the diverse needs of migrants. Member states are encouraged to provide language courses that align with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and ensure their availability to all migrants, regardless of their legal status or socioeconomic background (European Commission, 2021). At the national level, language integration programs are often tied to broader immigration policies, including legal requirements for residence permits, long-term residency, and naturalization. As such, language integration programs are primarily designed to target third-country nationals (TCNs)—individuals from non-EU countries who migrate to Europe—with such programs forming part of broader integration policies aimed at facilitating their inclusion into the host societies. Under the principles of free movement and nondiscrimination, EU nationals are presumed to have fewer structural barriers to integration because of shared rights and obligations across the member states, and are therefore entitled to live and work in member states without facing the same mandatory integration requirements imposed on TCNs. They may, however, decide to join language programs if they wish to improve their proficiency in the host country's language, particularly for professional or personal reasons.

### ***Structure and Accessibility of Language Programs***

Language integration programs in Europe typically range from basic survival courses to more advanced levels aligned with the CEFR. The number of instructional hours varies widely. In Germany, the integration course comprises 600 hours of language instruction and an additional 100 hours focused on cultural orientation (BAMF, 2023). France offers similar programs, with a minimum of 200 to 800 hours of training to reach A2 level (OFII, 2024). The Netherlands requires migrants to achieve an A2 level of proficiency, which usually involves 600 to 800 hours of instruction (Government of the Netherlands, 2023).

In countries where programs are compulsory, governments often subsidise or fully fund the courses to ensure accessibility. For example, Germany's integration courses are heavily subsidized, with participants paying a nominal minimal fee per lesson, while individuals receiving social benefits are exempt from fees. Similarly, in Austria, language courses for asylum seekers and refugees are predominantly funded by the state or the European Social Fund. Sweden's "Swedish for Immigrants" (SFI) program is universally free and tailored to migrants' educational backgrounds and professional goals. Finland's language courses, integrated into broader employment training schemes, are also free for migrants registered as job seekers. On the other hand, when countries offer voluntary programs, the availability of free or subsidized courses varies.

Many countries mandate proof of language skills at a specific CEFR level as part of the citizenship or long-term residence application process. For example, Germany requires a B1 level for citizenship, while Austria requires A2. France also mandates A2 proficiency for long-term residence and B1 for naturalization (OECD, 2023). Recent legislative trends indicate a gradual shift in several European countries from A2 towards B1 as the required level for newcomers.

### ***The Maltese Context and Recent Migration Trends***

Malta has experienced significant migration trends in recent years, profoundly impacting its demographic landscape. Between 2012 and 2022, Malta's population increased by approximately 25%, rising from 421,364 to 519,562 residents. This growth is largely attributed to net migration (National Statistics Office, 2021), and given its size and limited natural resources, this makes Malta quite an exceptional case in the context of European population trends (Eurostat, 2024). An increasingly aging population coupled with labor shortages has resulted in the proportion of foreign nationals in Malta rising markedly, from 5.5% in 2012 to 25.3% in 2022. By the end of 2023, the foreign population stood at 158,368, representing 28.1% of the total population (National Statistics Office, 2024).

The growing number of foreign workers has been instrumental in addressing labor shortages in various sectors of the Maltese economy (European Migration Network Report, 2011), and over the past 15 years the Maltese economy has more than doubled in size. In 2023, the employment rate stood at 78% compared to the EU rate of 70% (Justice and Peace Commission, 2024). Notwithstanding this, according to a recent European Employment Services report (EURES, 2023), Malta is still experiencing significant labor shortages across various sectors, such as manufacturing, construction, health care, transportation, hospitality, and food services, necessitating the recruitment of foreign workers to sustain its economic growth.

The significant demographic changes resulting from migration trends have presented both opportunities and challenges for Malta, and policymakers have

recently been tasked with balancing economic benefits with the need for sustainable development, infrastructure planning, and the provision of public services. In addition, effective integration strategies are regarded as essential to harness the potential of a diverse population while maintaining social cohesion.

### ***Maltese as a Language of Identity and Belonging***

The Constitution of Malta<sup>1</sup> recognizes Maltese as the national language while granting English co-official status, a position further reinforced by the Language Act.<sup>2</sup> The political status of the language was further strengthened in 2004, when Maltese was recognized as an official language in the EU. Although Malta's bilingual environment exposes citizens to English frequently, Maltese retains its prominence, especially in spoken interactions, demonstrating its enduring relevance and importance, despite the complexity of Malta's linguistic landscape (Brincat, 2021). Nationwide surveys consistently highlight Maltese as the preferred language among citizens. The study conducted by Marmarà and Bondi (2022), entitled *The State of the Maltese Nation*, found that 81.6% consider Maltese their primary language, compared to just 1.6% for English, with 16% favoring both equally. In fact, while the instrumental value of English on the island is undisputable with its frequent use, particularly in higher education, in the tourism industry, and in the passive skills, reading, and listening (Brincat, 2021, p. 422), Maltese is regarded as a vital part of national identity, playing a dominant role in family life, politics, law, religion, and the media (Camilleri Grima, 2021). The recent survey commissioned by the Centre of the Maltese Language and conducted by Marmarà (2024) highlights how 84% of Maltese nationals feel that it is important that non-Maltese living in Malta learn to communicate in the Maltese language. For a more detailed discussion on the linguistic specificity of Maltese, its acquisition, and its role in integration, readers are referred to Gauci (2024), where these issues are examined in depth.

