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To what extent do the types of schools shape respondents' perceived usefulness and use of English in bilingual Malta?

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a large-scale scientifically-representative survey conducted in 2012 on English language use amongst the Maltese bilingual population. It attempts to show how the three different types of schools – state, church and independent – shape their students' perceptions towards the usefulness and use of English in a number of domains.

Keywords: perceptions, domains, skills, use and education

Introduction

Together with Belgium, Finland, Ireland and Luxembourg, Malta is one of the countries in the European Union which is officially bilingual. Its bilingualism is testimony to the linguistic legacy by two of its former colonisers – the Arabs (870–1090) and the British (1800–1964) – who bequeathed Maltese (a variety of Arabic) and English respectively. In an unexpected turn of events, Maltese now has official status in both Malta and the European Union. Few would have foreseen such a linguistic development since for many decades Maltese was held in low esteem – many considered it 'il-lingwa tal-kċina' (the language of the kitchen) and the language of the illiterate population. Although Maltese was given official status during British rule, the Maltese never expected their indigenous language, one that was spoken by less than half a million, to obtain official recognition outside Malta and to be on a par with other world languages in the European Union. The newly-acquired status of Maltese outside Malta's shores has instilled deep pride among the Maltese (Sciriha & Vassallo, 2006).

Though Malta is *de jure* bilingual, this does not mean that the Maltese are *de facto* bilingual. Cassola (1994) contends that "bilingual people are those people who can speak two languages with near-native accuracy… In this respect the Maltese are certainly not bilingual" (p. 39). Cassola's statement finds support in language survey findings (Sciriha, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2013; Sciriha & Vassallo, 2001, 2006). Moreover, what also transpires from these surveys is that proficiency in English is to an extent dependent on the type of school one attends. Frendo's (2016) findings

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clearly showed that state school children did not perform well in English, in contrast to independent school children. Nevertheless, church school children evidenced good proficiency levels in their written skills in both English and Maltese. She clearly stipulates that "the amount of exposure to… English that Grade V primary students receive does depend on the type of school" (Frendo, 2016, p. 206). Baker (1992) too considers the type of school one attends as a key factor in determining language attitudes and proficiency skills.

It is in this Maltese sociolinguistic context that this paper discusses the relationship of only one aspect of school ethos or the distinguishing characteristic – which in our case is the use of English in three different types of schools – and the perceptions of the Maltese regarding the usefulness of English and their reported use of English in the four skills in different domains.

Background Information

Education in Malta

Compulsory school attendance was introduced in 1924 through the Compulsory Attendance Act, however, this was difficult to enforce because of World War II. Only later in 1946, did schooling become mandatory for all children aged 6 to 14 years. Another important development was that in 1956, education in state primary and secondary schools became free of charge. However, only in 1970 was secondary education made accessible to all students. In addition, the 1974 Education Act enforced compulsory education until students reached either 16 years of age or had completed their final year of secondary school. Moreover, in 1971 tuition fees were abolished for Maltese students joining the University of Malta. A further development occurred in 1977 when the student-worker scheme was introduced at university. This was later abolished and the stipend system was introduced so that all Maltese students would not pay any tuition fees for their first degree and yet also receive a monthly stipend and an allowance (Zammit Ciantar, 1996). These educational measures have goaded many young and not so young Maltese, to go beyond secondary school education and pursue studies at post-secondary and tertiary levels.

Types of schools: State, Church and Independent

Both English and Maltese are introduced to Maltese children as soon as they start formal schooling. In total, all children receive eleven years of compulsory instruction in the two official languages and are also taught at least one foreign language in secondary school. In view of the position of Maltese as the national language and one of the official languages of the European Union and the fact that it is overwhelmingly spoken in everyday interaction, English is considered as a second language.

Even though Malta is a small nation state, throughout its history of education there have been both state and private institutions. There are three types of schools operating in Malta. The first type consists of state schools, comprising ten colleges,

with each college overseeing a number of primary and secondary schools. The majority of Maltese children are educated in such colleges, while much smaller percentages of children attend either church-run or independent schools.

