

Teachers' Understanding of the Use of Language as a Medium of Instruction in 'French as a Foreign Language' Lessons

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Abstract: For their communicative needs, bilinguals access their language repertoire, in which languages are not discrete and separate, but form an integrated system. This has led to pedagogical practices which consider bilingualism as a strategic asset rather than a source of interference of the L1 upon the target language (TL). Competence does not consist of the total mastery of each language. Rather, bilinguals need to build proficiency by developing abilities in the different functions served by different languages. This new understanding clashes with the pedagogical tradition that theorizes competence in terms of monolingual norms, advocating exclusive use of the TL in the Foreign Language (FL) classroom. Given that it has been shown that FL teachers do frequently use the L1, and that the L1 can support the learning of French as a FL, this study investigates Maltese teachers' attitudes and classroom practices in relation to translanguaging in the French classroom. A questionnaire for teachers allows a better understanding of the functions for which the L1 is put to use, whether teachers received training in language use and whether there are consensus viewpoints about when L1 use may prove more beneficial.

Keywords: translanguaging, French as a foreign language, teachers' perceptions, proficiency

Introduction

This article surveys the perceptions of Maltese teachers of French with regard to translanguaging, or drawing on all of one's linguistic resources. Translanguaging is not an easy concept for a teacher of a foreign language to embrace, and while it would be normal for Maltese bilingual speakers to make use of it during foreign language lessons, it might be difficult for teachers to admit that they accept it as a common practice. I will first briefly review the literature on the use of the learners' L1 in foreign language (FL)

classrooms. In the second part I focus on the results of a preliminary field research carried out in virtually all Maltese schools where French is taught as a FL. This research was conducted through a questionnaire aimed to produce information on teachers' beliefs as to the degree and the ways in which they resort to the L1, and how they judge its use in their French class.

The context of the teaching of French in Malta

Maltese students learn the country's two official languages, Maltese and English, as from the start of primary school, and learn at least one FL at secondary education level. The most widely chosen language is by far Italian; many Maltese adults know the language, often because they are assiduous viewers of Italian television channels, and feel they can help their children in their Italian studies (Caruana, 2012). In Malta there are much fewer opportunities of easy exposure to French. One finds three types of schools in Malta: State Schools; Church schools; and fee-paying independent schools. Entry into all three types is not related to academic achievement and differentiated teaching is applied in more or less all three contexts. Although in the past many private or Church secondary schools used to propose both Italian and French to their students, most Maltese schools nowadays allow a selection of one or more languages from a wider array comprising Italian, French, German, Spanish and Arabic, which is much less popular. For various reasons which still need to be formally studied, there has over the past years been an overall steady decline in the number of secondary school students taking French. A consultation of the MATSEC Examinations Board Statistical Reports reveals that over a ten-year span, the overall percentage of candidates sitting for French in the SEC national examinations which students sit for at the end of secondary school fell from 40.4% (2004) to 33.7% (2014), and the situation is worse if one considers candidates having sat for only one FL (40.9% of candidates sat for French only in 2004, compared to 32.8% in 2014). Previously less popular foreign languages such as German and Spanish are catching up fast with French, traditionally the second most widely chosen FL after Italian. Data obtained from the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education shows that as of the 5th November 2015, a significant majority of secondary State School students were taking Italian (57.2%), followed by French (17.3%), which is in turn closely followed by Spanish (13%) and German (10.8%), with Arabic accounting for 1.2%.

French has the status of a FL in the Maltese context, although it is felt that a more widespread knowledge of the language would be an asset to the country's industry, due to the role of French as an international language and as a working language of the EU, and given Malta's important touristic, financial and trade links with France.

One wonders whether the main resources available for the teaching of French may in part account for the disenchantment towards the language. For many years Maltese students continued using the 1994 *Fréquence Jeunes* method which had been replaced almost everywhere else, and a number of teachers of French say they are unhappy with the 2003 *Oh là là* method currently used in State schools. There is more freedom of choice in Church and Independent schools but most use the 2007 *Le Kiosque* method. So the majority of schools are still following communicative methods and only in exceptional cases have some schools as yet moved on to the more recent task- and project-based textbooks like the 2011 *Pixel*. Moreover, students are made to learn a chunk of cultural data deriving from the outdated *Chez toi en France* (1995 / 2002) and they are examined on it in the national SEC examination. Some changes are envisaged for the near future but information taken from *Chez toi en France* will remain the basis of the cultural content in this examination.