### ***The "I Belong" Program***

Acquiring the language of the host country significantly enhances newcomers' quality of life, increasing their awareness of rights and opportunities in the public sector and higher education while fostering active participation in society (Chiswick & Miller, 2015). A shared language strengthens community ties, encourages cooperation, and empowers individuals to fully engage in society. Providing all residents with the opportunity to learn Maltese is therefore essential for promoting inclusivity and supporting meaningful integration.

In 2018, Malta introduced its very first integration program named *I Belong* as a key component of the Integration = Belonging: Migrant Integration Strategy &

Action Plan Vision 2020 (Ministry for European Affairs and Equality, 2017). The program aims to establish a more robust framework to support the integration of migrants already living and working in Malta. Focusing on fostering inclusion and providing migrants with the tools to fully participate in Maltese society, the program offers structured courses in Maltese and English languages, alongside cultural orientation. It is divided into two stages. Stage 1 provides a Pre-Integration Certificate with basic-level courses in Maltese and English (20 hours each) and cultural orientation (20 hours). Stage 2 advances to an Integration Certificate with more in-depth Maltese (50 hours) and cultural orientation (minimum of 100 hours) courses, focusing on democratic values, Maltese laws, and societal norms. The *I Belong* program is open to adult migrants residing in Malta, including EU nationals, third-country nationals, and beneficiaries of international protection. Successfully completing the second stage fulfills one of the legal requirements for obtaining a long-term residence permit<sup>3</sup> (possible after a minimum of 5 years living in Malta), making it a vital step toward deeper integration and belonging in Malta. The course is partially financed by EU funds and is offered free of charge following the candidate's application with the Human Rights Directorate<sup>4</sup> (Gauci & Mifsud, 2021).

For the purpose of this study, we focus our attention on the Maltese language component of the *I Belong* Stage 2 Integration Certificate. More specifically, the study was conducted with students who followed the *I Belong* course offered by the Department of Inclusion and Access to Learning within the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. The course content encompasses seven major topics: Myself (*Jien min jien*), Family and Friends (*Il-qraba u l-hbieb*), My House (*Id-dar*), My Town and My Country (*Ir-raħal u l-pajjiż tiegħi*), Parts of the Body (*Il-partijiet tal-ġisem*), Food and Drink (*Ikel u xorb*), and Work (*Ix-xogħol*). It is delivered over 25 weekly lessons, each lasting 2 hours. Initially conducted in person, the course transitioned to fully online delivery via the Zoom platform following the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to be offered in this format. Teacher educators are all qualified in teaching Maltese as a second language and have received specialized training for this purpose.

Lessons are conducted primarily in Maltese, with the use of English for cross-linguistic mediation (Stathopoulou et al., 2023), while a translanguaging pedagogy (García et al., 2017) is also actively encouraged. By the end of the course, participants are expected to achieve Maltese language proficiency at MQF (Malta Qualifications Framework) Level 2, roughly corresponding to A1-A2 CEFR level. Students are assessed through an examination covering the four language skills, weighted as follows: 35% speaking, 35% listening, 15% writing, and 15% reading. A minimum pass score of 65% is required to obtain the certificate.

## The Study

The study used an online questionnaire (see Appendix) as its primary data collection tool, administered to adult learners upon their completion of the *I Belong* Stage 2 Maltese language integration course. The aim of the questionnaire was to collect feedback on various aspects of the course to evaluate its effectiveness in facilitating learners' acquisition of the Maltese language and their integration into the local community. The questions focused more specifically on exploring the participants' reasons for enrolling in the course, their perspectives on the course content and delivery, its relevance to their daily lives, the challenges they faced in learning Maltese, strengths of the course, and areas for improvement. Question formats included a mix of multiple-choice items, Likert-scale questions, and open-ended questions with the aim of providing both quantitative data for comparative analysis and qualitative insights into learners' experiences and perceptions.

The choice of an online questionnaire was guided by the need to reach a diverse group of adult learners effectively and efficiently. Given that the course itself was delivered online, this mode of data collection aligned with participants' familiarity with digital tools and ensured accessibility. The use of mixed question formats allowed the study to balance breadth and depth: while the quantitative data facilitated analysis of trends and patterns, the open-ended questions offered nuanced perspectives, capturing the complexity of learners' experiences. The language used for the questionnaire was English. All communication in relation to the course itself always took place in this language, and it was a language with which all students were familiar. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was entirely voluntary. Before the data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were strictly maintained throughout the study.

