

Examining the impact of bilingualism on verbal fluency

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Maltese citizens are uniquely distinguished by their ability to switch interchangeably between Maltese and English, making code-switching a common feature of everyday communication. This phenomenon differs from traditional findings in bilingualism, where one language usually exhibits greater dominance over the other. The present study investigated the impact of bilingualism on verbal fluency in the Maltese context, using a quantitative research design. The study examined differences in semantic verbal fluency across three language conditions: Maltese-Only (n = 20), English-Only (n = 20), and No Language Restrictions (n = 20). A total of 60 adults over 18 (females, n = 41; males, n = 19) were randomly assigned to one of the three groups. Each participant completed a demographic questionnaire, the Maltese Word Reading Test (Bartolo, 1988), and the Vocabulary subtest from the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS-IV; Wechsler, 2008) to assess their language proficiency. Participants also performed a semantic verbal fluency task using the three most commonly used measures: animals, fruits, and vegetables. Data was analysed using a One-Way ANOVA. Results showed that the No Language Restrictions group achieved the highest mean verbal fluency scores, followed by the English-Only and Maltese-Only groups. Post-hoc comparisons revealed significant differences between the No Language Restrictions group and the English-Only and Maltese-Only groups. However, no significant differences were found between the English-only and Maltese-only conditions. This study confirmed the hypotheses that participants in the No Language Restrictions group produced more words than those in the Maltese-Only or English-Only groups. It also confirmed that participants in the English-Only group produced more words than those in the Maltese-Only group. Future studies should explore the cognitive and linguistic factors contributing to these group differences. The study findings also highlight the importance of accommodating bilingual language modes during verbal fluency testing.

Keywords: bilingualism, code-switching, Malta, verbal fluency, neuropsychology testing.

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