Maltese as a Foreign Language Educator's Acquisition of Intercultural Capabilities

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Abstract

This study sought to understand how teachers of Maltese as a foreign language (MFL) develop intercultural capabilities by exploring the importance of intercultural competence to MFL teachers, the characteristics of interculturally competent MFL educators, and how educators develop intercultural competence. The study adopted the interpretivist paradigm and a case study research design to collect qualitative data. Seventeen MFL teachers of adult learners were purposefully selected and interviewed. Findings regarding the perceptions of the teachers who were interviewed are as follows. Firstly, the participants stated that intercultural competence is important for MFL teachers because it helps them to embrace diversity, to help adult learners to learn the target language (i.e. Maltese) better, and to be sensitive and accommodative to learners from different backgrounds. Secondly, according to the participants, an interculturally capable person is one who knows their own culture and others' cultural aspects, respects and accepts other cultures. It was also found that teachers develop intercultural capabilities through learning at a school and by visiting other countries and being immersed in the cultures of those countries. The implications of the findings as supported by existing literature, are that intercultural competence is important for foreign language teachers and as a result, intercultural training, learning through interactions with others and visits to other countries are necessary to develop intercultural capabilities.

Introduction

In today's world, which is characterised by globalisation, individuals are expected to be interculturally capable and sensitive in order to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds and societies. One way in which individuals from different societies are able to interact and have meaningful cultural exchanges and a sense of belonging in the foreign country where there live or study is by learning and using that country's language.

On the bilingual island of Malta, where Maltese and English have been its official languages since 1934 (Europeans and their Languages Report, 2012), foreign residents can communicate in English, but it is always an asset to know Maltese, especially if one lives in certain villages where Maltese is mostly spoken: this is the case in many villages around the island, such as Zabbar, Zejtun, Zebbug and Gozo. Educators who teach Maltese language to non-native learners play an important role in teaching Maltese as a foreign language (MFL). One important aspect of teaching individuals a new language is relating the language to the culture of that language and the culture of the learners. According to Risager (2006), it is widely recognised that language and culture are closely intertwined. The relationship between language and culture is such that when one teaches a language, one also teaches the culture that is related to that language (Nhem, 2020).

It has also been argued that intercultural communication competence (ICC) is necessary for talent development and inclusive schooling in the twenty-first century (Cherkowski & Ragoonaden, 2016; Zhang, 2017). Zhang, (2017) also notes that the development of ICC is a phenomenon that will permeate all facets of activities involved in language teaching. In this vein, language teachers are expected to help learners develop ICC. To do this, the teachers themselves, especially teachers of MFL, should, as argued by Zhang (2017), first be capable intercultural communicators who have great self-confidence and adequate experience. As noted by Mostafaei and Nosrati (2018), foreign language (L2) teachers, as the critical players in the education of language, need to be interculturally competent and sensitive so as to be in a position to develop their learners' ICC and intercultural sensitivity.

It has also been acknowledged that integrating cultures in the teaching of the L2 is necessary to enable L2 learners to grasp and improve their ICC in the globalised community (Thao & Tai, 2017). However, Thao and Tai (2017) also point out that L2 educators in various contexts seem to ignore this important concept in their L2 teaching.

The Research Problem and Objective of the Study

The question that this research seeks to answer is, how do MFL teachers develop intercultural capabilities? The study will specifically focus on providing an understanding of how a sample of 17 teachers developed intercultural capabilities in their teaching of Maltese as a foreign language to adults. The aim of the study is to review the literature on the educational content and pedagogical practices that can support such development of intercultural capabilities and to compare the findings of the literature review with the views of the teachers who took part in this study.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How important is intercultural competence according to MFL teachers?
2. How do teachers perceive the characteristics of an interculturally competent MFL educator?
3. How do educators develop intercultural competence?

Literature Review

The Intercultural Competence of Foreign Language Teachers

When it comes to teaching foreign languages, the theory of intercultural competence has been used for more than 20 years (Karabinar & Guler, 2012). What comes out clearly in the discussion about culture and language is that because of the close connection between language and culture, foreign language teachers need to be familiar with the cultural aspects of their own languages and those of the languages of their learners (Karabinar & Guler, 2012). The debate has also brought about an argument about intercultural speakers. According to Risager (2007), an intercultural speaker is a language speaker who develops their own ability to mediate between different cultural perspectives and between the first language and the target language. The discussion about the theory of intercultural competence has also centred on the need for foreign language teachers to have intercultural competence (Karabinar & Guler, 2012).

Intercultural competence has been defined as "knowledge, skills and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to a number of social groups, values which are part of one's belonging to a given society" (Byram et al., 2001, p. 5). Intercultural competence can also be defined as being concerned with an individual's ability to shift their perspective to a culture other than their own (Arcagok & Yılmaz, 2020).