At present, a Learning Outcomes Framework is being developed for all subjects, so that a change in the approach to the teaching of French is being anticipated. The 2012 syllabus which is meanwhile being followed does not specify what language should be used as medium of instruction in French lessons, and teachers therefore follow their own pedagogical principles on the sensitive question of whether to allow the presence of the L1 in their classrooms.

The theory of translanguaging: definition

The definition of translanguaging which is adopted here is that which expert educationalists are using, namely that of a more natural, less institutionally organized use of both the L1 and the TL in the classroom in order to support and maximize learning. Beyond the educational context, the term has been adopted to account for the normal strategy employed by bilinguals in most communicative settings to exploit their language repertoire without being concerned with language boundaries. Garcia (2011) illustrates this through the example of an English-Spanish bilingual home where the television, the radio, the Internet and family conversation may be co-present in different or mixed languages. So translanguaging in the wider sense is the fluid and “flexible use of [bilinguals’] linguistic resources to make meaning of their lives and their complex worlds” (Garcia, 2011, p.1).

In his writing on global English with its power and domination over vernacular languages, Canagarajah criticizes “the context of a linguistics that theorizes competence and communication in terms of monolingual norms” (Canagarajah, 2011, p.2). Research on the possible benefits of translanguaging, which posits that both the L1 and the L2 may support communication from both the teacher’s and the learner’s perspectives, has resulted in monolingual assumptions being questioned. In this line of pedagogical practices,

bilingualism is considered as an asset rather than as an obstacle or weakness or a source of problematic interference of the L1 upon the TL (Lasagabaster, 2013).

Literature on translanguaging tends to be suspicious of the term 'code-switching' (CS), as CS is situated by some authors within a perspective assuming that bilinguals use their two languages as two separate monolingual codes. In this sense it differs from the translanguaging perspective according to which bilinguals have one linguistic repertoire from which they select strategically to communicate effectively (Garcia, 2009; Lasagabaster, 2013). Although the term 'translanguaging' is preferred here because of such theoretical implications, often 'code-switching' is used in this text while referring to other studies, in order to respect their authors' choice of terminology.

Maltese children interact in a bilingual setting; Maltese or English are each meant to be the medium of instruction for a number of school subjects. Maltese speakers produce a great amount of translanguaging between these languages in everyday speech (Busuttill Bezzina, 2013), and research has found that CS is resorted to across levels and subjects in the Maltese educational system and documented its positive effects (Camilleri Grima, 2013). CS has likewise been documented in the FL classroom, in the case of Italian (Gauci and Camilleri Grima, 2013). Therefore the teaching of French in Malta has to be understood as set in this context of widespread translanguaging behaviour practices.

Studies showing the benefits of translanguaging in FL teaching

There exists a long list of studies illustrating numerous benefits related to translanguaging practices in the classroom. Some investigations presenting factual results are mentioned here, since such studies have served to inspire the formulation of the questions contained in the questionnaire for FFL teachers in Malta.

Causa (1996), observing classroom spoken interaction in classes of adult French learners of Italian at beginner level, concludes that CS allows the class to overcome pedagogical obstacles, allows understanding, instils order in interaction and avoids uncomfortable interruptions in communication. Similarly, Olimnazarova (2012), through classroom observations and interviews, found that using learners' linguistic repertoires for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Tajikistan is beneficial for important pedagogic functions such as keeping a good flowing rhythm for pedagogic tasks and allowing equity of participation in small-group and whole-class discussion, apart from the fact that translanguaging facilitates understandings of grammar, general knowledge and key concepts. Lee and Macaro (2013)

include the language level variable in their investigation. Through vocabulary tests performed with Korean young learners of EFL (12 year-olds after 4 years of learning EFL) and adults (9 years of learning EFL) in English-only and CS conditions, it was found that at both levels, but especially at the less advanced one, learner groups benefit from links being made with the L1 for the acquisition of vocabulary. Empirical investigation carried out in Malta, based on analysis of transcribed Italian classroom interaction, finds that CS serves as a tool for stimulating learners' participation and facilitating metalinguistic talk, for instance in eliciting hypotheses about content and in explaining grammatical notions, whilst also aiding in classroom management (Camilleri Grima and Caruana, 2016).

Translanguaging, learning level and degree of language competence

Several studies based on empirical research conducted in FL classrooms concur in concluding that there is less need of translanguaging as learning advances, than there is at beginner level. Greggio and Gil (2007) studied CS at beginner and pre-intermediate levels, and found that in the pre-intermediate group, the teacher was observed to use little CS. The study does not guarantee complete reliability of its results though, as different teachers for the two levels were observed, so the difference in the degree of CS could be due to the teachers' personal pedagogical principles and habits. It is however interesting to note that the discrepancy could also be partly due to the fact that the functions fulfilled by CS in the corpus were different at the beginner and pre-intermediate levels.