When compared to the large number of state schools, a much smaller number of primary and secondary schools are run by the Catholic Church. It is important to document the fact that up to three decades ago, all parents whose children attended church schools paid tuition fees. However, following the 1991 Church-State agreement on the devolution of church property, all church-run schools are now tuition-free, although donations from parents are expected. The government pays the salaries of all the church schools' teaching and non-teaching staff. Entry into such schools is by a lottery system at the primary level. In this way, all those parents who wish to send their children to church-run schools have an equal chance of attending such institutions. On account of this fact, church schools are no longer considered elitist institutions as they now enrol a healthy mix of children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

There are slightly fewer independent schools than church schools, with most of these schools being established in the past thirty years. Though both church and independent schools are considered as private institutions of learning – unlike church schools – independent schools charge high tuition fees and parents of children who attend independent schools tend to belong to the professional and business classes (Cilia & Borg, 1997). Independent schools are not helped financially by the State, although the government gives tax rebates to parents whose children attend such schools.

In view of these differences in these school types and the fact as noted by Sultana (1996) that state school teachers are usually better qualified than their non-state school counterparts, it seems natural to ask: Why do Maltese parents send their children to non-state schools? Cilia and Borg (1997) cite a number of perceptions regarding state and church-run schools. In their qualitative study, in which 60 parents whose children attend church and independent schools were interviewed, Cilia and Borg (1997) discovered that parents send their children to such schools for a constellation of reasons, among which are family tradition and loyalty towards the school that the parents would have attended as children; the fact that such schools are open to parental involvement and because private schools emphasise the importance of English by enforcing it as a medium of instruction. Being fluent in English and being able to write well in an international language is an important "cultural capital" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and one which according to Sciriha (1997) is an important selling feature in private school education. In her study she elaborates on the importance that in such schools, all subjects are taught in English by giving an example of one independent school which had initially embarked on a policy of bilingualism. This language policy had to be swiftly changed to English as the medium of instruction in all subjects excluding Maltese, because the parents simply revolted and threatened to withdraw their children from this school.

Research Questions

The specific research questions in this study are:

1) Is there a relationship between the way the Maltese view the usefulness of English and the type of school they attended?
2) Is there a relationship between the domains in which the Maltese use English and the type of school they attended?

The present study – Language Survey (2012)

As previously noted, in view of the rise in the status of Maltese as one of the EU's official languages, and the concomitant increase in the positive attitude among the Maltese towards their native language, the present survey attempts to discover whether English is *still* perceived as a useful language as well as seeking to investigate the participants' English language proficiency skills in particular domains. However, before presenting the findings of this survey, a brief overview of the methodology and the instrument used to collect the data are given.

Research Methodology and Sample Profile

This study was conducted through a scientifically-selected sample of 500 persons in Malta by means of door-step person-to-person interviews. It is to be noted that a telephone-based survey has a slightly higher sampling error than a person-to-person house-based study, and was not considered to be adequate for this kind of study. Statistically, at the 95% confidence level, the maximum sampling error for this type of study is estimated to be ± 5% (on issues with an expected 50/50 split) but can go down to ± 2.5% on issues with an expected 5/95 split.

The sample was selected through a multi-stage random sampling procedure. All the persons in the most recent Local Electoral Directory were divided into 500 blocks, each with an equal number of voters. Of these, 20 were in turn chosen using a random seed. From within each of these blocks, 25 interviews were conducted. At this level, the sampling procedure was modified through the use of quota sampling on a block basis by gender and age, thus ensuring that it faithfully reproduces the population profile of Malta by gender and age. The study covered all persons resident in Malta aged 18 years and over.