Based on Byram et al.'s (2001) definition of intercultural competence, a key component of the concept is the attitude of the speaker—in this case, the teacher—in that the teacher should be curious, open and ready to suspend their disbeliefs about other cultures and their beliefs about their own culture. This implies a readiness to relativise one's own beliefs, values and behaviours, not to have the view that one's belief, value or behaviour is the only

probably and scientifically correct one. It is important to be in a position to visualise how teachers may look from the perspective of another person who has a dissimilar set of beliefs, values and behaviours (Byram et al., 2001).

Another factor that is critical to intercultural competence is knowledge. Knowledge here refers not simply to awareness of a particular culture, but to knowledge about the functioning of social identities and social groups in one's own and others' cultures (Byram et al., 2001). L2 educators need to have knowledge of social groups and their practices and products in their own country and in their learners' countries. The educators also need to have knowledge about how other individuals see themselves, as well as awareness of other individuals (Byram et al., 2001).

The final component of intercultural competence is skills. L2 educators need the skills to make comparisons, to interpret and to relate (Byram et al., 2001). That is, they need to be able to interpret an occurrence or document from another culture, to explain it, and to relate it to another occurrence or document from their own culture (Bouchard, 2017). L2 educators also need to have the skill of interacting.

According to Byram (1997), an individual who has developed ICC can establish relationships when interacting in a foreign language; interacts efficiently, considering his or her opinions and needs; mediates interactions between persons of various backgrounds; and seeks to keep learning communicative competence. While discussing Byram's (1997) definition of intercultural competence, Sercu (2006) notes that the definition brings to the fore the skills, knowledge and attitudes that foreign language teachers need in order to be considered as interculturally competent individuals. Regarding knowledge, Sercu (2006) notes that foreign language teachers need to be adequately acquainted with the foreign culture that is associated with the foreign language that they teach. Additionally, teachers need to be familiar with their own culture and have culture-general knowledge to assist them in explaining differences and similarities between cultures to their students. Foreign language teachers also need to understand both the stereotypes that learners have and how to handle the stereotypes in a foreign language classroom. Teachers also need to know how to select relevant content, materials and learning tasks that enable learners to develop intercultural competence. Concerning skills, Sercu (2006) suggests that teachers need to be able to employ teaching techniques that enhance their knowledge of social groups, ability to interpret documents or events from other cultures, ability to acquire new knowledge about a given culture, and critical cultural awareness.

Lastly, as regards attitudes, foreign language teachers need to be favourably disposed towards the incorporation of intercultural competence teaching in their work and be ready to actually work towards attaining this objective (Sercu, 2006). Dervin (2010) also discusses the same point by noting that teachers need to exhibit interculturality in the teaching of a foreign language. Further, Dervin (2010) notes that if one introduces intercultural competence in their teaching, they also need to develop ways of ensuring that the competence is developed.

The Significance of Intercultural Competence

Studies on the content of foreign language programmes have established that one of the most mentioned outcomes of foreign language teaching relates to cultural learning, which can occur in different forms (Moeller & Catalano, 2015), including culture-specific knowledge, culture learning skills, cultural self-awareness, and intercultural development.

The intercultural competence for intercultural development involves having the ability to shift the perspective from a person's own culture to another culture; it also entails gaining new communication skills, new cultural knowledge, culture learning skills, and competence in cross-cultural communication. As such, intercultural education is believed to develop an individual's affective, cognitive and behavioural skills (Holm et al., 2009).

Intercultural competence entails elements such as having respect for and valuing other cultures, having curiosity and openness about others, having a sense of self-awareness, and being able to adapt to new cultural conditions (Deardorff, 2007). Along the same lines, Bustamante et al. (2016) argued that the development of teachers' intercultural competence should be integrated into the preparation programmes for teachers, thereby providing room for pre-service teachers to be aware of diversity.

Understanding diversity is an issue that has been advocated by a number of organisations, including the European Commission (EC) (Xuereb, 2009). Diversity in Europe is reflected through multiculturalism, which the EC defines as the acceptance of migrants and minority groups as distinct groups of people whose social behaviours, languages and social infrastructures distinguish them from the majority groups (Xuereb, 2009). Xuereb (2009) further emphasises that multiculturalism advocates that members of minority groups and immigrants should be accorded rights equal to each other and to members of the majority groups. Therefore, if teachers are aware of diversity, they are likely to embrace matters of multiculturalism in their profession. Indeed, there are initiatives aimed at promoting the integration of intercultural aspects into the education of teachers. For example, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment of Europe emphasises the need to promote cultural awareness and to enhance intercultural competence in the teaching of foreign languages (Arcagok & Yılmaz, 2020). In particular, teachers are expected to use language in socially and culturally appropriate features when communicating, and to explore aspects of other languages (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002; Makhmudov, 2020). For example, the teachers' manner of expression, greetings, ways of addressing, politeness and idioms have to be socially and culturally appropriate (Makhmudov, 2020).

