

Attitudes towards foreign language learning at post-secondary education level in Malta

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Abstract: In recent decades, numbers of students taking up modern foreign languages (MFL) in post-compulsory education in Malta have shrunk to an alarming low, and the Maltese population's past multilingual skills have undergone a significant decline. This study aims to understand the reasons for post-secondary (PS) students' avoidance of MFL in their choice of subjects for Advanced level studies by analysing their attitudes to MFL and investigating which external and internal factors of influence impact on their level of interest in foreign language learning (FLL). A questionnaire was distributed to PS students in four of the six pre-university institutions in Malta. Results from the representative sample of respondents confirm the existence of negative attitudes to FLL among PS students. External factors of influence such as discontinuity between secondary and PS language curricula, and unsatisfactory FLL experiences at secondary level appear to be among the factors dissuading some PS learners from pursuing MFL studies. Internal factors such as causal attributions of success or failure in language studies compound the feelings of low learner agency. A case study is conducted concerning French, a foreign language (FL) in sharp decline, revealing perceptions of difficulty with regard to the language, as well as stereotypical associations that cling to the language, making it to some extent subject to lingering prejudice. Understanding actual PS learners' beliefs about FLL is an important step towards effectively addressing the unpopularity of MFL.

Keywords: post-secondary education; modern foreign languages; French; internal factors of influence; external factors of influence; motivation.

Introduction

For a number of years, modern foreign language (MFL) lecturing staff at the University of Malta (Malta's main tertiary education institution) and other

language educators, have been extremely worried by the near-death of the subjects they teach, not to say their “demise” (Bartram 2010), as foreign language (FL) student numbers have dwindled to a mere trickle in higher education. For each MFL, there are at most a handful of students in the different post-secondary (PS) institutions, and the situation can be so bad that in certain years, courses in a specific language do not open. In spite of having repeatedly voiced their opinion on this crisis, the general feeling among higher education MFL lecturing staff is that they have been abandoned to their plight. Language educators sometimes seem to be the only ones concerned by the societal implications for a country lacking persons qualified in MFL, as political and educational powers that seem to continue to promote the sciences, finance-related and information technology courses. One may speak of a “systematic marginalisation” of modern foreign language learning (MFL) in Malta, as Bartram (2010) does for the case of the US, and of “a national indisposition” (Leighton 1991) towards this learning area.

The situation is immediately critical at post-compulsory education, as very few students are learning a MFL beyond secondary school. This may be the result of a whole range of factors responsible for generating negative attitudes towards MFL. This study aims to potentially aid the situation by attempting to understand Maltese post-compulsory education students’ attitudes and perceptions towards MFL. It will also delve deeper into the question by taking the state of French education as a case study, in an effort to trace the fate of one of the languages that have seen a major decline in student numbers, by understanding students’ opinions vis-à-vis the language and its learning process.

The context of the study

The Maltese archipelago, situated 93km south of Sicily, is the smallest country in the European Union, with a population of slightly more than 520,000 (NSO, 2023), of which slightly more than 110,000 (22.2%; NSO, 2023) are mostly recently settled foreigners, attracted by Malta’s dynamic economy and low unemployment rates. With a surface area of hardly 300km², Malta is among the most overpopulated countries in the world, with 1,648.6 persons/km². For comparison, in the European Union, the country with the next largest population density, the Netherlands, has 507.3 persons/km² (NSO, 2023), therefore less than a third of Malta’s density.

The complex sociolinguistic situation in Malta is surprising. The Maltese are largely bilingual. Maltese and English are both official languages of the country, with Maltese as the national language. Speakers of Maltese tend to code-switch extensively, and having English, Maltese or a Maltese regional dialect as L1 may in certain situations be tinted with social connotations of belonging to the elite or to a lesser social level. Maltese is the language most

people use for daily conversation, while formality equates with Maltese on the institutional level and English in the private sector. Most writing is carried out in English, which is also the main language of one's educational journey. This situation has recently been enriched with the presence of foreign languages, as one can hear members of the Italian, Filipino, Pakistani, Indian, African and Eastern European communities speak their own languages, with some even having online newspapers in their language for their Malta-based compatriots.

The Maltese educational scenario has three school sectors which are public schools, Church schools and independent, fee-paying schools. At primary school level, children normally experience a taster course in the different MFL offered at secondary level in their sector. At least one FL is compulsory at secondary level as part of Maltese students' curricular entitlement, and the primary level taster course is meant to help students choose the FL they would like to study in their secondary cycle. In public schools, the range of languages on offer is wider, as students may choose between Italian, French, German, Spanish, and, in some schools, Arabic and Mandarin. In all Church and independent schools, Italian, French and usually German are on offer, but Spanish is gradually being introduced in these sectors too and is attracting many learners. Education is compulsory until the end of the secondary cycle, when students are 16 years of age.