A total of 359 students who completed the *I Belong* Stage 2 Maltese language integration course between 2021 and 2024 completed the online questionnaire. To protect anonymity, participants were not asked to disclose their nationality, as data were collected in small cohorts of around 15 students at the end of the course and identities could have been easily revealed, particularly in the case of students from less represented national backgrounds. Nevertheless, course participants were typically non-EU nationals applying for long-term residence status, with Filipinos, Indians, Pakistanis, and Serbians among the most common represented nationalities.

The collected data were analyzed using Python programming language with the assistance of OpenAI ChatGPT4 (OpenAI 2024). The use of such tools offers clear advantages for efficient and reproducible data analysis: Python enables structured handling of both quantitative and qualitative data while ChatGPT4 facilitates code generation, statistical interpretation, and theme identification. On

the other hand, the several limitations of these tools must also be acknowledged. First, while ChatGPT can assist with generating and explaining Python code, it relies on the quality and structure of the data provided and may not detect subtle data issues such as coding inconsistencies or sampling biases unless explicitly prompted. Second, theme extraction and qualitative coding require contextual sensitivity and interpretive depth, which AI can support but not fully replicate. To address the limitations associated with using such tools, the researcher made sure human validation took place at all times and always relied on her own critical judgment and understanding of the broader context in the interpretation of results.

Results

Learners’ Profile

The first section of the questionnaire helped in providing some useful demographic data about the participants. At the time of completing the questionnaire, the majority of respondents declared they had been residing in Malta either for 4–6 years (46.5%) or for 7–9 years (36.2%). Data in relation to participants’ gender, age, and number of years living in Malta are summarized in Table 1.

Gender	
Male	174
Female	185
Age	
18–29 years	22
30–39 years	208
40–49 years	105
50–59 years	21
over 60 years	3
Number of years living in Malta	
1–3 years	2
4–6 years	167
7–9 years	130
10 years and more	60

Table 1: Participants’ Gender, Age, and Number of Years Living in Malta

Reasons for Taking the Course

As shown in Figure 1, the reasons for enrolment in the *I Belong* Maltese language course reveal a variety of motivations among participants, with the most prominent being practical and integration oriented. Starting with the legal necessities, the most frequently cited reason for following the course is that it is a requirement

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**Figure 1:** Reasons for taking the course.

to obtain long-term residence status, with 345 out of the 359 participants (96% of participants) identifying this as a motivation. This highlights the course's critical role in satisfying bureaucratic requirements and underscores the perception of Maltese language learning as a gateway to legal and societal recognition, particularly for individuals aiming for long-term stability in Malta. Social integration also emerged as a significant motivator, with 68% of participants indicating a desire to better connect with the local community. Sixty-six percent of respondents emphasized the need to understand better what is being said and what is happening around them, highlighting how language proficiency aids in navigating everyday life in Malta and signaling a need for functional language skills that enhance everyday life interactions.

Another prominent reason is linked to family and personal relationships, with 52% of respondents indicating the desire to be able to communicate with Maltese relatives or friends among their reasons for learning Maltese. Knowledge of Maltese was cited as important for working and professional reasons by 41% of participants, reflecting the demand for bilingual or Maltese-speaking employees, particularly in sectors like health care, education, and public service, where interaction takes place mostly with Maltese-speaking communities. A smaller but noteworthy group of participants expressed a fascination with the Maltese language itself, showing that some were drawn by intrinsic interest rather than, or alongside, external obligations. Other unique responses, such as helping their children with school, career advancement promises, and cultural appreciation, provide a glimpse into the diverse personal contexts influencing enrolment.



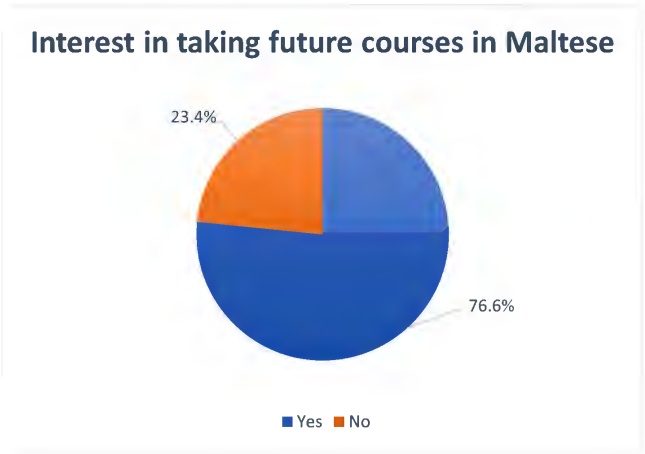
### ***Perspectives on the Course Content and Delivery***

The participants' feedback on the language course highlights positive perceptions across several aspects of content and delivery. Participants rated the relevance of the topics covered during the course highly, with an average score of 4.5 out of 5 indicating that the topics align well with their practical needs, as reflected in the frequent mention of goals such as integration, communication, and fulfilling residency requirements.