Closely related to the argument made by Makhmudov (2020) and Byram et. al. (2002) about the need for teachers to use culturally appropriate features in their communication is an observation made by Ortaçtepe & Akyel (2015). In a study to investigate the linkage between the efficacy of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers and the teachers' self-reported information about the practice of communicative language teaching, Ortaçtepe and Akyel (2015, p. 684) note that "In recent years, there has been a shift in foreign language teaching from traditional grammar-based approaches to more communicative ones such as communicative language teaching". The shift is such that it introduces a new role for foreign language educators. Rather than being the sole source of knowledge, foreign teachers are now facilitators who not only create a classroom environment that is conducive to the learning of language but also provide opportunities for learners to be involved in meaningful communication (Hall, 2011; Ortaçtepe and Akyel, 2015).

Why MFL Educators Need Intercultural Capabilities

Having intercultural capabilities is important for MFL teachers in many ways. To start with, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that language and culture are closely intertwined. The close connection between language and culture is such that language is used to express meaning, but the meaning is brought about by culture (Arcagok & Yılmaz, 2020). According to Damen (1987), in order to be meaningful, language must be connected to culture and be culture-specific. As a result, it is critical for teachers of MFL to value the significance of possessing cultural competence so that their students can learn to communicate successfully using the target language (Arcagok & Yılmaz, 2020).

The growing need for people to be interculturally competent as a result of globalisation and other advancements has made it necessary for teachers, especially L2 teachers, to gain intercultural capabilities (Bal & Savas, 2020). Bal and Savas (2020) further point out that teachers are expected to have respect for both individual and cultural differences. Marczak (2013) identifies tolerance, being accommodating and openness as some of the attributes of an intercultural educator. Teachers' sensitivity to the attitudes of learners is also regarded as a facet of the intercultural learning process (Bal & Savas, 2020).

How Educators Develop Intercultural Capabilities

Various authors have discussed how educators develop intercultural competence. For example, according to Zhang (2017), some educators are of the view that the development of intercultural communication capabilities in the teaching of an L2 is a continuous process that encompasses focusing on three levels of intercultural teaching aims and criteria.

The first level is concerned with knowledge, and includes factors such as linguistic awareness, language capability of the target culture, general cultural awareness, and cultural knowledge of the country from which the L2 learners originate (Zhang, 2017). For instance, having cultural awareness means being able to understand and empathise with different individuals and cultures, respecting and embracing differences and diversity in a way that is not judgemental, being able to undertake effective intercultural communication, and supporting others and giving them equal opportunity (Baker, 2011). It has also been argued that in order to develop linguistic ability, L2 teachers need, among other things, to make their students cognisant of the phenomenon of language and how it works. The teacher will also help learners to have conscious knowledge of the language and its nature (Byram, 2012).

The second level is related to areas such as competence in intercultural communication, the ability to use verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, socio-cultural competence, and communication approaches (Zhang, 2017). Individuals develop their intercultural communication ability through attributes such as interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, interaction attentiveness, and respect for cultural differences (Sarwari & Wahab, 2017). These traits are developed when individuals are willing to interact with other people from different cultures, have respect for other cultures, and treat others from different backgrounds fairly (Sarwari & Wahab, 2017).

The third level of how educators develop intercultural capabilities is related to attitude, which has to do with critical cultural awareness and empathy in intercultural communication (Zhang, 2017). As noted above, awareness of the differences and similarities between one's own culture and the target culture is critical for the development of intercultural competence. Thus, an L2 teacher needs to be aware of the culture that learners bring to the communication process in an L2 classroom (Fenner, 2017). In order to communicate effectively with learners, the teacher needs to be willing to adjust his or her own attitudes and perspectives so as to understand the learners, even in a scenario where a full understanding cannot be achieved (Fenner, 2017).

Measures to Promote the Development of Intercultural Capabilities among L2 Teachers

As implied above, one of the attributes of teachers who have intercultural capabilities is that they can use language in a socially and culturally appropriate manner when communicating, and be able to explore aspects of other languages (Byram et al., 2002; Makhmudov, 2020). It has also been noted that teachers need to develop ways of to ensure that their intercultural competence is developed (Dervin, 2010). This means that teachers have to continually improve their intercultural competence by exploring more ways to behave in a socially and culturally appropriate manner when interacting with others. This section thus discusses various measures that have been proposed to help develop educators' intercultural capabilities.