At the end of secondary education, students sit their Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) national examinations. To proceed to Sixth Form, they normally need a pass in Mathematics, one Science Subject, Maltese and English and any two other subjects, meaning that it is not obligatory to obtain a pass in the FL one has studied, and that a significant number of students leave compulsory school without any certification in any FL (Pace, 2018). Table 1 shows the decreasing percentage of students registered for an end-of-secondary SEC examination in one of the four main MFL (French, German, Italian and Spanish) over a recent 15-year period at 5-year intervals (with the exception of numbers for year 2022). Moreover, this percentage is calculated on the basis of the total cohort of students sitting for any SEC examination and does not include those students who do not sit for any end-of-secondary examination.

Year	Percentage of students registered for SEC level examinations in French, German, Italian and Spanish
May 2007	68.56%
May 2012	57.56%
May 2017	55.38%
May 2022	70.58%
Source: Adapted from Matsec Statistical Reports (for 2007, 2012, 2017) or General Statistics (for 2022)	

Table 1: Percentage of students registered for an end-of-secondary SEC examination in May 2007, 2012, 2017 and 2022 in the four main FL

At PS level, entry into University normally follows a two-year Sixth Form course, with around six institutions catering for the pre-university courses, belonging to the public, Church or private sector, and with one of the larger establishments belonging to the University. At this level, students take one compulsory subject at Intermediate level, called Systems of Knowledge, apart from two Advanced Level subjects and three other subjects at Intermediate level. One language is obligatory, but since this can also be Maltese or English, Sixth Form students largely opt for their first or second language, and not a FL.

The downward trend can also be illustrated in Tables 2 and 3, showing the drastic decline in the number of candidates sitting for the Advanced and Intermediate level examinations in the four main MFL over a recent 15-year period at 5-year intervals.

Year	Percentage of students registered for Advanced level examinations in French, German, Italian and Spanish
May 2007	15.28%
May 2011*	13.94%
May 2017	4.83%
May 2022	3.59%
Source: Adapted from Matsec Statistical Reports (for 2007, 2011, 2017) or General Statistics (for 2022); the statistical report for 2012 was unavailable	

Table 2: Percentage of students registered for FL Advanced level examinations in May 2007, 2011, 2017 and 2022.

Year	Percentage of students registered for Intermediate level examinations in French, German, Italian and Spanish
May 2007	16.98%
May 2011*	15.8%
May 2017	5.65%
May 2022	5.5%
Source: Adapted from Matsec Statistical Reports (for 2007, 2011, 2017) or General Statistics (for 2022); the statistical report for 2012 was unavailable	

Table 3: Percentage of students registered for FL Intermediate level examinations in May 2007, 2011, 2017 and 2022.

The crux of the problem thus lies in the radical drop of FL student numbers at PS level, as studying a FL is no longer obligatory. Very low percentages of Sixth Form students' study FLs at Advanced and Intermediate levels, in the two-year course in preparation for entry into University. Thus, Sixth Forms can barely feed any MFL students to university courses, where a further drop in FL

student numbers is experienced due to students' not passing their end-of-Sixth-Form examinations, or their preference for other university courses.

The unpopularity of MFL today is offset by the older Maltese generations' tradition of being at least trilingual. Before the availability of cable and satellite television and of online media, given the proximity with Italy, many Maltese people used to assiduously follow Italian television channels, which endowed them with an at least passive knowledge of Italian as a "third language". This probably made them more open to MFL in general.

The younger generations find enough entertainment in English and no longer need to go through the process of building understanding in a third language for their use of media. Thus their heavy reliance on English as a bridge to the world beyond their shores but also for education and work related communication, and even, more and more often nowadays, for communication within their circles of friends and family (NSO, 2024). Older persons, and stakeholders in the FL education sphere in particular, feel that Malta has experienced a sad (and worrying) loss with this downturn in language competence.

Pace has tackled the problem of the agony of FL at higher education levels in Malta in various publications, by taking stock of the situation and exposing data, speculating about the reasons which may be leading to the unpopularity of FL, and suggesting measures that need to be adopted for a positive change (2017, 2018). The present study is different in that it constitutes a large-scale attempt at gathering Maltese Sixth Form students' authentic reasons for avoiding FLs, and their perceptions on FL study and its usefulness. This data is considered important as it may help understand the causes of the worrying situation of FL teaching and learning in Malta, which may then be addressed. It is based on a student questionnaire, thus a rudimentary data collection method, but is intended to lead to more rigorous studies on learner motivation, based on established motivation measurement models at secondary level. Motivation measurement models were not the most important tool at this stage because non-language students make up the vast majority of our respondents. Thus, our study lays emphasis on contextual circumstances that may affect students' subject choices, and not only on inner self motivational aspects. Items in our study are not strictly or intentionally related to motivation theory, although the present study does carry out an elementary post-questionnaire attempt to interpret participants' motivational positions regarding Foreign Language Learning (FLL). It is necessary at this point to present an overview of research carried out in the field of FLL motivation, or concerning contextual reasons leading to the avoidance of MFL in post-compulsory education.