The Questionnaire

In addition to the section intended to collect the participants' demographic details, the questionnaire used for this study was divided into a number of sections but for the purposes of this paper it is only the findings from two sections which will be presented namely: (i) the section which focussed on participants' perceptions of the usefulness of English, and (ii) the other section which asked participants to provide information on their use of English in listening, speaking, reading, writing in different domains.

Sample Profile

The distribution by age and gender obtained was pre-stratified as shown in Table 1 which provides a breakdown of the sample obtained through this study.

A good representation of the different age groups had subsequently been captured by this study. The highest number of Maltese respondents interviewed were those whose ages ranged between the ages of 31–50 (N = 165) and 51–65 (N = 134).

The study took into account the respondents' native languages. In Table 2 the findings of this survey conducted in 2012, are compared with those by Sciriha and Vassallo (2006) and it is evident that there has only been a slight decrease in the percentages of Maltese (2006: 96.2%) and English (2006: 5.2%) as native languages. It is important to point out that in the Sciriha and Vassallo survey, a few of the participants were also brought up as native speakers of both languages and it is for this reason that the total adds up to more than one hundred percent (N = 510; 102.0%). However, none of the participants in the 2012 survey declared themselves as simultaneous native bilinguals. As is clearly evident in Table 2, Maltese has retained its dominant position, while English is a very distant runner-up.

Table 1. Sample profile by age and gender

	Gender		
	N =	N =	N =
Age	Male	Female	Total
18–30	60	57	117
31–50	84	81	165
51–65	68	66	134
66+	35	48	84
	247	253	500

Participants' Native Languages

Table 2. Native Languages – A Comparison of the 2006 and 2012 surveys

	Sciriha and Vassallo (2006)	%	Sciriha (2012)	%
	Frequency		Frequency	
Maltese	481	96.2	472	94.4
English	26	5.2	25	5.0
Italian	2	0.4	2	0.4
Arabic	1	0.2	0	0.0
Serbian	0	0.0	1	0.2
	500	102.2	500	100

Educational Attainment

The Maltese participants were also asked to provide information regarding their highest educational levels. The findings reveal that 45.4% (N = 227) of the Maltese completed secondary education; 20.8% (N = 104) terminated post-secondary or technical schooling; 5.0% (N = 25) followed courses at a post-secondary vocational institution (MCAST); while 15.2% (N = 76) attended university. Unsurprising is the fact

that 13.6% (N = 68) of the Maltese who declared as having only attended primary school, belong to the two oldest age groups (51–65: 5.6% (N = 28); 66+: 8.0% (N = 40)).

Results

This section gives the results of the survey which are organised in such a way as to answer the two research questions: (1) Is there a relationship between the perceptions of the Maltese on the usefulness of English and the type of school they had attended?; (2) Is there a relationship between the domains/contexts in which English is used and the type of school they had attended?

Research Question 1. Usefulness of English

The Maltese were simply asked 'How useful is English for you?' The results to this question show that a high 79.8% consider English as 'very useful', while 17.8% declared English to be 'useful'. A very small percentage of the Maltese respondents did not wish to commit themselves and very neutrally said that English is 'neither useful nor not useful' (1.6%) while 0.8% openly declared that English is just 'not useful'. In view of the fact that previously-cited studies have shown that the type of school one attends is an important factor with respect to one's attitude towards English, the present survey findings on the usefulness of English have been cross-tabulated by the type of school attended by the participants.

Table 3. Perceived usefulness of English by type of school attended

		English learnt in secondary school			
		State	**Church**	**Independent**	**Total**
English is:	N =	286	80	33	399
Very useful	% within English leant in School	77.6%	89.9%	86.8%	79.8%
	% of Total	52.2%	16.0%	6.6%	79.8%
Useful	N =	75	9	5	89
	% within English leant in School	21.1%	10.1%	13.2%	17.8%
	% of Total	15.0%	1.8%	1.0%	17.8%
Neither useful nor useless	N =	8	0	0	8
	% within English leant in School	2.1%	0%	0%	1.6%
	% of Total	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%
Not very useful	N =	4	0	0	4
	% within English leant in School	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%
	% of Total	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%
	N =	373	89	38	500
	% within English learnt in School	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	% of Total	74.6%	17.8%	7.6%	100.0%

