

## Teaching Maltese to Foreign Workers

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**T**hird-Country Nationals (TCNs) have become an increasingly important component of the Maltese economy, particularly over the past decade as labour demand has outpaced local supply. Employed widely in sectors such as construction, hospitality, transport, healthcare, manufacturing, and domestic services, TCNs help sustain economic growth, support essential services, and address skills shortages in both low- and high-skilled occupations. Their contribution has enabled businesses to expand and remain competitive, while also influencing demographic patterns and workplace diversity. At the same time, the growing reliance on TCNs has raised important policy considerations related to work permits, labour rights, social integration, housing, and long-term economic sustainability, making their role a central feature of Malta's contemporary labour market structure.

Dr Vassallo Gauci presented findings from a study of the *I Belong* integration programme, focusing on the motivations and challenges of 359 non-EU foreign workers learning Maltese.

### Study Statistics:

- **Motivation:** The primary driver is extrinsic; 96% of participants enrolled specifically to satisfy the legal requirement for long-term residency status.
- **Difficulty:** Over 75% of learners classified Maltese as "difficult" or "very difficult," citing the complex verbal system and Semitic root structures.
- **Outcomes:** Despite the forced entry, the exit outcomes were positive.
  - 81% reported the language helped in daily life.
  - 83% reported better relationships with locals.
  - 77% expressed interest in continuing their studies beyond the mandatory requirement.

### The Barrier

The most significant hurdle identified was not the grammar, but the social environment. Locals often switch to English immediately upon hearing a foreign accent. This "accommodation" actually hinders integration, as it denies learners the practice they desperately need.

For linguistic policy to be fair, it must be supported by employers (through incentives) and the general public (through patience).