Intercultural training. Intercultural training is predominantly related to the training of adults who perform jobs that require them to interact with individuals from different cultures (Perry & Southwell, 2011). The training involves imparting knowledge to teachers about various aspects of intercultural competence and how to develop these aspects. For instance, teachers are trained on how to interact with ethnically diverse students and other attributes that make teachers interculturally competent (Gay & Howard, 2000).

Learning intercultural capabilities at school. It has also been noted that the development of intercultural capabilities can take place through learning at school (Perry & Southwell, 2011). Specifically, it has been argued that interaction between native speakers of a language and L2 learners is at the core of enhancing both the learning of language and cultural understanding (Byram & Feng, 2004). Additionally, as noted by Cloonan et al. (2016, p. 11), "sharing is a critical part of intercultural exchange". In particular, when teachers share narratives about their experience of intercultural exchanges, they are able to develop their

knowledge and consciousness of ethnic and cultural differences and able to embrace these differences (Cloonan et al., 2016). This can also help teachers to revise their pedagogical approaches in ways that are sensitive to diverse groups of people (Cloonan et al., 2016).

Visits to other countries. The impact on intercultural competence of visits to other countries has been researched widely (Perry & Southwell, 2011). For instance, one study showed that overseas study enhances university students' intercultural understanding, while another suggested that repeated visits to the same place or a sojourn of at least three months is associated with higher intercultural sensitivity or intercultural competence (Perry & Southwell, 2011).

Similarly, in a study involving US students studying abroad, Medina-Lopez-Portillo (2004) found that the longer students interact with people of a particular culture, the more they learn and develop intercultural sensitivity. It has also been suggested that "a comprehensive study abroad program is one of the most effective ways to prepare multicultural and global teachers" (He, Lundgren, & Pynes, 2017, p. 147). Sercu's (2006) study also found out that foreign language teachers who frequently travelled to foreign countries associated with the foreign language that they taught felt that they could deal extensively with the traditions, daily life routines, education, youth culture, and history, political systems and geography of those countries in a foreign language classroom. The same teachers could also at least have something to say about the values and beliefs, cultural expressions, and international relations of those cultures (Sercu, 2006). As a result, according to Sercu (2006), foreign language teachers' contact with the cultures associated with the language that they teach "should be both varied and frequent" (p. 57). This implies that where possible, foreign language teachers should constantly visit countries associated with the foreign language that they teach in order to learn about the cultures of those countries. This does not apply to the present study as the participants teaching Maltese as a foreign language were actually Maltese living in Malta.

It has also been found that students who study abroad can develop intercultural competence only when they interact with the local people of that country (Williams, 2005). He et al. (2017) also argued that "International cultural immersion experiences are considered one of the most effective means to prepare multicultural and global teachers" (p. 147). This means that it is not enough to merely work or study overseas; the visiting people have to be immersed in the local culture. This implies that it is not enough for the adult learners who are learning Maltese to live in Malta: they need to be immersed in the Maltese culture, which is often found in rural areas and not in the touristic towns such as Sliema, St Julian's and Bugibba.

Methodology

Selection of the Research Paradigm and Its Justification

In the current study, the researcher was interested in understanding how MFL teachers develop intercultural capabilities. The researcher was also interested in gaining knowledge regarding how MFL teachers understand intercultural capabilities, and the attributes of interculturally competent MFL teachers. Researchers take into consideration factors such as the research problem and people's own personal encounters when selecting a research paradigm (Creswell, 2014).

Given the complex and interconnected nature of the phenomena to be investigated, the researcher deemed it appropriate to use a qualitative (interpretivist) research paradigm. Interpretive researchers believe in adopting a detailed meaning of a phenomenon, exploring the understanding of the world in which they exist, and conducting research in a natural setting (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Rahi, 2017). They therefore collect data using real-life (qualitative) approaches such as observation, interviews, reflective sessions, and text messages and discourse (Creswell, 2014; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). According to Yilmaz (2013), the interpretive paradigm makes it possible to investigate social phenomena that are closely connected and complex. This is because the interpretivist paradigm allows researchers to obtain knowledge through a detailed description of the phenomenon in question (Lanka et al., 2020). The researcher chose the interpretivist paradigm in order to study the complex phenomenon of the intercultural skills that educators need to develop and how to develop them, and thus to answer the research questions appropriately.