État de l'art

Reasons for students' disenchantment vis-à-vis FLL: external and internal factors

We take 'external factors' of influence on attitudes towards MFLL as those factors situated outside the student's own 'self' (which is the domain of their motivation, self-confidence, attributions, etc.). Beyond and around the self, ranging from the closest to evermore distant circles, we find factors such as parental encouragement vis-à-vis MFLL, the effect of the socio-economic background, peer influence, the impact of the teacher's practices on learners' degree of motivation, the status of languages versus other subjects in the curriculum, school procedures, materials and practices, socio-educational cultures, including Internet use, and geographical realities, such as learners' belonging to English-speaking communities, against the backdrop of the ever greater importance of English in the global cultural environment.

Jones (2009) investigates the role of parental support and its effects on learners' attitudes towards MFLL, through the parents' expressions of their views about its importance or otherwise, and according to the extent to which they feel able and willing to help their children in their FL studies. Kormos et al. (2011) also highlight the "effect of milieu on language learning" (p.497), as they state that the learners' immediate environment, through their interaction with family and friends, affects their "goal setting, attitude formation, and [...] students' self-efficacy beliefs and the effort and persistence with which they carry out a learning activity" (p.497). The nature of parents' influence can be one of support (especially with girls) or hostility towards MFLL, apart from the fact that in Jones' (2009) study, parents tend to think that MFL are "more difficult than a number of other subjects" (p.95), which may lead to concern or apprehension in their children, or even discouragement. Jones' research was conducted with pupils and parents of one school from a disadvantaged background, and of a second school from a middle-class background, with much higher achieving pupils, and finds that participants from the lower income background regard MFL as less important. Jones (2009) thus expresses concern that "language skills may become confined to more middle-class pupils" (p.96).

Moskovsky et al. (2013) underline "the importance of the language teachers' teaching behaviours as a critical tool for motivating learners" (p.58). They conduct a quasi-experimental research exercise involving an experimental group of learners whose teachers use motivational strategies following a designated guide, and a control group with whom teachers use their traditional methods of teaching. Statistically significant enhanced motivational levels were evident in response to the use of teachers' motivational strategies, in contrast with increasing learning anxiety and demotivation in the group

following traditional teaching. Stables & Wikely (1999) and Graham (2004) also mention the significant impact of the teacher's personality on learner response. Bartram (2010) speaks about the need for a quality teacher-pupil relationship based on trust, all the more so because of the special demands that MFL makes on the student, with its "unique nature and challenges", such as having to "perform [...] quite conspicuously in front of their teacher and peers" (p.43), at a time in the students' life when adolescence makes them particularly self-conscious and preoccupied about their self-image. If teaching styles lack vigour and are unimaginative, they lead to student drop-out due to frustration, for instance when their learning experience becomes repetitive in nature (Clark and Trafford, 1996). Moreover, if teachers strictly embrace target-language use principles, learners may end up discouraged and the relationship and communication between the two may be harmed as the power and competence differentials are heightened (Bartram, 2010, Bezzina, 2017).

Issues with the curriculum can be counterproductive for MFL, either because a crowded national curriculum leaves limited time available for language lessons (Bartram, 2010), or because the MFL curriculum itself is too heavy to allow teachers to use motivating teaching and learning activities (Abela 2021). "Curricular discontinuity" (Stables and Stables, 1996) between MFL content at secondary level, with its communicative and transactional slant, and Advanced level language work, demanding accuracy and in-depth argumentative and analytic skills, may shock students who feel ill-equipped to handle the new expectations. This results in a dip in self-confidence upon their entry into PS education, as they find it hard to rapidly adapt to overcome the mismatch (Graham, 2004). Such experiences spill out to generate perceptions of difficulty that become associated with MFL at higher levels. Jones (2009) documents that according to her parent participants, French (the MFL being studied by the learners in her enquiry) is the most difficult subject for the pupils, and Graham (2004) obtains as a result of her investigation that perceived difficulty is the second most common reason why Year 11 students do not intend to continue studying the language after age 16. Paradoxically, the opposite view to this belief that MFL are for the most able can be found in other contexts, such as the case documented by Bartram (2010) in the Netherlands, where "languages are an easy option" (p.26). MFL curriculum relevance is another area of concern (Stables and Wikeley, 1999). Pace (2018) argues that for MFL learners, it is important that the curriculum is "connected to the outside world" so that students feel "that they can apply it to real life" (p.430). He criticises the one-size fits-all, single MFL curriculum at B2 level in the Maltese educational system, which is heavily based on literature, to the detriment of proficiency-based courses.

