

Expert sounds warning as Maltese teens shun Italian and French at A-level

6-7 minutes

Malta's education system is roundly criticised for its inability to invite youths to make critical assessments of their country. Yet even in languages, the Maltese student population is finding foreign language proficiency less alluring than before.

Of the 4,797 students who completed their studies in one or more 'foreign' languages at secondary level in 2021, only 101 continued studying the language at Advanced level.

The shocking finding shows that practically 98% do not want to pursue knowledge of either Italian, French or German after they leave secondary school at 15.

Dr Mario Pace, University of Malta senior lecturer in Italian, called for an overhaul in post-secondary foreign language learning away from a one-size-fits-all model.

With just 101 students furthering their studies in a modern language apart from Maltese and English at A-level, the figure of 2% has shocked those who previously took the Maltese aptitude for language-learning for granted. In 2016, this number was at 189.

A further 230 students are studying a foreign language at Intermediate level, but it is only students who study a language at A-level who can continue their language studies at the University of Malta.

In his study "Losing out on Foreign Languages. Can we afford it?",

Dr Mario Pace called for urgent action, warning that Malta risks witnessing “a diminishing supply of young, home-grown linguists”, available to internationally-oriented businesses or as teachers who can train others.

Pace thinks such a scenario would “in turn could create long-term difficulties for our country.”

His study suggests that the progressive decline in students studying foreign languages at A or Intermediate level is more linked to the way these subjects are thought and packaged in the fields of specialisation on offer, than with demand for these subjects.

He notes that while adult learners enrolling in foreign language courses in Lifelong Learning Centres (LLCs) is increasing – with their numbers reaching a staggering 1,873 in 2019 just before the outbreak of the pandemic – this same success is nowhere to be seen among 16-year-olds starting post-secondary education.

Pace highlights the stark contrast between the increased interest in foreign languages among adults, which reflects labour market realities, and the decline of languages at “post-compulsory and tertiary levels”.

While recognising that schools are not the only venue where people can further their education in languages, he points out that language learning and teaching will flourish “if students are motivated by the provision of the right opportunities at post-compulsory level”, and if what is being learned in class is connected to the outside world and can be applied “to real life”.

Pace said the “one-size-fits-all” model in language learning does not cater for that category of students which simply wants to “improve their proficiency in the basic foreign language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading.”

Instead, the only option available to these students is to follow an “A” level or Intermediate course as part of the MATSEC certificate, which emphasises “grammatical accuracy, literature and culture

rather than proficiency in the target language.”

While underlining the “undisputed value of literature”, one also has to cater for young people currently “frustrated” at the absence of foreign language proficiency (FLP) courses at post-secondary level, with a special focus on “listening, speaking, reading and writing.”

So far, the only exception to this was the introduction of a foreign language proficiency course offered at the Higher Secondary college in Naxxar, and on a voluntary basis at MCAST and the University of Malta.

One way to address the situation could be the introduction of university courses which include combinations of foreign languages with other subjects. Pace notes that in British universities, eight out of every ten students are opting to combine a language with another subject. And these combinations are not limited to the humanities and social sciences but also include business studies, maths, physics, engineering or natural sciences.

The decline in Maltese students furthering their education in foreign languages at tertiary level is in marked contrast to the objectives set in the European Commission’s Lisbon Strategy, which underlines the need to improve foreign language teaching at all levels of education throughout Europe.

And while various initiatives enticing more students to study foreign languages at secondary level have been implemented during the past few years, Malta still lags behind when it comes at enticing students to do the same at tertiary level.

Pace argues that if Malta truly recognises the need that graduates and employees are also proficient in one or more foreign languages, “we need to move away from a one-size-fits-all system at post-secondary and tertiary institutions.”

Concern at the low intake for courses in foreign languages at A-level was also expressed in the annual MATSEC reports. The latest report noted that while the popularity of the two national

languages is generally increasing as A-level options, “the opposite effect is noted in foreign language examinations”.

And among those opting for the study area which includes languages, one finds the largest gender disparity with 69.5% of candidates being female.

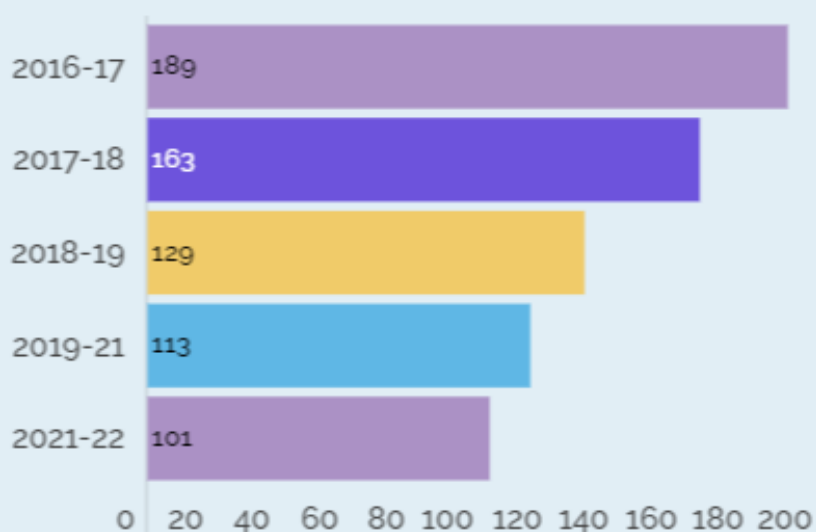
Statistics presented in Pace’s study show that Spanish was the most popular option among adult education learners who chose a foreign language course: learners in Spanish represented 34% of the total number of students following adult education courses.

But at secondary-education level, Italian remains the most popular choice, followed by French, German and Spanish. Only 18 students opted for Arabic while five opted for Chinese.

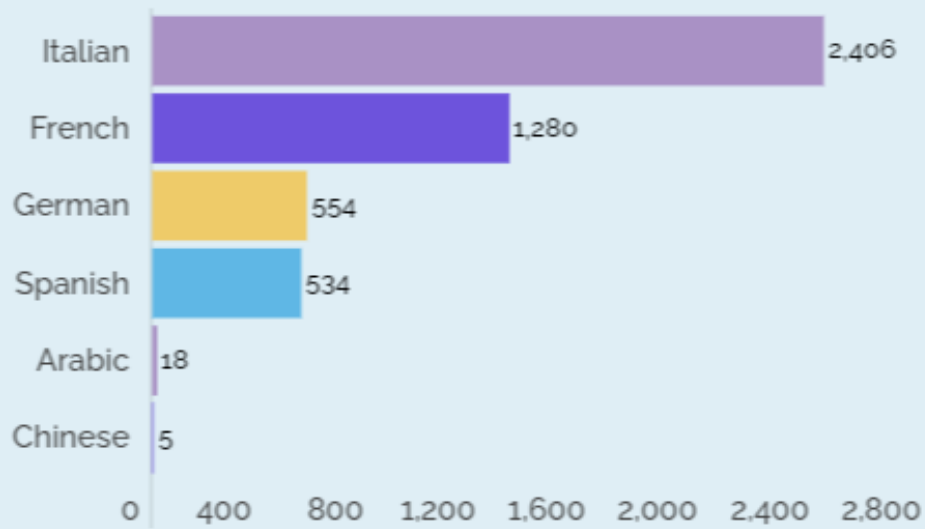


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Students studying a foreign language at A level



**Students studying a foreign language in last year
(year 11) of secondary school in 2020-21**



**Adult learners following courses in lifelong
learning centres in 2019/2020**