Halasa and Al-Manaseer (2012) view CS as a helpful psychological tool in the early stages of L2 learning. Anton and DiCamilla (2012) conclude, on the basis of recording collaborative interaction tasks performed by first- and fourth-year FL learners, that at beginner level, the L1 is much needed as an aid in learning, whereas due to the higher level of language ability possessed by more advanced learners, the L2 emerged in their case as the overwhelming language choice for performing the task. The questionnaire distributed to 45 language teachers in Meiring and Norman (2002) indicates that teachers tend to use the TL more extensively if the pupils are at a higher level.

As for learners' own expressions of needs, Ahmad (2009) finds that higher proficiency learners prefer teachers to adopt a TL-only policy, and reject CS which they believe does not improve their proficiency: "this can be taken as a signal that they have developed sufficient level of proficiency that resulted in their rejection" (p.52). Indeed, Trévisiol (2006) finds that Japanese students of French L3 resort significantly less to their L1 and L2 (English) as their mastery of the TL progresses. Bateman (2008), studying attitudes and beliefs on TL use from the teachers' perspective likewise attests the opinion that CS can be gradually limited as the students' abilities in the TL develop. In Horasan

(2014), teachers were interviewed about their perceptions of CS in Turkish EFL classrooms, and the results actually reveal that all teachers believed CS was only valid for beginner levels, but should be avoided in upper levels.

As regards the relationship between translanguaging and learners' language competence, there seems to be, according to research, an association between low language performance and the need to use translanguaging. In investigating the effect of teachers' CS in low proficiency EFL classrooms in Malaysia, the questionnaire results in Ahmad (2009) reveal that learner respondents approve it and feel that CS helps ensure that they achieve success, by allowing them to comprehend the subject matter as well as the classroom activities they engage in. This is confirmed by corpus based study (Celik, 2008): CS is a teaching strategy aiding teachers of low ability learners to tackle complex concepts with them and verify their comprehension. Bateman (2008) deals with the question of demotivated learners: interviews with student teachers reveal that a consequence of pupils' lack of motivation to learn the TL was that their educators felt compelled to use the TL less, and this seems to effectively be a method of responding to learners' actual needs and capabilities. Thus, Centeno-Cortés and Jiménez-Jiménez (2004), investigating 18 learners with different language proficiency levels, observed that low-proficiency learners will use the L1 to a greater extent, compared to students with better L2 abilities. Low-proficiency learners in this study had to code-switch while struggling with the FL in which the instructions were given before handling the tasks assigned to them, again through extensive CS.

Conflicting views: tenants of limited L1 use in the FL Classroom

This recent understanding of the benefits of translanguaging in the FL classroom clashes with the pedagogical tradition that advocates rigid language separation and the near-exclusive use of the TL in the FL classroom. Molander (2004) summarizes what she considers as negative arguments, including for instance the idea that learners' CS reflects weaknesses in their L2 linguistic and communicative competencies, which teachers' CS would reinforce. Learners' CS threatens long term progress in the L2, and teachers' CS inhibits this progress. Coste (1997) takes stock of the reasons upon which tenants of immersion TL-only programs base their position. First, references are made to natural acquisition of the L2 through intensive exposure, reproducing natural conditions of L1 acquisition by impregnation and communication. Secondly, the limited time dedicated to FL lessons would be used in the best way by maximizing exposure to the L2. Also, with the L2 as both the goal and means of learning, the learner is pushed to make an extra effort. The fear of interference is a fourth argument, involving claims that cognitive separation between L1 and L2 must be ensured.

Thus, Thompson and Harrison (2014) stand by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages 2010 recommendation that teachers and students should use the TL as exclusively as possible (90% plus), ideally even beyond the classroom, and aim to “substantiat[e] the effectiveness of a teaching style in which use of the first language is actively avoided” (p.322). Deriving their results from recordings of 40 classes at beginner and intermediate levels of Spanish as a FL in a US university, they found great variation in L1 and L2 use in the different classes, despite the department’s clearly stated policies. Ignoring the complexity of argumentation in the explanation of, for instance, rules and exceptions, whilst only retaining considerations of terminology, they claim that even the complex explanation of grammatical notions may be covered in the L2: “many students are not familiar with grammatical terms in their first language and, thus, explaining grammar may be just as easily accomplished in the target language” (2014, p.331). They criticize teacher-initiated code-switches for which they trace a “strong correlation” (2014, p.332) with the amount of L1 used by students. As strategies for avoiding the use of the L1, the authors also recommend the use of “visuals, body language, gestures, synonyms, definitions and examples”, and even “circumlocution” (2014, p.332).