Research Design

For an interpretive study like the current research, the research designs that can be used include a naturalist methodology, a case study methodology, a grounded theory methodology, narrative inquiry, heuristic inquiry, phenomenology, action research, phenomenography and hermeneutics (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The case study methodology was used in the current study because the researcher wanted to get an in-depth understanding about how MFL teachers develop intercultural capabilities. The researcher was also interested in getting the participants' views regarding the importance of intercultural competence, how the teachers perceive the characteristics of an interculturally competent MFL educator, and how they think an educator develops intercultural competence. The case study design was a selected one because it enables the researcher to conduct an intensive and in-depth inquiry about a complex phenomenon within a real-world perspective (McGloin, 2008; Yin, 2012). A case in a study can be an individual, a group of people, an institution, a programme, a school, or any other phenomenon (Simons, 2009). For the current study, the case was a group of 17 teachers who teach MFL to adults.

Population and Sample

A sample of 17 teachers was purposively selected from teachers who teach MFL to adults at evening classes or in private lessons (see the Appendix). MFL is a new subject in Malta and it has began to be required since 2014 due to the influx of migrants in Malta (Żammit, 2021). Maltese Educators' Perceptions of Democracy, Equality and Justice in Multicultural Education, IAFOR Journal of Education: Inclusive Education, 9(1). https://doi.org/10.22492/ije.9.1.09. The need for a national policy for teaching MFL within the context of bilingualism and plurilingualism, which involves both children and adults, emerged in 2019 as a result of the significant advent of foreigners to Malta (The National Policy of the Teaching of Maltese as a Foreign Language, 2019). As the Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes states, MFL started being assessed at Primary, Middle and Secondary State schools in 2016 (Żammit, 2020).

The 17 teachers in this study have been teaching Maltese as a native language (L1) for more than ten years and thus, they did not receive any training of intercultural competence in their pedagogical training. A postgraduate training programme in Teaching Maltese as a Foreign Language started recently, in

2018. This postgraduate training was intended to teach Maltese teachers how to teach ML2 and provide them with the necessary training to do so effectively. Maltese teachers need to be aware that teaching MFL requires a different pedagogy (including intercultural competence) than teaching Maltese as an L1.

Purposeful or purposive sampling entails targeting participants who are perceived to have the most comprehensive knowledge about the phenomenon that is being investigated (Yilmaz, 2013). The researcher was of the opinion that the 17 teachers selected to participate in the study would be familiar with the topic, given their work of teaching MFL to adults from different cultures.

Data Collection Tool and Procedure

Interviews were used as the data collection instrument in the current study because the researcher wanted to get in-depth responses from the participants by talking to each one of them in person. As noted by Wolgemuth et al. (2014), interviews allow researchers to collect data about the participants' feelings and thoughts regarding a given phenomenon or experience that is being investigated. Also, given that interviews are among "the most common types of data sources in qualitative inquiry" (Holloway, 2005, p. 37), interviewing was considered as a suitable data collection method in the current study.

Prior to conducting the study, the researcher sought ethical approval from the University of Malta's Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC). The researcher then prepared an interview guide, tested it with volunteers and peers, and conducted the interviews. The interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience and in their chosen comfortable location and time, in accordance with the guidance provided by McGrath et al. (2018) on how to conduct interviews. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded using a smartphone and obviously by wearing a mask because the interview was held during the pandemic of COVID-19.

Data Analysis

The interview data were transcribed, coded, and analysed thematically to determine the emerging themes in relation to the research problem and research questions of the current study. The coding was inductive, in that codes were developed from the data itself by identifying the inductive themes, coding them in a dataset, and then examining the meanings, context and implications of the themes. The themes were identified and coded by reading the data samples, creating codes to cover the sample and repeating the process for all the samples. In inductive coding, the researcher identifies the themes and patterns that emerge during the analysis, and these themes may be new and unexpected (Bishop & Yardley, 2007).

Results And Discussion

Presentation of the Results

From the analysis of the interview data, there major themes emerged. These themes are discussed below.

Theme 1: Intercultural competence helps teachers embrace cultural diversity, to be sensitive and accommodative to learners from different cultures, and to use socially and culturally appropriate features during communication.

On the matter of how important intercultural competence is from the participants' perspective, it emerged that MFL teachers who are interculturally competent are able to embrace diversity, be sensitive and accommodative to learners from different backgrounds and cultures, and use socially and culturally appropriate features when communicating with others. For example, Participant 1 stated:

I believe that a teacher of Maltese as a foreign language should have intercultural competence to understand the adult students better, especially the aspects of different cultures that these students belong to. The teacher should also be sensitive and accommodating to learners from different cultures.

Similarly, Participant 4 noted:

I think having intercultural competence helps one understand aspects of other cultures such that it becomes easier to interact with learners and other teachers from different cultural backgrounds. It is important, for instance, to be able to use culturally relevant features when you are interacting with someone from a different culture. And it all begins with knowing how the people from a different culture greet each other, address others or express themselves, whether they use idioms in their language, and so forth. Also, it is important to know whether the other culture exhibits aggressiveness or politeness when communicating. As a teacher, when you know all these things about other cultures, you become more accommodative and not judgemental, and you also avoid stereotypes and prejudices when relating with others.