Socio-educational cultures may also promote or hinder MFL, such as widespread excessive or biased admiration for certain study areas instead of others. For Leighton (1991), a combination of historical and geographical

factors, and even modern technology, has created a general perception that in the United Kingdom, FLL is superfluous. The situation of the UK is in our view highly comparable to that of our Maltese context. Insularity signifies geographical isolation (Bartram 2010) whereby a nation is not physically in close proximity to foreign speaking communities. The Internet reinforces English complacency by spreading English as a world language. We strongly believe that this phenomenon of complacency, attested by Bartram (2010) for the UK and other English-speaking contexts such as the United States and Australia, may well apply to the Maltese context and others like it, where English is not the L1 but is the language of education and evermore widely spoken and/or better mastered by the younger generations, avid users of social media. In these English-speaking environments, Stables and Wikeley (1999) note that students lack integrative motivation, while Graham (2004) also speaks of “the relative absence of instrumental reasons for learning a foreign language” (p.173), with English as a lingua franca often seen to be enough for communicating internationally. This view simply kills motivation for MFLL, and puts it in a losing battle situation.

The global spread of English, on the one hand certainly useful for communication, can be seen as threatening to other languages and cultures. Contrary to the English-is-enough belief, and evoking the same motive of globalisation, Pace (2018) stresses the need for the young generations to be proficient in MFL: “Within a global economy, the ability to understand and communicate in other languages has become an increasingly important characteristic that contributes to the cultural and linguistic richness of our society whilst promoting global citizenship” (p.425) and mentions the rising demand for MFL competence on the European labour market. It would be important to help learners with an English-is-enough attitude to come to understand and embrace this reality.

As for internal factors that may account for learners’ disaffection with MFLL, one may mention issues on the level of self-efficacy, self-confidence, and maladaptive causal attributions of success or failure in language learning (Graham 2004). A student’s wish to discontinue or persist with MFLL at post-compulsory level may be affected by their degree of self-efficacy, that is the degree to which they believe they are able to meet the challenge of pursuing a MFL, or, in other words, individual learners’ feelings that they possess the capacity to attain a certain level of competence and performance in the language. Self-efficacy may itself be influenced by the attributions learners make, that is the reasons with which they explain their success or failure in language tasks (Graham 2004). Among these causal attributions they may make, one finds ability, effort, luck, task difficulty and use of learning strategies through which a student may make learning more manageable, more effective, transferable to different situations and more enjoyable. As far as ability is concerned, it risks being perceived as a stable quality, an internal factor that

you either possess or don't, and that is thus beyond an individual's control. This attitude falls within a maladaptive style and can lead to what is termed as "learned helplessness" (Dweck and Repucci 1973). On the contrary, students harbour an adaptive style if they attribute competence levels to the use of good learning strategies and effort, because these beliefs may push them to work hard and to adopt problem-solving techniques. Results in Graham (2004) show that "non-continuers are less likely to attribute success to effort, strategy use, and ability, and more likely than other students to attribute it to luck or chance, indicating a poor sense of their own agency" (p.183). Perceptions of task difficulty, such as the rude awakening that learners may experience when they start Advanced level studies, make them lose self-confidence, as they acquire a sense that they can no longer cope. Students may experience low self-confidence levels even when they do extremely well in language assessment. Graham (2004) thus documents high achievers who deplore a lack of fluency and / or proficiency, or the inability to hold a conversation in the FL. Self-confidence is a vital driving force in language learning (LL). If a language student believes that their goal can be achieved, that their learning behaviour may bring about the desired outcome, they "may devote considerable effort and persistence" to the LL task (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995, p.507).

From internal factors such as self-efficacy and self-appraisal, as well as under the influence of several external factors, among which parental encouragement, school policies and the personality and practices of the teacher, attitudes to the L2 are derived. Attitudes to MFL can thus be considered as "affective reactions" (Kormos et al., 2011, p.508) and have great power on (de)motivation, effort and persistence: "[i]n the field of L2 motivation, attitudes have been identified as emotional precursors of the initiation of learning behavior" (p.497). Language learners' attitudes can be directed, among others, at the target language community, at MFL in general, and at the learning situation (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). Attitudes towards MFL may help measure a valence component of motivation, namely the value that students perceive in MFL and their competence in the L2: if language students do not find attractiveness in the learning tasks, if they do not perceive value in their language competence, their motivation will decrease (Tremblay and Gardner, 1995).

FLL Motivation theory: a brief note

Motivation in general explains human behaviour and thinking, while in learning, it explains a student's success or failure. Kormos et al. (2011) use Dörnyei's (2005) theory to express its role: "Motivation explains why people select a particular activity, how long they are willing to persist in it and what effort they invest in it" (p.496). In MFL, it is motivation that provides the initial thrust to follow this area of instruction and to encourage the individual to persist in "the long and often tedious learning process" (Guilloteaux and

Dörnyei, 2008, pp.55-56). Second language motivation is linked to achievement in the sense that more motivated learners are more successful in learning MFLs, and if a certain degree of motivation is lacking, even cognitively highly able individuals may be unable to sustain long-term goals (Moskovsky et al., 2013).