The teaching methods were similarly well received, with an average score of 4.52 out of 5. Participants likely appreciated engaging and effective pedagogical approaches tailored to adult learners. The relatively low standard deviation (0.84) indicates a consistent perception of quality in this area. The teaching ability of language educators was one of the most highly rated aspects, with an average score of 4.65, reflecting the participants' confidence in their educators' proficiency and skill in facilitating language learning. Participants rated their educators' approachability and caring attitude very highly, with an average score of 4.76. This aspect had one of the lowest standard deviations (0.61), indicating broad agreement among learners. Such ratings reflect the supportive and inclusive environment fostered by the instructors, which likely contributed to participants feeling comfortable and motivated to learn. The overall classroom atmosphere was also rated positively, with an average score of 4.75 suggesting that the course successfully created an environment conducive to learning, characterized by collaboration and mutual respect among participants and educators.

Class size (which at the time of data collection was a maximum of 15 students per group) was another highly rated aspect, with an average score of 4.76, aligning with participants' emphasis on a positive classroom experience. As to the participants' responses to the question about the adequacy of the 50-hour course duration, 32.9% of participants stated that this time was too little to cover the course content, suggesting that it was not sufficient for completing the curriculum without feeling rushed or overwhelmed. Thus, nearly a third of learners felt that additional time would have been beneficial to cover the material more thoroughly, suggesting a possible need for expanded instruction or supplementary sessions.

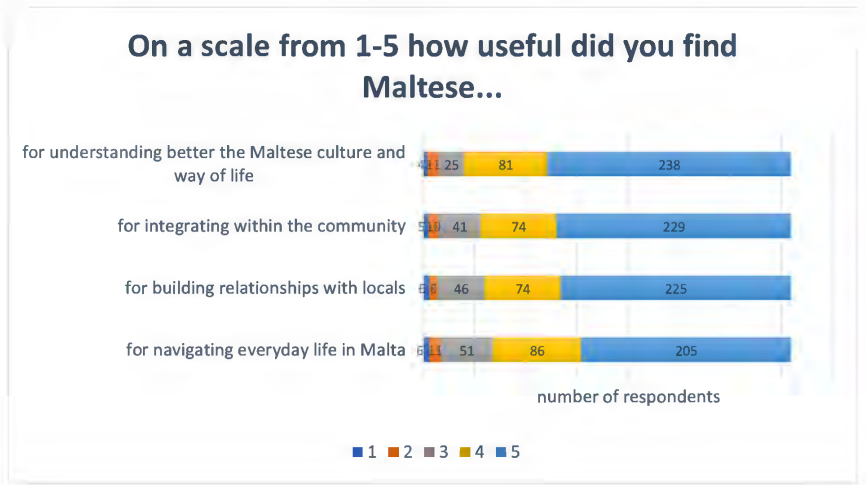
As shown in Figure 2, approximately 77% of participants expressed interest in taking future courses to improve their Maltese, indicating a need for and a strong inclination toward continued Maltese language learning. A minority of 23% of respondents, on the other hand, did not consider pursuing additional courses. The reasons behind this might lay in the challenges a number of learners face in learning the Maltese language, some of which will be explored later in the article.



**Figure 2:** Interest in taking future courses in Maltese following the *I Belong* program.

**Relevance of Learning Maltese**

Participants were asked to what extent learning Maltese has been relevant to them and their daily lives across four dimensions: daily interactions, relationship building, cultural understanding, and community integration. The data in Figure 3 reveal some positive feedback in this respect.



**Figure 3:** Relevance of learning Maltese.

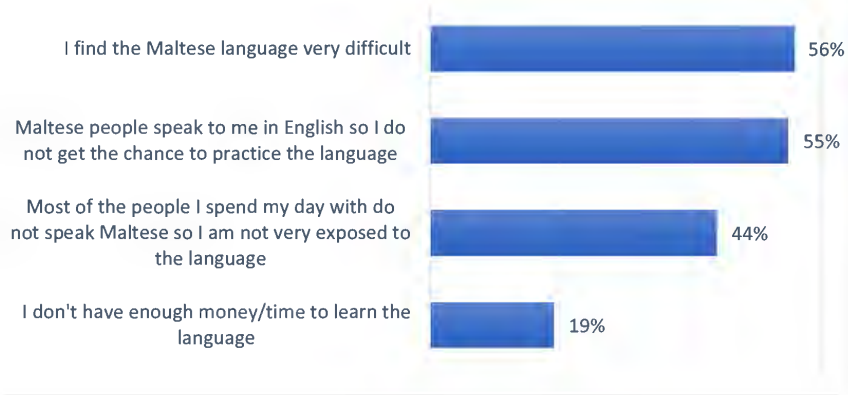
The highest-rated aspect, with an average score of 4.5 out of 5, was the course's ability to help participants better understand Maltese culture and way of life. This indicates that students view the language as a critical key to accessing the cultural nuances, traditions, and societal norms that shape Maltese identity. The question on whether learning Maltese has helped students feel better integrated within the local community also received a high average score. This response highlights that learning Maltese not only facilitates practical communication but also instills a sense of belonging and inclusion among learners, suggesting that by learning the language they feel more connected and accepted as members of Maltese society. Next, learning Maltese was also highly rated for its impact on building relationships with locals and fostering stronger interpersonal connections. Finally, participants also indicated that learning Maltese significantly improved their ability to navigate everyday life, suggesting that acquiring the language equips learners with essential communication skills for practical situations such as shopping, interacting with local services, and understanding public announcements. The relatively low standard deviation (0.94) highlights broad agreement among respondents.