Participant 4's response echoes various aspects of the importance and relevance of intercultural competence discussed in the literature review. For instance, it was noted that individuals who have cultural awareness, which is one aspect of intercultural capabilities, are able to understand and empathise with others from different cultures in a non-judgemental way (Baker, 2011). Such individuals are also tolerant and accommodative of others from different cultures (Marczak, 2013). More importantly, it was discussed that teachers who have intercultural capabilities are able to use culturally relevant features when communicating (Marczak, 2013), which is beneficial to the students who are learning Maltese as a foreign language.

Theme 2: An interculturally competent MFL educator is one who understands their own culture and those of others, respects and accepts other cultures, and acts appropriately during interactions with people from other cultures.

Another theme that emerged is that an interculturally competent MFL educator will be cognisant of their own culture and others' cultures, respects and accepts other cultures, and acts appropriately when interacting with individuals from other cultures. For instance, Participant 3 pointed out that:

A teacher who can be said to be interculturally capable is one who not only understands their culture but also has a good understanding of other cultures, and is able to act in ways that reflect the cultural conventions of the people with whom they are speaking. For instance, when I teach foreign adults who come from different backgrounds, I pay a lot of attention to what I say and also to what my students are saying, because I genuinely care for my students, especially for those minority groups in my class who always need support and adaptation. I remember that once I had a German student who was talking in English (not in Maltese) about the open relationship that she has with her boyfriend and offended other female students from different cultures. As a teacher, I felt that I was interculturally capable because I understood the German culture and also the Muslim and the Hindu cultures. I remember that I acted immediately by telling the women that we need to respect each other's cultures, and if we had been born in each other's country then we could have acted according to the way we were raised in that particular country. I remember that their argument ceased after what I told them.

Whereas Participant 3 looked at intercultural competence from the perspective of a teacher who genuinely cares about their adult learners' different cultures and teaching them to respect each other, in a way treating adults like children since they did not seem to be tolerant of each other's cultures, Participant 11 brought into perspective the notion that the teacher needs to respect and accept their students' culture as different from the teacher's. Participant 11 asserted that:

I think a teacher can be said to possess intercultural capabilities if the teacher respects and accepts the differences that exist between their own culture and the cultures of their students. You see, different cultures make us express ourselves differently, communicate differently, use non-verbal signs differently, interpret meanings differently, and do a whole lot of other things differently. If, as a teacher, I am able to acknowledge these differences and embrace and accommodate them when interacting with people from different cultures, especially my Maltese as a foreign language student, then I can be said to be interculturally capable.

Participant 11's response reflects what has been widely discussed in the literature concerning the interconnection between culture and language. One of the key points discussed is the need to respect the cultural values that pertain to different cultures. For example, Shemshadsara (2012), notes that "Because language is closely entwined with culture, language teachers entering a different culture must respect their cultural values" (p. 98). More importantly, it is crucial for foreign language teachers to be sensitive to the fact that learners, institutions, administrators, and others to not necessarily share their cultural paradigms (Shemshadsara, 2012).

Other participants emphasised that an interculturally competent teacher should be able to act appropriately at all times when interacting with people from other cultures. For example, Participant 8 noted that "one should always be accommodative and ready to help learners by understanding how their culture affects their ability to learn the new language". Similarly, Participant 16 pointed out that an interculturally capable teacher is an individual "who despite being different from their learners or those they interact with, is respectful at all times and goes the extra mile to ensure that any cultural differences that exist do not hinder effective interaction or communication."

Overall, the responses offered by all the participants, and in particular Participants 3, 8, 11 and 16 highlight elements of the triangular model of intercultural communicative competence suggested by Chen (2014). This model features three sets of capabilities that interculturally competent individuals should have. The capabilities are knowing one's own culture and others' cultural aspects, being able to respect and accept other cultures, and acting appropriately all the time when interacting with people from different cultures (Chen, 2014; Lum, 2018).

Theme 3: The participants felt that they have developed intercultural competence through interactions with others at school and visits to other countries.

The participants discussed the various ways in which, from their own perspective, they have gained cultural capabilities, although they pointed out that they never received any intercultural training in their pedagogical courses. However, during their teaching experience, they learned how to interact with people of different cultures, and by visiting other countries or their general knowledge, they learned and became aware of new cultures. Some of the responses are highlighted below.