Tremblay and Gardner (1995) stress the effort component of motivation for LL, defining it as the extent to which a person works or strives to acquire a language because they wish to do so and because of the satisfaction reaped upon learning a language. In Gardner's Socio-Educational Model, it is proposed that two types of variables influence motivation. The first is integrativeness, referring to a positive disposition for the communities that speak the FL, assessed on the basis of (i) attitudes toward the target language group, (ii) interest in FLs and (iii) integrative orientation. The second type of variables influencing motivation is language attitudes, namely attitudes toward the language course and the FL teacher (Tremblay and Gardner, 1995).

Gardner's theory is one of only two LL motivational theories that we will be referring to here, for reasons of space. It is based on the distinction between integrative LL goals, that is students' wish to learn a MFL with the objective of becoming integrated into the target language culture, for instance by communicating with native speakers, and instrumental goals, associated with the pragmatic, utilitarian values and profit of learning another language, such as to get a better job and a higher salary (Kormos et al., 2011, Hromova, 2019). Conducting research among Kyiv University students, Hromova (2019) finds a high level of motivation among her English as a foreign language (EFL) participants, and judges their being slightly more integratively motivated as a positive result, following studies which find that integrative motivation leads to more efficient and successful EFL learning (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Hromova's results may have been injected with higher degrees of motivation due to the students' level of maturity and the fact that the target language is English; Kormos et al. (2011) do remark that their "investigated Chilean learners [...] seem to have a strong motif to learn English in order to become a member of the globalized international English-speaking community" (p.510), just like Moskovsky et al. (2013) find their Saudi EFL learner participants instrumentally motivated from before the start of their investigation.

The second LL motivational theory referred to here is based on Dörnyei's (2005) theory of the motivational Self system. As we have already alluded to above, self-concept plays a vital role in motivation (Kormos et al., 2011), and affective, cognitive and social / contextual factors interact in forming motivated behaviour in a dynamic, evolving manner, with motivation as an outcome of how a student perceives the relationship between their current and future concepts of self (Papi et al., 2019). Dörnyei's model of motivation is based on two self-related components: Ideal L2 self, which focuses around promotion and eagerness, and Ought-to L2 self, based on prevention and

vigilance. Individuals driven by an Ideal L2 self-system wish for “advancement, growth and accomplishments”, and strive to reach “positive outcomes” (Papi et al., 2019, p.340), whereas persons relating to Ought-to self seek security and regulate their behaviour in an attempt to avoid negative outcomes. In MFLL, promotion-focused, Ideal L2 self-driven learners set to the LL task with eagerness and joy, striving to advance in their performance in order to maximise gains, with items defining their behaviour such as “I take advantage of every opportunity to use my [FL]” (Papi et al., 2019, p.354). Prevention-focused language learners are strategically and anxiously careful to preserve their safety by avoiding negative situations and consequences to insufficient or inappropriate behaviour; items that could illustrate their viewpoint are: “I don’t speak [the FL] too much to avoid making mistakes” (Papi et al., 2019, p.354) and “It will have a negative impact on my life if I don’t study [the FL]” (Papi et al., 2019, p.341).

Studies in different contexts have been carried out in order to gauge which motivational constructs are strongest in specific groups of language learners. For instance, Kormos et al. (2011) find a strong link between the Ideal L2 self and the motivated behaviour of their Chilean secondary school and university EFL learners. The researchers believe that the university students have embarked on an “efficient process of goal- and self-realisation” (p.507), while secondary school students have managed to internalize their future goals as from the early learning stage they are at, and have already devised action plans to reach them. For Papi et al. (2019), however, such results may be the consequence of using biased motivation models and research tools that are more likely to generate the dominance of the Ideal L2 self in shaping motivational behaviour. Their study uses a more balanced motivation questionnaire having Ideal and Ought-to selves both bifurcated by own and other standpoints, for instance, with the items “I need English to avoid failing my exams” (Ought-to own) and “If I fail to learn [the FL] I’ll be letting other people down”) (Ought-to other). With participants being international students learning ESL in a North American university, Papi et al. (2019) find that Ought-to self/own is the strongest predictor of motivated behaviour in their context of study. We would like, through the present study, to check whether the results obtained can give some indications of which self-guide is most prominent in the case of Maltese PS MFL learners.

French as a Foreign Language

Above, we mentioned the power and attraction of English as a FL, whereby the language itself acts as a strong factor of motivation due to the learners’ wish to belong to the globalised English-speaking network of people interacting for study, work and entertainment purposes. French does not possess this allure. Chambers (1999) documents attitudes in Germany that are not as positive toward French as they are toward English, which partly explains the decline in

the choice of French in German schools (Bartram, 2010). Similarly, Willems (2003) attests the decline of French in the Netherlands.