### ***Challenges in Learning the Maltese Language***

Participants rated how challenging they found learning Maltese on a scale from 1 to 5. The distribution of responses reveals that a significant number of students rated the difficulty level as 5—extremely challenging (52%), 4—very challenging (24%), or 3—challenging (20%), highlighting the perceived complexity of the language for many learners. A linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether the number of years participants had been living in Malta was associated with how challenging they found learning Maltese. Results revealed a small but statistically significant negative relationship between these two variables ( $\beta = -0.084$ ,  $p = .046$ ). This suggests that, on average, for each increase in the duration category (e.g., from “1–3 years” to “4–6 years”), participants rated the difficulty of learning Maltese approximately 0.08 points lower on a 5-point scale. This indicates that participants who had been living in Malta for longer tended to perceive learning the language as slightly less challenging. A multiple linear regression was conducted to examine whether gender, age, or the perceived teaching ability of the educator influenced how challenging participants found learning Maltese. The results showed that none of these factors had a statistically significant effect. While age showed a slight negative trend (older participants find Maltese slightly less challenging), this result did not reach statistical significance ( $p = .08$ ).

Participants were also asked to specifically indicate what were the main challenges they faced in learning the Maltese language. Their replies are being reported in Figure 4.

### Which are the major challenges in learning the Maltese language?



**Figure 4:** Major challenges in learning Maltese.

A number of key challenges emerged as recurring themes among the participants’ responses, with some participants also adding their personal responses under the heading “other.” Some of the responses are hereby being quoted to further illustrate these challenges.

#### *Complexity of the Language*

The unique structure of Maltese, influenced by both Semitic and Romance linguistic roots, poses a steep learning curve, with pronunciation and grammar being specifically noted as areas of struggle.

- (1) Grammar was a challenge, particularly the amount of odd cases to the general rules.

#### *Limited Practice Opportunities*

The lack of opportunities to practice Maltese in daily life was a prominent challenge. This is likely due to the strong presence of English in Malta, limiting the immersion experience for learners.

- (2) I think mostly people switch to English but once they know you learn Maltese they encourage you to speak it.

### *Social Context*

Some students noted that most people they interacted with did not speak Maltese, reducing their chances to use the language in a natural setting. On the other hand, a social setting that allowed them to be in contact with native speakers significantly improved their language acquisition.

- (3) Before all my colleagues at work were all of the same nationalities ... when I started here in Malta ... but when I change my job I hear about some words to the Maltese colleague and I ask what it means ... slow by slow I keep to learn and understand the language.

### *Time and Resource Limitations*

Some students expressed difficulties in dedicating sufficient time to learning Maltese. Competing priorities such as work, family, or financial constraints were common barriers. Others highlighted the challenge of learning a language in just 2 hours of classes per week.

- (4) Lack of time to dedicate to proper learning is an obvious challenge.
- (5) The time, it's not enough, I think if it's at least 5hrs a week it will be better ... more space to understand each lesson ...

### *Insufficient Tailored Resources*

The absence of readily available digital or context-specific learning materials was highlighted, indicating a need for more accessible and targeted tools to assist learners.

- (6) In my view, there should be more textbooks and study materials that are currently available. A comprehensive online and offline dictionary wouldn't hurt either.

### *Positive Aspects and Areas for Improvement*

In the last section of the questionnaire, participants were asked to mention at least one positive aspect of the Maltese component of the *I Belong* course, and to provide suggestions they felt would help improve the course.

A total of 359 open-ended responses were analyzed with the assistance of OpenAI ChatGPT4 (OpenAI 2024) to gain insights on the learners' positive experience of the course. The most mentioned themes have been analyzed and prioritized by frequency. Below are the most commonly emerging themes. Some further insights and specific examples of participants' responses are also included.

The theme that featured most predominantly in participants' responses was *the use of effective teaching methods*. The approachability and teaching abilities of

the educators were frequently praised. Participants noted that the methods used helped simplify complex aspects of Maltese, making it easier to learn.

- (7) The educator explained everything clearly and used real-life examples to make the lessons relatable.
- (8) The step-by-step approach of the teacher really helped me build confidence in speaking Maltese.

The second most recurring theme was the *supportive learning environment*. Many participants highlighted the encouraging and inclusive atmosphere of the course. They appreciated the educators' efforts to make the classroom a welcoming space for all learners, regardless of their proficiency level. Many mentioned how the welcoming and inclusive atmosphere fostered motivation and reduced anxiety among learners.

- (9) The classroom environment was very friendly and encouraging, which helped me feel comfortable asking questions.
- (10) I appreciated the supportive nature of both the teacher and classmates; it felt like a community.
- (11) The educator's positive attitude made the learning experience enjoyable and less intimidating.