Intercultural training. Participant 2 stated that their teacher training did not include any intercultural training sessions to prepare teachers to work in culturally diverse environments, since this multicultural situation was not existent previously, especially when Participant 2 was being trained twenty years ago:

Twenty years ago, our teacher training at university did not provide an intercultural training programme to prepare us, teachers, to work in culturally diverse environments. Multiculturalism in class was non-existent twenty years ago. I always used to teach in state schools and I always taught Maltese to Maltese students. In fact, I did not know what the words 'intercultural' or 'intercultural competence' meant and I asked you before answering your questions. Through reading, movies, travelling, getting to know new people from different countries, and even by hosting students from different countries, I learned a lot about other cultures, how different people express themselves, how they communicate and much more. I also learned how to be accommodative of other cultures, how to avoid prejudices and stereotypes, and how to embrace diversity. The result is that I have always been sensitive to people from other cultures. I do my best to understand them despite the differences that exist between us.

Many participants admitted that, similar to Participant 2, they did not know the definitions of 'intercultural' or 'intercultural competence' and did not learn anything about interculture in their teacher training. This corresponds with Thapa (2019), who claimed that there could be a lack of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication in teacher training.

Similarly, Participant 13 pointed out the following:

We lack intercultural training, but travelling and teaching foreigners has enabled me to be more sensitive, tolerant and accommodative when dealing with my learners who come from different cultures.

The responses above show that intercultural training, whether at the pre-service level or in teacher training, is important to enable teachers to develop intercultural capabilities. Bustamante et al. (2016) discussed the importance of integrating intercultural training in teacher training programmes to make teachers aware of diversity. Similarly, it has been noted that intercultural training helps teachers to gain knowledge about various aspects of intercultural competence and to develop intercultural capabilities (Gay & Howard, 2000; Perry & Southwell, 2011).

Learning while interacting with others at school. The participants who mentioned that they learned intercultural competence while interacting with their students as a way of developing their intercultural capabilities expressed different views regarding how this happened. For example, Participant 13 noted that:

I have developed intercultural skills through my interactions with learners who are from different cultures. One case that I remember very well was when I came across three Somali adults who were interested in learning Maltese as a foreign language so that they could obtain their long-term residence status in Malta. They were making every effort to pronounce well in Maltese, and I took it upon myself to help them by learning some aspects of the Somali culture and teaching some aspects of the Maltese culture. While doing so, I realised that I was learning some aspects of their culture but, most importantly, I was learning to tolerate their culture and not to show them that my culture is better, for instance.

Similarly, Participant 10 claimed that:

My daily interactions with learners from different cultures enable me to learn about multiculturalism and the need to embrace diversity. I remember asking my students to talk about their country's role models and I became aware, and then made my students aware, that people of different ethnicities, gender, etc. can have different impacts on the world, and thus everyone needs to be respected.

The views expressed by the participants reflect what researchers have described about learning intercultural capabilities at school. For example, Perry and Southwell (2011) suggested that the development of intercultural capabilities can also take place through learning within the school environment. As native speakers of a language interact with learners of the language, they share various aspects of their experiences, language and culture, and these intercultural exchanges lead to a developing consciousness of ethnic and cultural differences (Byram & Feng 2004; Cloonan et al., 2016). For instance, according to Participant 13, interacting with learners from different cultures enabled the educator to develop intercultural capabilities by being tolerant of other cultures and not showing the learners that the teacher's culture was better. Similarly, Participant 10's response was that interacting with learners on a day-to-day basis enabled the teacher to learn about multiculturalism and why it is necessary to embrace diversity. Through such interactions, foreign language teachers are able to develop a sense of consciousness regarding ethnic and cultural differences, in the same way as discussed by Byram and Feng (2004) and Cloonan et al. (2016).

Visiting other countries. Some participants indicated that visiting other countries enabled them to learn about the language and cultural aspects of these countries, which was critical in their work as MFL teachers. Participant 6 stated the following:

During evening classes, I meet many nurses who come from rural areas of India. To learn how to interact well with these students, I visited India and stayed in the country for three months during my summer vacation. During this period, I interacted with many individuals in India, learned about their culture and cuisine, how they greet and interact with people of different ages, and so forth. My stay in India was worth it because it helped me learn a lot about how to teach and communicate with my Indian students.

Participant 8 also talked about the importance of visiting other countries to learn different cultures, noting that:

I have visited many countries and interacted with people in these countries to learn about their languages and culture. These experiences have enhanced my intercultural capabilities.

Similarly, Participant 14 pointed out the following:

Visiting various countries and interacting with the people has enabled me to learn about different languages and cultures and how to interact with students from diverse backgrounds.