French has lost much of the popularity it enjoyed in the past. This is probably partly due to the hegemony of English, that some consider as a form of linguistic imperialism exerting adverse effects of marginalisation on other languages (Pennycook, 1995). However, French itself is surrounded by an elitist and traditional image (Gosse, 1997) that may be partly responsible for the negative attitudes among learners in some countries (Bartram, 2010). Gosse (1997) explains how cultural associations, as well as political and historical reasons, account for the decline in the status of French across Europe:

Le français a beaucoup moins les faveurs du public européen qu'auparavant et l'hégémonie de l'anglais n'en est pas la seule responsable. L'image dont il est porteur repose essentiellement sur des considérations historiques, politiques et culturelles (p.159).

In this study we shall attempt to look for evidence of similar attitudes to the French language in the Maltese context, which may in part explain the radical drop in the cohorts of students who choose to study it as their FL and in its uptake at PS level. Knowing if French is in actual fact tainted with stereotypical associations in the minds of Maltese learners would be important for the French teaching and promotion community to be able to address the problem of its sharp decline in Maltese educational establishments.

Method

This study was partly conducted within the framework of a Master in Teaching and Learning research project (Sultana, 2021). It was vetted for ethical clearance, and ethical procedures were respected. Data collection took place in January and February 2021. Mostly due to the fact that the study coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, it is rudimentary in its main method of data collection, because it is based on the responses to a Google form, anonymous questionnaire distributed online to Sixth Formers from 4 Maltese PS institutions. The number of respondents (514) went well beyond the minimum number of respondents (362) required for the questionnaire to be representative of the Maltese PS population, which was a positive surprise to a certain extent, and showed a certain eagerness on the part of the students to talk about FLL. This however was especially true of female students, since there was a strong imbalance as far as gender is concerned (74.9% of respondents were female). The questionnaire consisted of 35 items, including diverse standard types of questions, namely multiple choice, closed and open-ended items, asked in a logical sequence going from the more generic to the more specific.

Apart from a brief, initial section aimed at collecting personal information, the questionnaire was divided into two main information seeking sections. The first section concentrated on respondents' current main areas of study and the reasons explaining their choices, their perceptions of the French language and on FLL in general, and their experience in FLL at secondary education level.

The second main section of the questionnaire was reserved for Advanced level students of French, asking them about their current experience of learning FFL at Advanced level, their perception of the level of difficulty posed by their French studies, whether the transition from secondary education to PS French studies was smooth or abrupt in terms of a possible knowledge and preparation gap, and whether students plan to pursue French studies at University level.

The research questions that provide the backbone for this study's investigation are the following:

1. What are PS students' perspectives regarding learning a FL in Malta?
2. What is discouraging Maltese students from choosing FL as their main area of study?
3. How is the French language perceived by students and why is it no longer popular (at PS level)?

As mentioned above, some of the questions in the questionnaire were more or less based on items related to the theory of motivation, but in actual fact the questionnaire could not focus on language learning motivation theory, because it was aimed at the general population of Maltese Sixth Formers, the vast majority of whom are not FL learners. Therefore, it had to focus mostly on external factors that can instil motivation to learn languages or on the other hand deprive students from interest in FLL. Contextual reasons leading to the avoidance of FLL were mainly researched.

Data analysis is descriptive in nature, and is based on percentages. Open-ended and "Other" responses were analysed by using the "Responses by question" tool of Google Forms. This gave access to all answers given to a particular question. A thematic approach was adopted to calculate responses for such questions, with different answers being categorized under their respective themes to allow percentage calculations.

Results

PS students' views on MFLL

The Sciences are the major area of study of the questionnaire respondents; in fact, they are the main area of study of almost half of the respondents (46.1%), as is shown in Figure 1. Although Languages feature as the second area mostly

studied by students (23.3% of respondents), Figure 2 shows that this relatively high result is because a great portion of PS students take English, and quite a good number take Maltese. It can be noted from Figure 2 that the proportion of students taking FL is minimal compared to those who study Maltese, and much more so, English.