Data collection for an investigation into translanguaging in Maltese FFL classrooms

In the light of these divergent views regarding translanguaging in the FL classroom, the results of this study provide a further perspective on the issue in Malta. These results are based on an initial investigation of teachers’ perceptions regarding language distribution in the French class, obtained through a questionnaire that was distributed to virtually all teachers of French in Malta at primary (where language awareness in French takes place), secondary and sixth form levels. The response rate was high at 66% (78 out of 118 in all).

Access to these teachers’ views was obtained after formal permission to carry out this questionnaire-based investigation was granted by the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education responsible for State Schools, the Delegate for Catholic Education responsible for Church Schools, and the Head Teachers of Independent Schools. Teachers were informed that their participation was voluntary and the questionnaire was formulated in such a way as to avoid any information about respondents’ identity and the name of their school.

The first section of the questionnaire concerned information about the respondent’s teaching experience, as regards number of years of teaching, type(s) of school(s) taught at (State/Church/Private), gender of students taught and level(s) taught (whether primary awareness, specific Secondary

School years and Sixth Form). The second section asked what might be the five most useful functions of translanguaging (from a list of 18 items). The third section dealt with whether teachers received or wished for training on translanguaging during their university education or in Continuing Professional Development (CPD). The fourth section focused on teachers' practice of translanguaging according to a set of variables. The final section was based on an open-ended question and asked whether teachers of French had a generally positive or negative opinion of translanguaging and why.

The questionnaire was kept as brief and simple to fill in as possible, so as to avoid discouraging prospective respondents from participating. The participation rate was in fact deemed, if not ideal, at least satisfactory. The general feeling obtained from this rather high rate of participation was that teachers feel quite strongly about the issue of translanguaging, whether they are for or against the practice, or see both positive and negative aspects in its use.

Teachers' perceptions of the most useful functions of translanguaging

In their questionnaire answers, indications by Maltese FFL teachers regarding their main preferences from a list of 18 possible useful functions of translanguaging (the 18th being an open invitation for respondents' own suggestions) were as in Table I, which also indicates the function category. The teachers' first option ("For the learners not to lose self-confidence and therefore for their motivation not to suffer"), as well as their seventh and eighth choices ("To create closeness with a learner/with the learners"; "To create a more relaxed environment in the class") concerned the provision of affective support in their students' learning process. This main concern on the teachers' part goes in the way of providing a psychological environment which is conducive to learning, in that it has been shown that learners perceive the presence of positive psychological support brought about by teachers' translanguaging. Ensuring comprehension, also through the teaching of vocabulary, is another important aim of Maltese FFL teachers: related entries were selected in second ("For learners to confirm their comprehension"), fourth ("For the teacher to ensure learners have understood input in the TL") and sixth positions ("To help learners remember new vocabulary by association with the L1").

Explanation, discussion and simplification of grammar and complex concepts appear in the third and ninth places ("To compare and contrast different language phenomena"; "For simplification"). The Maltese teachers' fifth choice ("To deal with disciplinary issues") demonstrates learners' L1 as a good tool for managing the class, when pronouncing classroom rules or in the case of disruption, since admonitions in the TL seem to have less impact on

pupils. By contrast, task management (“To discuss tasks, for ex. in pair / group work”) was only indicated in the eleventh place.

Function	% of choice	Function category
For the learners not to lose self-confidence and therefore for their motivation not to suffer	79%	Encouraging learners
For learners to confirm their comprehension	73%	Ensuring comprehension
To compare and contrast different language phenomena	64%	Negotiating metalinguistic knowledge
For the teacher to ensure learners have understood input in the TL	58%	Ensuring comprehension
To deal with disciplinary issues	53%	Rules / class functioning
To help learners remember new vocabulary by association with the L1	40%	Deliberations over vocabulary
To create closeness with a learner/with the learners	40%	Enhancing interrelationships
To create a more relaxed environment in the class	40%	Enhancing interrelationships
For simplification	36%	Negotiating metalinguistic knowledge
To increase student participation in class discussion	34%	Vocalizing learners’ thoughts
To discuss tasks, for ex. in pair / group work	32%	Task management

TABLE 1: Main positive functions of translanguaging according to Maltese FFL teachers

Teachers were less inclined to choose other proposed functions of translanguaging, as in Table II. The fact that the option “For saving time” was only indicated in twelfth place is somewhat paradoxical, and will be discussed further in a comparison of these Maltese results with international data. However, this relatively lesser importance given to time-saving might be an indication that quality of teaching is more of an issue than practicality in Maltese teachers’ pedagogical beliefs. The final choice (“To avoid interruptions during explanation”) is related to time-saving and its very last position goes in the way of confirming the same argument.