Third, students valued the course's *applicability* and its focus on *practical language skills* that could be applied in daily life. The emphasis on conversational Maltese, commonly used phrases, and cultural nuances was seen as particularly useful. According to the students, the focus on real-life communication made the course highly relevant and immediately useful for participants.

- (12) The course taught us practical phrases that I could use in shops and while speaking with my neighbours.
- (13) Learning conversational Maltese has made it easier to interact in daily situations like public transport.
- (14) The focus on everyday language rather than just theory was the best part of the course.

Several participants mentioned that the course provided opportunities to connect with others in similar situations. The possibility for *interaction and the sense of community* enhanced their overall learning experience and integration process. The course clearly facilitated connections among participants, fostering a sense of camaraderie and mutual support.

- (15) I made new friends during the course, which made learning Maltese much more enjoyable.

- (16) The group activities encouraged interaction, helping us practice Maltese while getting to know each other.
- (17) It was great to meet people from different backgrounds, all working towards the same goal of integration.

The organization of the course content, from basic to more advanced topics, was another aspect that resonated with learners. Though this was mentioned less frequently than the other themes, participants certainly appreciated the *gradual progression and clarity of the material*. This ensured that learners could build on foundational knowledge effectively.

- (18) I liked how each lesson built on the previous one, making it easier to follow the progression.
- (19) The structure of the course was clear and logical, which helped me retain what I learned.

In the last question, participants were asked if they had any suggestions to help improve the course. Out of the 291 responses, 123 participants stated that they had “no suggestions” or that the course was good as it is. As for the remaining responses, the most commonly mentioned themes have been analyzed and prioritized by frequency. Below are the most commonly emerging themes.

A high number of respondents expressed that they required *more hours of instruction* and that the course duration (6 months – 2 hours per week) was insufficient to cover the material comprehensively or achieve proficiency in Maltese. Extending the course or adding follow-up opportunities to practice the language could address this concern, allowing participants to reinforce their learning more effectively. Some students suggested having fewer hours allocated to the cultural component of the *I Belong* course (currently 120 hours) with these being added to the language component instead.

- (20) Maybe you should swap the hours between Kultura and Maltese, I think more hours are needed for learning Maltese language.
- (21) The time allocated for the course is too short to learn enough Maltese.
- (22) I think 50 hours is not enough in order to learn the language so that we are able to speak with confidence.

Participants appreciated *the integration of a cultural context* during the language classes and suggested further emphasis on this aspect. Learning a language intertwined with the cultural context helps participants connect better with Maltese traditions, values, and society.

- (23) Learning about the culture helps us understand the language better.

The idea of *grouping by ability* or *grouping by previous knowledge* was another aspect that resonated with learners. Though this was mentioned less frequently than the other themes, the idea of introducing some form of grouping was quite popular. According to participants, this would ensure that all learners remain engaged while those who need it can receive foundational support, ensuring an equitable learning pace.

- (24) Try to make groups by level... putting all people together makes the class slower and less productive.

Currently no form of grouping or streaming is used; students who apply to join the *I Belong* language integration course are typically placed in groups randomly or based on space and scheduling constraints. Implementing diagnostic assessments or pre-course evaluations could help create more cohesive groups, ultimately enhancing the course's effectiveness and fostering a supportive learning environment.

Other random responses included suggestions to offer the course in person or adopt a blended approach instead of solely online delivery. Some participants recommended the provision of a standardized textbook as opposed to handouts and PDF slide notes. Others recommended adjusting the balance between conversational practice and grammar instruction, with some emphasizing the need for more speaking activities and less focus on grammar; still others advocating the opposite, to have a stronger focus on grammar. Additionally, there were calls to improve the synergy between Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the Maltese language integration course, ensuring a smoother progression and better alignment between the two stages.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to assess the effectiveness and impact of the *I Belong* Stage 2 Maltese language course on participants' language acquisition and integration into the local community. Using an online questionnaire completed by 359 adult migrant learners who followed the course, the study explored participants' reasons for enrolling, their perspectives on the course content and delivery, its relevance to their daily lives, the challenges faced in learning Maltese, strengths of the course, and suggestions for improvement. In this section, we discuss the results of this study and view them in light of the findings of a previous study (Gauci & Vella, 2022), which, to the author's knowledge, is the only other empirical study conducted specifically to investigate the *I Belong* Maltese language integration program. The study was conducted in 2021 during



the early years of the course, was entirely qualitative in nature, and analyzed the narratives of 15 adult migrants as they participated in a number of focus group interviews at various stages throughout the program. It examined how learners' classroom experiences linked to their linguistic needs and the practical exposure to Maltese in their everyday lives. As discussed below, the findings from the current study corroborate with those of Gauci and Vella (2022) on multiple levels.