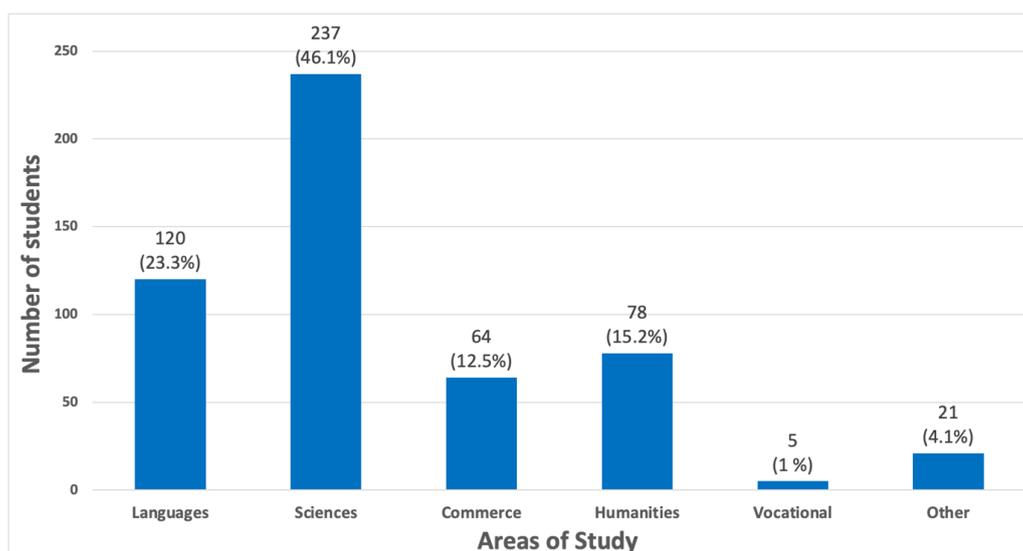


Figure 1. PS students' main area of study
(Source: Sultana, 2021: 39)

Moreover, in Figure 2, the percentages taking MFL are probably inflated by the very topic of the questionnaire, because MFL students may probably have felt proportionately more inclined to respond to it than non-FL learners. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that it is students of French who make up the highest percentage of MFL learners among this questionnaire's respondents, given the focus on French in the second section, which may have attracted more responses from learners of French. The more general figures in the literature review above show that actual percentages of FL learners are in reality very small, compared to other areas. In the Matsec statistical reports researched for the data in Tables 1, 2 and 3 above, it is Italian, not French, that leads with the majority of learners sitting for examinations at all levels, across the four main MFL that are French, German, Italian and Spanish. What is sure is that out of the 153 participants stating that they study languages at Advanced level, only 29 students (of whom 89.7% are female), have at least one MFL as a main area of study, which means that only 5.6% of the research participants study a MFL at Advanced Level.

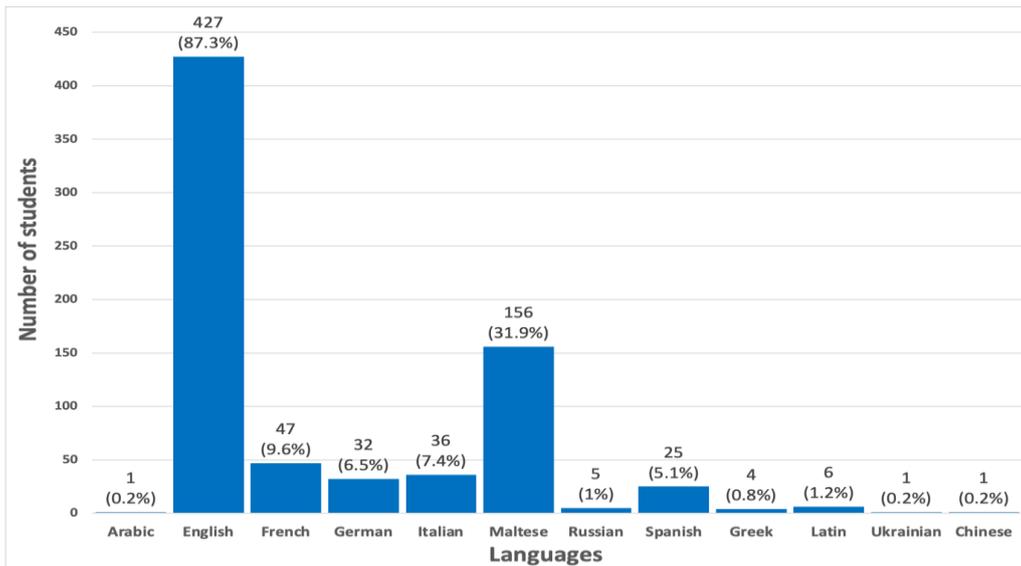


Figure 2: Languages studied at PS level (Source: Sultana, 2021, p.40)

An important question, specifically for non-FL learners, explains the reasons why PS students avoid taking up MFL. As is shown in Figure 3, slightly more than half of the participants (50.9%) say they did not choose a MFL due to their preference for another area. An important number (30.4%) lost faith in their ability to learn a language due to their perceived bad performance at secondary level, while not less than 26.4% of participants claim to have had a bad experience with compulsory FLL at secondary level. Utilitarian reasons follow, with 21.2% of participants saying that languages limit your choice of profession, and 11.4% saying that languages do not lead you to have a lucrative profession. The 'other' option was chosen by 6.2% of respondents, who mostly mentioned the lack of utility of languages, in general or for their desired profession, or their disinterest in languages.