Rather worrying results are the thirteenth and fourteenth places at which references to learners’ spoken interaction appear (“Students can communicate in any language in order to get their point across”; “For the teacher to confirm to the whole group something proposed in the TL by one learner”). Learners’ practice of the spoken component deserves to place higher up in the list of teachers’ concerns.

Function	% of choice	Function category
For saving time	22%	Ensuring a smooth rhythm in the lesson
Students can communicate in any language in order to get their point across	21%	Vocalizing learners' thoughts
For the teacher to confirm to the whole group something proposed in the TL by one learner	16%	Ensuring Comprehension
To introduce or conclude a new theme	10%	Ensuring Comprehension
For the teacher to express positive evaluation	12%	Encouraging learners
To avoid interruptions during explanations	8%	Ensuring a smooth rhythm in the lesson

TABLE 2: Secondary functions of translanguaging according to Maltese FFL teachers

The position of the other two lower placing items (“To introduce or conclude a new theme”; “For the teacher to express positive evaluation”) - though these are important features of any class - is not here perhaps that worrying, for these two aspects fall respectively within the function categories of “Ensuring comprehension” and “Encouraging learners”, which otherwise feature among the highest ranking choices.

Training on translanguaging

Going back to the questionnaire results, a perfectly balanced result was paradoxically obtained for Maltese FFL teachers claiming to have received formal training about language distribution in the FFL classroom, in their university training or in CPD (50%), and for teachers claiming the opposite to be true (50%). The clue to solving this paradox may lie in some teachers’ further specification that they received indications on the matter during their Teaching Practice. Training on language use might therefore have consisted of not much more than recommendations or expressed expectations from Teaching Practice examiners about what language/s should be used in the French classroom. It is assumed from personal knowledge of some examiners’ attitudes regarding this question that the recommendations would have more likely been to use French and to avoid the L1 as much as possible, although a few examiners are more tolerant regarding the presence of the L1 in the classroom.

The vast majority of teachers do however feel that it is important to receive formal training about language distribution in the FL classroom (83%), as opposed to a small minority who expressed that language distribution for diverse classroom situations is something which a teacher learns to sense with experience (13%). This can be linked to the notion of how important it is

for the teacher to know at what language level the learners really are so s/he can address their language needs. Thus teachers seem to be suggesting that they resort to use of the learners' L1 when it is needed for their learners' language skills to develop, if talk held in the TL is too difficult for them to handle.

Teachers' perceptions on their degree of translanguaging

A significant number of teachers (37%) ticked the option that they feel they 'translanguage in a balanced way between the TL and the L1'. This option was purposefully proposed, in spite of its inability to yield any measurable or reliable result, for it is very revealing as far as attitude is concerned. As the sociolinguist Calvet (1999) states, misconceptions and misformulations are as revealing as the truth, and the question why speakers pretend to speak in a particular way is not less interesting than why they actually choose to speak in a particular way. In our case, given the impossibility to define a balanced use of the L1 and the TL, this particular option rather shows the teachers' will to tread on the safest path, or their sincere wish to perform in class in what they perceive to be the ideal way for their students' benefit.

Most teachers (50%) opted for 'whenever necessary', though this seems to be likewise ambiguous, for these teachers might have either a more open attitude towards translanguaging and use it on all occasions when they feel it could be helpful, or else it might mean that they strictly restrain its use to when it cannot be avoided. In analyzing the questionnaire results, it was hence found that the final open question threw more light than these proposed options on teachers' attitudes on L1 use.

A very small number of teachers (6%) claimed they translanguage rarely, as a matter of principle, and the same percentage liberally claimed they translanguage often.

Translanguaging, learning level and language competence

Only one respondent is of the opinion that translanguaging may be more useful or practical with the upper forms. There is otherwise a balance between the number of teachers who believe that translanguaging is more helpful with beginner level classes (50%) and the number of teachers (49%) who feel that the degree of translanguaging in the classroom does not depend on the years of instruction. An attempt to interpret this belief will be made further on.

Different authors allude to a relationship between the utility of translanguaging and learners' proficiency level. In the Maltese questionnaire, a very small number of teachers of French (5%) believe that language mastery

makes no difference as regards the degree of translanguaging. Only one respondent feels that it may be more useful or practical with learners who have a good mastery of the required level of French. This strikes a contrast with the overwhelming majority of the respondents, who believe that it is more effective with learners who encounter more difficulty learning French (94%). In fact this condition for using translanguaging was one of the main ones mentioned in the final open question, many teachers claiming that translanguaging must be resorted to in the case of students with learning difficulties and mixed ability classes. Thus for Maltese FFL teachers there seems to be concordance with other studies' findings on this association between low ability and the need for translanguaging.