Base = All

Table 3 which gives a breakdown of the results shows that of the 79.8% of the Maltese who consider English as 'very useful', the incidence of such a positive attitude is highest among those who have attended church-run (89.9%) and independent schools (86.8%). Interestingly so, a notably lower 76.7% of the Maltese who had attended state primary schools, consider English to be 'very useful'. Moreover, none of the Maltese who had attended the non-state schools declared that English is 'not very useful'. With the p value of p = 0.107 which is higher than p = 0.05 at the 95% confidence level, the Chi-Square test carried out shows that there is no significant relationship between the two categorical variables, namely the type of school and usefulness of English. This effectively means that the results for this question are not dependent on the type of school one attends.

English Language use in the four language skills in different domains

Listening and Speaking

The Maltese are formally taught the two official languages in both primary and secondary schools. Depending on the type of school they attend, an extra one or two non-official foreign languages are added to their linguistic repertoire. Whereas all schoolchildren are taught a third language, learning a fourth language is subject to other considerations such as the willingness of the child to choose another language in Form 3. Though the educational system imposes the learning of at least three languages, language learning at school does not translate into using the languages, neither at school nor outside it. Unfortunately, unless practised, languages are very quickly forgotten if they are not found to be useful. In fact, the usefulness of a language depends on how much one needs to use the language in everyday life. Since the overwhelming majority of the Maltese stated that English is very useful, they were in turn also asked to name the domains they used English in when listening, speaking, reading and writing in English. Passive exposure to a language helps to remember it and to expand one's vocabulary. In respect of listening to English, only 17.7% of the Maltese listen to English programmes on the radio, though a much higher 56.5% is registered as regards their watching English films and programmes.

Table 4. Listening to English by type of school attended

		State	Church	Independent	Total
Listening to the Radio	N =	32	25	20	77
	*Row	41.6%	32.5%	26.0%	100.0%
	**Column	10.0%	32.5%	54.1%	17.7%
	Total	7.4%	5.7%	4.6%	17.7%
Watching films on TV	N =	187	61	30	275
	*Row	66.9%	22.2%	10.9%	100.0%
	**Column	50.8%	70.1%	78.9%	56.5%
	Total	37.8%	12.5%	6.2%	56.5%

*Row Percentage; **Column Percentage; Base = All

Furthermore, a closer look at Table 4 reveals that as regards listening to the radio and watching English programmes, much higher percentages are registered among those who had previously attended independent (radio: 54.1%; TV: 78.9%) and church-run schools (Radio: 32.5%; TV: 70.1%) when compared with those who had attended state schools (Radio: 10.0%; TV: 50.8%). When the Chi-Square test is applied, results show that when the replies for this question are cross-tabulated by Type of School, the values obtained are p = 0.000 and p = 0.001 for 'listening to the radio' and 'watching films on TV' respectively. Both these values are less than p = 0.05 at the 95% confidence level. This test therefore yielded significant results and effectively meant that both replies for this question are dependent on Type of School attended.

Listening to English is important because it helps listeners acquire accurate syntax and a vast vocabulary and also exposes them to the prosodic features particular to English. However, listening to English is passive and is not enough if one wishes to enhance their spoken English skills. As the adage goes, it is practice that makes perfect. For this reason, the Maltese were also asked whether they speak English in different contexts. Table 5, which gives a breakdown of the findings by type of school attended, reveals that some but not all of the Maltese practise their English with their friends, government officials, work colleagues, shop assistants in localities where English is commonly heard such as Sliema and St. Julians, as well as when they consult the doctor, to cite a few.