First, results from the current study indicate that participants' experiences with the program were very positive. Overall, the data suggest that the *I Belong* Maltese language course fulfills multiple roles, from meeting legal requirements (with a high prevalence of responses related to residency requirements as a main motivator) to enhancing social integration, while also accommodating personal interests and aspirations. While in Gauci and Vella (2022) specific factors such as employment and locality of residence were found to significantly influence participants' needs, motivation, and exposure to Maltese, participants across both studies consistently recognized the benefits of learning Maltese, including increased confidence, improved social interactions with locals, and a stronger sense of integration into Maltese society.

Second, data demonstrate that students are happy with the teacher educators' approaches, caring attitudes, and methods, which is also highlighted among the course's prevalent strengths. Participants expressed positive perspectives regarding the class size, course content, and delivery. The course appears well designed to meet learners' needs, with high satisfaction reported across relevance, educator effectiveness, and classroom dynamics. The feedback underscores the importance of supportive educators and an engaging, inclusive atmosphere in fostering successful learning outcomes.

Third, several challenges to learning Maltese have been identified by students, and these require recognition and attention. Some participants reported difficulties in dedicating sufficient time or resources to learning the language. This challenge suggests that balancing work, family, or other commitments with language learning can be particularly difficult for migrant adult learners. Additionally, some participants mentioned the lack of accessible learning resources, such as a standardized textbook or digital materials tailored to their specific needs, as a hurdle in mastering the language.

As indicated in the study, the widespread use of English in Malta presented another major challenge for learning Maltese, and the lack of opportunities to practice Maltese in daily life was identified as a prominent obstacle. Similarly, in Gauci and Vella (2022), participants had expressed frustration with the tendency of Maltese speakers to switch to English when they sensed learners were

struggling with Maltese. This behavior hindered consistent practice and slowed language acquisition. While some learners used this dynamic as a fallback for comprehension, others felt it reduced their motivation to persevere in learning Maltese. Both studies, therefore, underscore the need for strategies to support the consistent use of Maltese and to create opportunities for learners to practice the language in everyday interactions.

In summary, the challenges highlighted by learners point to areas where additional support, such as flexible course hours, supplemental resources, and more immersive practice opportunities, could significantly enhance the learning experience for future participants. Providing learners with more exposure to Maltese through community activities or conversational practice groups may help address the issue of limited opportunities to use the language. Developing more accessible and varied learning materials, including digital tools, could also help overcome resource-related barriers. By addressing these challenges, the course could further empower learners to achieve greater proficiency and confidence in Maltese.

Fourth, participants strongly emphasized that the 50-hour duration of the *I Belong* course was insufficient to achieve meaningful proficiency in Maltese and identified this as the most prominent area requiring improvement. Their feedback underscores the importance of aligning course length with the complexity of the content and participants' learning needs. This point strongly aligns with the findings in the study conducted by Gauci and Vella (2022), in which learners expressed limited expectations of reaching fluency due to the constrained time frame—a sentiment that persisted throughout the course. Under these circumstances, many participants reported feeling rushed and unable to fully engage with the material. These local observations are echoed in international research, which demonstrates that extending the duration of language training significantly enhances outcomes for learners. For example, Pont-Grau et al. (2023) found that longer language courses not only improve the proficiency of employed immigrants but also increase their chances of securing formal-sector jobs and permanent contracts, with benefits attributed to a better understanding of labor market institutions and expanded social networks. This convergence of local and international findings highlights the critical role that sufficient instructional time plays in supporting both language acquisition and broader social integration. Policymakers and organizers might thus consider adopting flexible options such as supplementing face-to-face learning for the online lessons, extending course duration for learners who need more time, or offering additional resources to ensure comprehensive coverage of the curriculum. Comparatively, language integration programs in several European countries offer up to hundreds of hours of instruction, suggesting that the *I Belong*

course could greatly benefit from an expanded curriculum to better meet learners' needs.

Finally, the study reveals how while obtaining long-term residence status was a primary motivation for enrolling, many participants developed a genuine interest in learning Maltese and engaging with the local culture as the course progressed. Beyond fulfilling residency requirements, learners viewed the course as an opportunity to deepen workplace and community integration. Many demonstrated strong dedication to language learning, with the intension of taking additional courses, actively seeking practice opportunities, and showing a sincere appreciation for the Maltese language and culture. Similarly, in Gauci and Vella (2022) participants recounted their experiences of how the course provided them with the courage to increase their interaction with people in the larger community because, in spite of living in a bilingual context, locals seemed very appreciative when they tried to communicate in Maltese, "When we speak Maltese with them, they become friendlier with us because they see that we are trying" (Gauci & Vella, 2022, p. 189). The findings underscore the importance of further fostering learners' intrinsic motivation to connect with Malta's linguistic and cultural heritage.

## Conclusion

Migration has been a key driver of demographic change in Malta over the past decade, influencing population size, composition, and distribution. These trends underscore the importance of comprehensive data collection and analysis to inform policy decisions that address the complexities of a rapidly evolving sociolinguistic landscape.