Teachers' general opinion regarding translanguaging in the FFL classroom

Telling results were obtained for the questionnaire's final open question, requesting teachers of French to explain their general opinion on the question of translanguaging in the FL classroom. Fourteen per cent (14%) of teachers expressed a very negative view on translanguaging, or the idea that it should be restricted as much as possible. Often the sole justification provided was that French should be used, but this can be put in relation with a number of teachers' statement that students need to be exposed to the TL and helped "to move away from mental translation" This phrase was not explained by its author but one can take it to reflect the teacher's wish that learners think directly in French.

Other reasons support teachers' negative views on translanguaging, such as the feeling that it instils a laxist atmosphere in class and makes learners lazy, whereas they should make an effort to understand. One teacher in fact finds translating harmful because students switch off while the teacher is talking in French. The belief that translanguaging should be restricted to culture and grammar was mentioned by a Maltese teacher, whilst another respondent claims that culture and writing should be taught in French. Translanguaging would make the teacher hurry up and so learners do not get enough time to think. Finally, teachers' guilt feelings vis-à-vis translanguaging appeared, because of the training they had received which prohibited the use of the L1.

A significant figure, 31%, were in fact caught between conforming with what they have been influenced to regard as the ideal, namely that French should be the exclusive medium of instruction, and admitting that this is rarely possible whilst acknowledging several benefits of translanguaging. Generally, they feel that translanguaging facilitates the complex task of learning a FL, but are conditioned by TL-only precepts.

On the contrary, the majority of teachers (53%) expressed totally positive views on the use of translanguaging in FL teaching. Given the widespread

mentality that French should be the dominant language in the French classroom, this answer was unexpected and indicated a mature reflection upon what is perhaps better in the light of current pedagogical realities. The most frequent type of justification for the use of translanguaging was related to a concern for the learners' well-being, namely the wish not to demotivate learners, to put them at ease and give them reassurance and confidence, because exclusive use of the TL conversely makes learners struggle, panic and lose interest. It can make them feel disoriented, frustrated, anxious and with no sense of belonging. A very interesting view is that this is a question of politeness, decency and respect from the teacher vis-à-vis the learners, in that it's impolite and disrespectful to talk to someone in a language s/he does not understand. This insistence on pedagogical etiquette is a development upon the view expressed by other researchers that incomprehensible input is frustrating and impracticable for learners, whereas translanguaging allows the effective transfer of information from the senders to the receivers (Ahmad, 2009).

The second most common type of positive responses was linked to the quality of learning: translanguaging helps students understand better, faster and easier, and they can confirm their degree of understanding. It encourages students to ask questions, participate and express themselves. They can also discuss metalinguistic points, they come up with hypotheses when it comes to analyzing a language corpus and they feel pride about their reflections on how the TL works. Translanguaging helps students learn how to learn.

Thirdly, Maltese teachers invoked learner ability: a TL-only policy does not allow the teacher to take into account the needs of all the students, whereas translanguaging puts the student in the center by easing communication; it helps bridge the gap between high and low achievers, and is therefore more conducive to learning in mixed ability classes.

Fourthly, according to other Maltese teachers, translanguaging "emphasizes the action and practice of languaging bilingually". It is a positive strategy allowing bilinguals to take advantage of associations between languages. It acts as a sort of scaffolding, a means of access to the L2 through which the students can relate something new to something already known. Thus it helps students overcome the common misperception that French is a difficult language, a "language out of this world".

Better classroom management and teacher-student relationships were also mentioned. One interesting comment was that translanguaging may be beneficial to the teacher too, as it leaves the teacher with a good feeling that lessons' objectives have been reached.

Interpretation of the Maltese FFL teachers' results vis-à-vis realities attested in international studies

A significant portion of the results related to translanguaging principles upheld and expressed by Maltese teachers of French does tie in with the findings of investigations carried out in a number of other countries. For instance, the Maltese teachers' selection of the provision of affective and psychological support as the most useful function of translanguaging can be compared to the results of a questionnaire distributed to Malaysian students of EFL, which yield learners' opinions that teachers' CS helps them enjoy their classes, feel more at ease, less tense and less lost in the lessons: "there is a significant relationship between teachers' code-switching and positive affective learning state" (Ahmad, 2009, p.51). The importance attached by Maltese teachers of FFL to functions concerning comprehension and vocabulary learning confirms the findings in several studies based on various methods of research (interviews, corpus analysis, etc.), that translanguaging is useful in both allowing and verifying comprehension (Greggio and Gil 2007; Celik 2008, Samar and Moradkhani 2014).