Since speaking is a more difficult skill – after all, comprehension always precedes production – the findings in Table 5 show that when compared with those for listening to English, there is a lower incidence of speaking English. Quite noteworthy is the fact that while 17.6% of the Maltese declared that they speak English when interacting with shop assistants in the Sliema and St. Julians conurbation, only 3.3% did likewise with government officials. Of the 11.8% of the Maltese who did speak English with their friends, the incidence of such language preference is highest among those who attended Independent schools (44.7%) and lowest among the state school participants (5.0%), thus confirming the oft-cited perception that non-state school Maltese have a tendency to speak English more than their state school counterparts.

Only 8.9% of the Maltese use English when interacting with their doctor. The incidence of such use is indeed virtually negligible among those who attended state schools (1.7%) while it is significantly much higher among those from independent schools (43.2%) and lesser among those from church schools (24.1%). At work, 16.7% of the Maltese stated that they speak English with their colleagues. Although the incidence of spoken English is highest among the non-state school participants (Independent: 34.3% and Church: 22.8% vs. State: 13.1%), there is not such a huge chasm as in other domains. When interacting on the phone, only 11.9% declared that they speak English. As in the other domains, it is the Maltese who have attended independent schools who speak English most. In fact, the incidence of such use is highest among those from independent schools (44.7%) and lowest among the state school participants (4.9%).

When the Chi-Square test is applied for the replies for situations which are cross-tabulated by type of school, the values are: p = 0.000 (speaking with friends), p = 0.007 (speaking with government officials), p = 0.002 (interacting with shop assistants), p = 0.000 (speaking on the phone) and p = 0.000 (consulting the doctor). All these values are less than p = 0.05 at the 95% confidence level. This effectively means that in each instance, each of the categorical variables investigated are indeed dependant on the type of school attended.

Table 5. Speaking English by type of school attended

		State	Church	Independent	Total
When speaking with friends	N =	18	22	17	57
	*Row	31.6%	38.6%	29.8%	100.0%
	**Column	5.0%	25.3%	44.7%	11.8%
	Total	3.7%	4.5%	3.5%	11.8%
When speaking with government officials	N =	7	5	4	16
	*Row	43.8%	31.2%	25.0%	100.0%
	**Column	2.0%	5.8%	10.8%	3.3%
	Total	1.5%	1.0%	0.8%	3.3%
When speaking with work colleagues	N =	39	18	12	69
	*Row	56.5%	26.1%	17.4%	100.0%
	**Column	13.1%	22.8%	34.3%	16.7%
	Total	9.5%	4.4%	2.9%	16.7%
When interacting with shop assistants in Sliema and/or St Julians	N =	30	29	17	76
	*Row	39.5%	38.2%	22.4%	100.0%
	**Column	9.5%	35.8%	48.6%	17.6%
	Total	6.9%	6.7%	3.9%	17.6%
When speaking on the phone		18	23	17	58
	*Row	31.0%	39.7%	29.3%	100.0%
	**Column	4.9%	26.4%	44.7%	11.9%
	Total	3.7%	4.7%	3.5%	11.9%
When consulting the doctor	N =	6	21	16	43
	*Row	14.0%	48.8%	37.2%	100.0%
	**Column	1.7%	24.1%	43.2%	8.9%
	Total	1.2%	4.3%	3.3%	8.9%

*Row Percentage; **Column Percentage

Base = All those who said that they use English for these particular situations

Reading and Writing

Reading and writing usually go together. Nevertheless, even though writing presupposes knowledge of reading, the latter skill does not assume that actual writing occurs. For this reason, the Maltese were asked to cite separate occasions when they read English material (books, magazines, newspapers) and when they use English in written communication.

Tables 6 and 7 provide a breakdown of the results by type of school attended. In all, the Maltese cited two platforms when English is read: (i) books/newspapers/magazines; (ii) surfing the net. The majority of the Maltese (60.3%) stated that they read traditional material namely books, newspapers and magazines, in English while a much higher 93.1% read in English when surfing the net. It is apt to point out that while the findings in the two previous tables (4 and 5) show that the incidence of those who used English is much higher among those who had attended non-state schools, the differences among the three school types are not as sharp in this platform. In fact, extremely small differences are registered among the three types of school attendees in respect of 'surfing the net'.