This contribution illuminates the efficacy and relevance of the *I Belong* Maltese language integration program and its ramifications within the context of Malta's evolving social fabric. The participants' feedback highlights some of the course's key strengths including a supportive environment, practical focus, and skilled educators. These factors not only facilitate language acquisition but also contribute significantly to participants' confidence and integration. At the same time, the study reveals a number of challenges and areas for improvement, offering valuable insights for enhancing the program's overall impact and responsiveness to learners' needs.

Language integration programs for adult migrants are fundamental to fostering inclusive and cohesive societies, and more efforts are needed to ensure flexibility and equity in their provision, as well as innovation in program design, while conducting ongoing research that incorporates course participant feedback.

Such research is crucial to refine language integration courses to empower migrants to fully participate in their host communities, fostering both individual success and societal cohesion. While grounded in the Maltese context, the insights from this study resonate with global efforts to develop responsive language policies and practices that support migrant integration in increasingly multicultural societies.

## Notes

1. Constitution of Malta (1964), Article 5. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5550.html>.
2. Chapter 470, Maltese Language Act, ACT V of 2004, National Legislation Malta <https://www.eui.eu/Projects/InternationalArtHeritageLaw/Documents/NationalLegislation/Malta/Chapt470.pdf>
3. Constitution of Malta, Legal notice 278 of 2006, as amended by Legal Notices 370 of 2010, 197 of 2014 and 366 of 2015 of subsidiary legislation 217.05
4. <https://humanrights.gov.mt/i-belong-programme/>

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

#### Introduction

The aim of this study is to gain insight into the (Stage 2) Maltese component of the *I Belong* course. We are asking past students who have followed the course at the University of Malta to provide us with their feedback about their experience of the course.

This questionnaire is divided in four sections and should not take more than 10-15 minutes to complete. Participation in this study is voluntary and your identity will remain anonymous.

#### Section 1:

1. What is your gender?
  - ☐ Male
  - ☐ Female
  - ☐ Non-binary
  - ☐ Prefer not to say
2. What is your age?
  - ☐ 18-29 years
  - ☐ 30-39 years
  - ☐ 40-49 years
  - ☐ 50-59 years
  - ☐ over 60 years
3. How many years have you been living in Malta?
  - ☐ 1-3 years
  - ☐ 4-6 years
  - ☐ 7-9 years
  - ☐ 10 years and over

The following questions refer to the Maltese language component of the *I Belong* course (Stage 2). The questions apply to students who have followed the course at the University of Malta.

4. Indicate the year when you completed the Maltese component of the *I Belong* course:
  - ☐ 2020
  - ☐ 2021
  - ☐ 2022
  - ☐ 2023
  - ☐ 2024

5. Modality in which the course was delivered:

- ☐ In presence
- ☐ Online

## Section 2:

6. Indicate the reason/s for choosing to take the *I Belong* Maltese language course (you may tick more than one option)

- ☐ It is a requirement to obtain long-term residence status
- ☐ Knowledge of Maltese is important at my workplace
- ☐ To understand better what is being said and what is happening around me
- ☐ I am fascinated by the language
- ☐ To be able to communicate with my Maltese relatives and/or friends
- ☐ To better integrate with members of the local community
- ☐ To broaden my opportunities in the labour market
- ☐ Other .....

## Section 3:

From a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good) how would you rate each one of the following:

7. Relevance of topics covered according to your needs.

(very poor) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (very good)

8. Teaching methods used

(very poor) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (very good)

9. Teaching ability of your language educator

(very poor) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (very good)

10. Approachability and caring attitude of your educator

(very poor) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (very good)

11. Overall positive classroom atmosphere

(very poor) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (very good)

12. Class size (number of students in your group)

(very poor) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (very good)



13. Do you feel that 50 hours to complete the course were:
- ☐ Too little to cover the course content
  - ☐ Just enough to cover the course content
  - ☐ Too many to cover the course content
14. Following the *I Belong* course, do you consider taking future courses (or have you already taken other courses) to continue improving your Maltese?
- ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No

#### Section 4:

Answer the following questions by rating from a scale of 1 (very little) to 5 (very much)

15. Has learning Maltese helped you in your everyday life in Malta?
- (very little) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (very much)
16. Has learning Maltese helped you in building better relationships with locals?
- (very little) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (very much)
17. Has learning Maltese helped you in understanding better the local culture and way of life?
- (very little) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (very much)
18. Has learning Maltese helped you feel better integrated within the local community?
- (very little) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (very much)
19. How challenging do you find learning Maltese?
- (very little) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (very much)
20. From your personal experience, which are the major challenges in learning the Maltese language? (you may tick more than one option)
- ☐ I find the Maltese language very difficult
  - ☐ I do not have enough money and/or time to dedicate to learning the language
  - ☐ Most of the people I spend my day with do not speak Maltese so I am not very exposed to the language outside the class

- ☐ Maltese people speak to me in English so I do not get the chance to practice the language outside the class
- ☐ Other

21. Mention at least one positive aspect of the Maltese component of the *I Belong* course

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22. Do you have any suggestions to help improve the Maltese component of the *I Belong* course?

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Please click on 'submit'. THANK YOU for your time and valuable feedback!