The fact that Maltese teachers of French claim that the L1 is useful whilst negotiating metalinguistic knowledge goes in line with observations made by several researchers; for instance, through qualitative analysis, Inbar-Lourie (2010) finds data suggesting that teachers seem to use students' L1 more frequently during grammar lessons, compared to other categories of language teaching.

The results in section 3.1 also showed that teachers of French believe that the L1 is an important tool for classroom management as regards learner behavior, but not so much in managing tasks. Such a discrepancy has already been noted elsewhere: a quantitative analysis of Turkish EFL teachers' questionnaires in Horasan (2014) revealed that while 75% of teachers sometimes code-switch for classroom management, they rarely do so for giving instructions.

The surprising fact that Maltese teachers of French relegated the option "to save time" to a very low position does not really follow other researchers' observations and their data gathered from teachers. Ahmad (2009) lists time-saving among the main benefits of CS, in that it "helps to facilitate the flow of classroom instruction" (p.49), and for Celik (2008) "L1 is extremely effective during teaching to provide a swift and clear-cut synonym or paraphrase of a complicated concept or utterance, which otherwise would take a long time for the teacher to clarify" (p.78), an idea which is also expressed in teachers' questionnaires and written reflections (Bateman, 2008). One would indeed expect time-saving opportunities to be sought by teachers as useful assets, but it seems that Maltese teachers are ready to dedicate ample time to

explanations, as long as learners understand the message which is being conveyed to them.

It has been seen that very low results were scored as regards the perceived utility of code-switching in aiding learners' spoken interaction. It is widely rumoured that in this respect French lessons in Malta are still delivered in the traditional lecture style, where teacher talk has absolute dominance and is centered around grammar, culture and comprehension, in contrast to learners' minimal practice of the spoken component of language learning. In a study of the spoken interactions of secondary school learners of French in Malta, Bondin (2014) remarked that secondary school learners are not often made to engage in spoken tasks, so learners were seen to encounter great difficulty and discomfort to communicate for her role play corpus recordings. The Gauci (2016) corpus, based on sixteen transcribed French lessons given by two secondary school teachers in Malta, also shows an overall and constant statistically proven dominance of teacher talk. One transcription actually captures a teacher preparing her learners for the spoken component of the end-of-year examination not through periodic practice, but through hints and tips given to them in one lesson prior to the examination. Such teaching styles may sadly be quite widespread in Malta and do not seem to be limited to the teaching of French; indeed, an analysis of a corpus of Italian as a FL lessons revealed a "limited extent of participation of learners, both in length of utterance as well as in terms of opportunities to speak" (Camilleri Grima and Caruana, 2016).

If this relegation of the references to learner talk among the lesser important functions of translanguaging is indeed an indication of teachers' secondary concern about students' oral interventions, then it is a sign that this ideology needs to be much worked upon, for instance through effectively designed CPD and dedicated guidance by the subject Educational Officer and Heads of Department, so that appropriate measures can trigger the much needed change in mentality. There does exist at Maltese educational policy making level an awareness of the problem that not all competencies are given their due importance in FL teaching, so much so that the need was felt to introduce, for secondary school language education, a Subject Proficiency Assessment FL examination scheme, which is being based on an equal importance assessment of the four skills. The June 2015 CPD session for FL teachers was also focused on the teaching of the spoken and the listening components, and in 2015 the Education Ministry set up a Foreign Language Proficiency and Certification Working Group which is also working on plans to invite foreign experts to give training on the teaching of these two competencies to all FL teachers.

There appears to be a lack of a clear majority consensus as to the association between a higher use of translanguaging and beginner levels of instruction,

with only 50% of Maltese FFL teachers thinking that this is necessary. We have seen above several researchers claiming to have observed a decline in the amount of translanguaging and a concomitant higher use of the TL as the learners advanced in their learning process. One wonders whether a worrying state of affairs may be connected to the belief expressed by virtually half of the Maltese FFL teachers (49%) that the degree of translanguaging does not depend on the number of years of instruction. Could this possibly be a reflection of a teachers' feeling that learners' level of proficiency in French remains quite low after some years of learning? This is what seems to be suggested by the contrast between this widespread belief among the Maltese FFL teacher population and the results obtained in other studies. The result may be an indication that Maltese FFL teachers are not reassured enough with their learners' progress as to hold TL-only or TL-dominant lessons.