The Chi-Square test performed shows that the replies for the above situations (reading and surfing the internet) where English is used are: $p = 0.000$ and $p = 0.184$ respectively. Only one of these values is less than 0.05 at the 95% confidence level. This effectively means that 'reading newspapers/books' is dependent on type of school attended whilst 'surfing the net' is not.

Table 6. Reading English by type of school attended

		State	Church	Independent	Total
When reading newspapers/books	N =	178	71	31	280
	*Row	63.6%	25.4%	11.1%	100.0%
	**Column	51.9%	83.5%	86.1%	60.3%
	Total	38.4%	15.3%	6.7%	60.3%
When surfing the net	N =	232	71	34	337
	*Row	68.8%	21.1%	10.1%	100.0%
	**Column	93.2%	92.2%	94.4%	93.1%
	Total	64.1%	19.6%	9.4%	93.1%

*Row Percentage; **Column Percentage

It is clearly evident that new technology is encouraging the Maltese to practise their reading skills in English, which it is augured will eventually also help in improving their writing skills too. Though many are able to speak English well, this does not mean that they are also able to express themselves cogently and effectively through their writing. In fact, Sciriha and Vassallo (2006) present data which shows that the Maltese overwhelmingly speak Maltese in most domains, yet they rarely write in Maltese. Some respondents even stated that they prefer to write in English rather than Maltese. It is a somewhat perplexing fact that although the Maltese speak Maltese as a native language, and are formally taught Maltese and English on

entering school, they still declare a preference for writing in English, their second language. Possibly, the Maltese orthography is the cause of this anomaly since it is considered to be difficult. Moreover, in view of the lack of standardisation in the orthography of foreign loan-words in Maltese – a process which is currently still undergoing a public consultation process launched by the *Kunsill tal-Malti* before having such guidelines become the established norm, it is not surprising that the Maltese in Sciriha and Vassallo's study prefer to write in English than in Maltese.

Furthermore, the findings in Table 7 reveal that 'communicating by email' is more popular than writing formal letters. In fact, 72.2% (N = 327) use the former, while 59.9% (N = 223) of the Maltese state that they send formal letters in English. Similar to the findings related to spoken English, although the majority of the Maltese use English in writing, its incidence is the highest among those who have attended independent schools (letters: independent 90.0 % vs. state: 51.3%; email: independent 91.9% vs. state: 67.2%). More than half of the Maltese (53.7%) also send SMS messages in English. Once again, of those who text in English, there is a higher incidence among those who attended independent (84.2%) and church schools (74.1%) than state schools (44.3%) who follow such trends. The Maltese (64.3%) also chat in English on MSN and Facebook. The incidence of those using English is highest among those who had attended Independent schools (87.1; church: 69.4% and 59.5%).

Table 7. Writing English by type of school attended

		State	Church	Independent	Total
When chatting on MSN or Facebook	N =	110	43	27	180
	*Row	61.1	23.9	15.0	100.0
	**Column	59.5	69.4	87.1	64.7
	Total	39.6	15.5	9.7	64.3
When I write formal letters	N =	138	58	27	223
	*Row	61.9	26.0	12.1	100.0
	**Column	51.3	79.5	90.0	59.9
	Total	37.1	15.6	7.3	59.9
When I write emails	N =	223	70	34	327
	*Row	62.2	21.4	10.4	100.0
	**Column	67.2	83.3	91.9	72.2
	Total	49.2	15.5	7.5	72.2
When I write SMS messages	N =	132	60	32	224
	*Row	58.9	26.8	14.3	100.0
	**Column	44.3	74.1	84.2	53.7
	Total	31.7	14.4	7.7	53.7

*Row Percentage; **Column Percentage

The Chi-Square test shows that when English is used in these situations the values are p = 0.009 (chatting on MSN or Facebook), p = 0.000 (formal letters), p = 0.001 (writing emails) and p = 0.000 (writing SMS messages). All these values are less than p = 0.05 at the 95% confidence level. This effectively means that the use of English in each of the above situations is dependent on Type of School attended.