The responses above suggest that when MFL teachers visit different countries, they can obtain the cultural knowledge that they need to apply when dealing with learners from the countries or regions they have visited. Such knowledge is related to aspects such as language, communication, food and other. In the literature, various authors have discussed visits by L2 teachers to the countries associated with the language that they teach to help them improve their intercultural competence. For example, Perry and Southwell (2011) have noted that visiting other countries enhances intercultural understanding. Sercu (2006) illustrates this point by noting that L2 teachers who frequently visited foreign countries linked with the L2 they teach were of the view that such visits enabled them to understand some aspects about those countries. These aspects include traditions, youth culture, daily life routines, education, as well as the history, political systems and geography of those countries. Based on Sercu's (2006) study, the teachers indicated that they could apply the knowledge gained during such visits in their L2 teaching.

It is also important to point out that the participants in the current study stayed for some time (a minimum of three months) in the countries that they visited and interacted with the local people there. This is important for cultural immersion. In the literature, it has been noted that repeated visits to a country or staying in the visited country for at least three months, coupled with interacting with the local people in that country, enhances a person's intercultural sensitivity or intercultural competence (He et al., 2017; Perry & Southwell, 2011; Williams, 2005).

Discussion

The implications of the results are as follows. To start with, it was found that intercultural competence helps teachers embrace cultural diversity, to be sensitive and accommodative to learners from different cultures, and to use socially and culturally appropriate features during communication. Hence, it is necessary for L2 teachers to develop intercultural capabilities. This will enable such teachers to embrace and accommodate other cultures and to communicate in a socially and culturally appropriate manner when interacting with individuals from other cultures. In the literature, it is noted that L2 teachers need to have certain skills, knowledge and attitudes that depict their intercultural competence (Sercu, 2006). For example, teachers are expected to use language in a socially and culturally fitting way when communicating, and to understand their own culture and the aspects of other cultures and languages (Byram et al., 2002; Makhmudov, 2020; Sercu, 2006). Teachers also need to know how to select content, materials and learning tasks that are relevant and which enable learners to develop intercultural competence (Sercu, 2006).

The second issue pertains to the finding that an interculturally competent MFL educator is one who not only understands their own culture and those of others but also respects and accepts other cultures and acts appropriately during interactions with people from other cultures. Previous studies (e.g. Bal & Savas, 2020; Deardorff, 2007; Marczak, 2013; Sarwari & Wahab, 2017), have also established that L2 teachers who are interculturally competent have attributes such as respecting and valuing other cultures, being accommodative and open towards people from other cultures, and treating people from different backgrounds fairly.

The third issue relates to the finding that the participants felt that they have developed intercultural competence through interactions with others at school and visits to other countries. One implication of this finding is that learning institutions need to encourage intercultural learning by promoting diversity and interactions between and among MFL teachers and students. Through the interactions and exchanges, teachers can develop their knowledge and consciousness of cultural differences and be able to embrace these differences (Cloonan et al., 2016).

Moreover the participants in the study noted that they had not received intercultural training, the review of literature in this study has established that intercultural training is an important way of developing intercultural competence. Hence, it is necessary to provide intercultural training to L2 teachers, with a focus on how teachers can amicably interact with ethnically diverse students and other aspects that make teachers interculturally competent (Gay & Howard, 2000).

Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to investigate how MFL teachers develop intercultural capabilities. The study also sought to investigate the importance of intercultural competence for teachers of MFL and to determine what educators think are the characteristics of an interculturally competent MFL teacher. The following conclusions are based on the findings of the study in relation to the research questions.

Firstly, the participants in the study were of the view that having intercultural capabilities enables MFL teachers to embrace diversity, to help MFL adult learners to learn the target language better, and to be sensitive and accommodative to learners from different cultural backgrounds.

Secondly, in relation to the second research question, the characteristics of an interculturally competent MFL educator included understanding one's own culture and others' cultures, having respect for and accepting other cultures, and acting in an appropriate manner when interacting with individuals from other cultures.

The third conclusion is related to how educators develop intercultural capabilities. The study noted that this occurs through learning at school, which promotes intercultural learning, and visiting other countries and interacting with people in these countries.

The study had some limitations. First is that although purposeful sampling involves focusing on a small number of people or a unique case with comprehensive information about the phenomenon being investigated, the small sample size limits the possibility of generalising the findings to other settings or situations (Yilmaz, 2013). Hence, the findings of the current study may not be generalizable.

The second limitation concerns the nature of the sample. According to Blankenship (2010), purposeful sampling may be affected by an error in the researcher's judgement, leading to a biased or flawed sample. It is notable that MFL educators can be quite subjective when giving their opinion concerning intercultural capabilities. Moreover, some of the teacher's narratives of their experience of intercultural capabilities deviated from the subject that the researcher was exploring, and thus actually had nothing to do with intercultural capabilities.

Abbreviation

EC - European Commission

EFL – English as a foreign language

FREC - Malta's Faculty Research Ethics Committee

ICC - intercultural communication competence

L1 – Native language

L2 – Foreign language

MFL – Maltese as a foreign language

Declarations

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