By contrast, the high consensus rate (94%) among Maltese FFL teachers' beliefs regarding the utility of translanguaging in the case of learners' low proficiency levels is in agreement with the findings in the international literature mentioned above. Several Maltese FFL teachers in the questionnaire referred to the relatively recent reality of mixed ability classes in the Maltese education system, which seems to be calling for the need to resort to translanguaging so that the teaching process can effectively reach the lower proficiency learners. Karuo (2011) indeed attests a discrepancy between high-proficiency students who seem to both prefer and benefit more from a TL-dominant classroom, and low-proficiency students who benefit from L1 use, and thus concludes that there exists a relationship between students' preference for the TL and their proficiency in it. This discrepancy in preferences and needs becomes an issue in mixed ability classes, as is most often the case in Maltese classes of French. However, in such cases, ethical concerns should overcome all other considerations. One example of this type of argumentation is found in Macaro (2005), who advocates exposure to the TL whilst judging it unacceptable to code-switch at will; he claims in fact that the nature of CS changes if rates of L1 use in FL classrooms are beyond 10-15%. In spite of this, he stresses that the L1 should still be used if the TL is too difficult for learners. As Svendsen (2014) argues, teachers need to know their learners individually and well, as regards their abilities and needs, and since every student has a right to academic success, if some learners are at risk of failure, the school should give them enough support to enable them to improve their knowledge. The implication of this is that teachers should use the L1 as a tool, if and when this can support low proficiency students in developing FL skills.

Some of the generally negative views on the use of translanguaging in the Maltese FFL classroom also find support in international literature. A teacher's argument that translating in the L1 leads to laziness as learners do not heed teacher talk in the TL, has been documented in other contexts, such

as in Iqbal (2011), where it is stated that judgments of laziness along with language incompetency account for Pakistani teachers' generally unfavourable attitude towards CS. The manifested belief that it is important for learners to think directly in French is in line with those studies which argue that the TL is to be preferred as it maximizes students' exposure to the L2 (Turnbull 2001, 2006), and with Wright (2010) who argues that direct translation has a negative impact as it causes vocabulary learning to decrease. This may explain why one Maltese teacher justified his/her negative evaluation of CS practices by arguing that gestures and pictures are better than translanguaging to teach vocabulary, and may be related to other Maltese teachers' expressed fear that interference between languages might occur, for the use of more than one language makes students confused. Contrary arguments have however been advanced: Bateman (2008) claims that low ability learners can be confused in TL-dominant contexts, and as seen in section 2.0 above, Lee and Macaro (2013) observed that links made with the L1 helped FL learners' vocabulary acquisition. It has been seen above that many studies do moreover go in the direction of supporting Maltese FFL teachers' most widespread views related to the generally beneficial effects of translanguaging in the FFL classroom.

General conclusions

This study is limited because it is based on a questionnaire seeking to unravel teachers' perceptions, and therefore its reliance on subjectivity and possible self-judgment errors. It therefore calls for another study, in which a corpus-based analysis of transcribed classroom interaction gives more detailed information on the dynamics and outcomes of translanguaging in the teaching of French in Malta. For this reason, the present study leads on to a verification of the functions that translanguaging is made to fulfil in a number of transcribed FFL lessons held in Maltese schools (Bezzina, forthcoming), and a characterization of code-switching instances.

Results obtained here show that teachers' perspectives on translanguaging in the FFL classroom in Malta are still often influenced by a direct method teaching ideology advocating avoidance of the L1, but surprisingly, the majority of teachers appear to have moved away from this view, and express awareness of the benefits that translanguaging may offer on the practical, relational, attitudinal and academic levels.

Given the FL learning objective underlying this study, it is here argued that sustained exposure to the TL should undeniably remain an important aim in FFL classrooms, in such a way as to increase listening and speaking skills through frequent practice. As Ahmad (2009) puts it, CS can be used as a careful strategy in the FL classroom, where its potential contributions can be drawn upon for the benefit of learners of diverse abilities, but it should

perhaps not in this particular context become an all-pervading teaching method. The warning in Celik (2008) against the risk of engaging in unchecked L1 use needs to be adhered to, so that L1 use is controlled at a level where it supports FL learning, rather than hindering it through lack of practice. The teacher needs to know learners' needs well, and take wise decisions regarding language use, on the basis of the content which is to be imparted and the nature of the activities which need to be carried out. This notwithstanding, translanguaging is certainly not a sign of shortcomings in the teacher's skills. Bilingual speakers are privileged to be in a position where they can exploit their plurilinguistic knowledge to understand, create and express meaningful ideas. Imposing a TL-only policy in the FL classroom may signify depriving bilingual learners from the possibility to use an important learning asset that they possess.

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