Conclusion

There is consensus among the Maltese on the usefulness of English regardless of the type of school they had attended. However, this positive view does not mean that they are also frequent users of the language in all four skills or in different domains. In fact, notwithstanding the status of English as being co-official with Maltese, its use in the spoken form is surprisingly limited especially when compared with the results in the written mode of communication. Since English was reported as being the native language of a mere 5.0% of the Maltese, it could be considered as understandable that its use is not as pervasive and dominant as Maltese, the native language of the overwhelming population of Malta. Nevertheless, this survey's findings with regard to spoken English are still unexpected and worrying in the light of Malta's official bilingualism. After all, being a native speaker of Maltese does not exclude one from speaking English especially since English and Maltese are taught as soon as children enter school. Moreover, at secondary level most of the textbooks are in English which should further encourage children not only to read and write in but also to speak English.

What clearly transpires from this study's findings is the fact that the type of school one attends is an important variable that cannot be overlooked when discussing language use in Malta. Interestingly, the three different types of schools seem to be operating as different language camps, motivated by different language agendas. Whereas the state school participants clearly prefer speaking Maltese, those who have attended independent schools opt for English in most domains. On the other hand, what is particularly striking is that the former church school participants are not as blinkered and rigid in their language use. They use both English and Maltese, albeit to varying degrees and in different domains. This finding is probably the result of the wholesome blend of children who now come from all socio-economic categories and not just from the professional or business socio-economic groups as was the case up until the late 1980s. Church schools which have been present in Malta for many decades had traditionally enforced English as the medium of instruction and interaction at school. It is documented that some students were even shamed and/or penalised if they were caught speaking Maltese.

Moreover, prior to the **Ecclesiastical Entities Properties Act** in 1991, church schools were considered elitist institutions. However, nowadays, gaining entry into the church schools does not depend on how well-to-do the parents are – as is the case with independent school children – but is based on a democratic lottery system which ensures that all children, whose parents wish to enrol their children at a church school, now have an equal chance of gaining entry into such schools. This has led to a situation where students now come from different socio-economic

and language backgrounds. This position has unwittingly positively changed the physiognomy of church schools which were previously English-speaking schools, to bilingual (English and Maltese) schools.

Even in respect of reading English books, there was a significant difference between private school participants when compared to their state school counterparts. In this regard, Frendo (2017) in her extensive research among primary school children attending the three school types affirms that:

> student respondents… do not always receive enough exposure to the two languages, and consequently, for a substantial number of students, both as a result of the school type attended as well as the fact that outside the school domain, there are but a few opportunities for receiving quality exposure to one or the other of the two official languages, written communicative competence, remains a struggle (p. 309).

With regard to 'surfing the net', the differences between the school types are not significant. It is indeed noteworthy and heartening that the prolific use of the internet is helping to narrow the chasm in English reading among the Maltese, regardless of the type of school they had attended. This will in future benefit writing in English which is until now still a prerogative of the Maltese who have attended private schools. Indeed, as Benson (2004) contends that it is important to give due consideration to the language of instruction.

Furthermore, Malta's strong economy – which has provided jobs for thousands of foreigners whose language of communication is predominantly English – will serve as an impetus for the Maltese to practise their English not just with English-speaking tourists, but also with foreign work colleagues who know no Maltese. This emerging linguistic scenario is set to change the language of instruction in state schools from one which is overwhelmingly Maltese-based to one where English will take precedence, since the presence of foreign children in state school classrooms who have no knowledge of Maltese is set to increase.

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