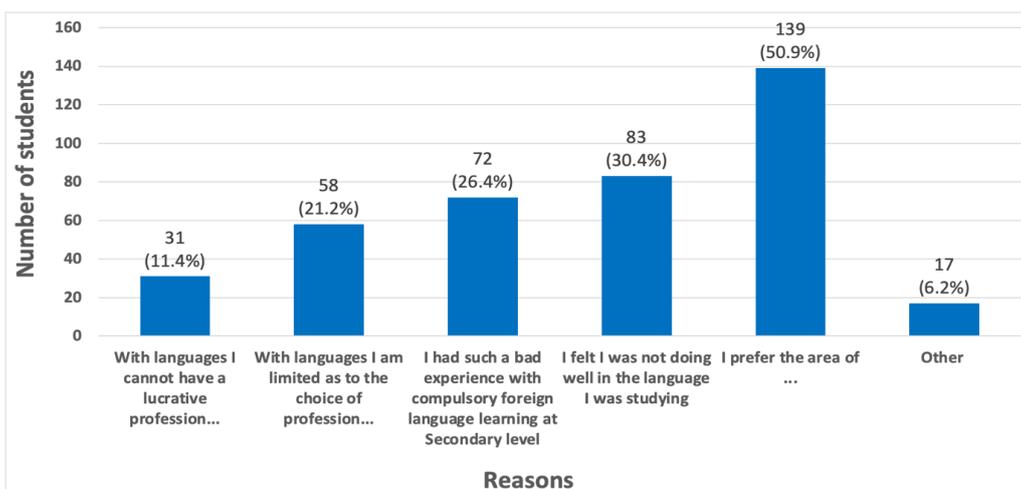


Figure 3. Reasons why respondents didn't persist with FLL (for non-MFL learners only) (Source: Sultana, 2021, p.43)

Asked whether they regret not having chosen to study a MFL at PS level, these non-MFL learners were by far ready to confirm their choice (64.5% reply 'No'). Around one-fourth of respondents were undecided (24.7% reply 'Maybe'), while a meagre 10.8% wish they had chosen a MFL for their studies. These figures remain more or less in the same ranges when the same students were asked whether they would take up studying a MFL alongside their main course at university. The University of Malta in fact offers certificate courses leading up to B1 or B2 level in a number of MFL to students of all faculties reading for any degree. Only 11.2% of non-MFL learners feel inclined to take up a MFL at University in parallel with their main course. While 31.8% choose the 'Maybe' option, 57% do not wish to study a MFL while at university.

As Figure 4 shows, participants' attributions of success or failure in MFL mostly revolve around ability, with almost half of them (46.7%) choosing 'Personal Aptitude for learning a new Language'. This is closely followed by a large fraction (41.8%) who think the 'Teacher' can make or break learners' success in MFL, 37.9% of respondents thinking you need 'Motivation', 32.9% thinking you need to use the right 'Strategies to work and study', and 28.8% thinking success or failure depend on 'Task difficulty or easiness'.

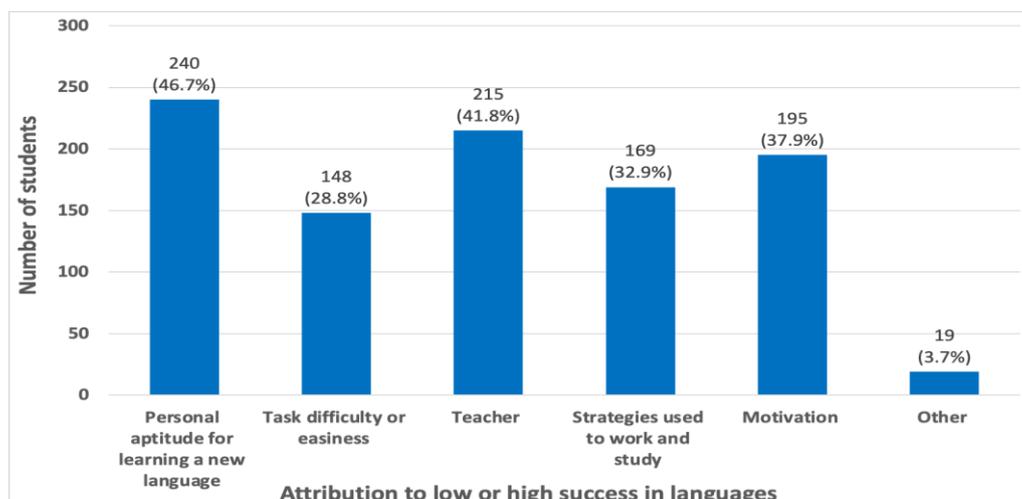


Figure 4. Causal attributions of success or failure in MFL (Source: Sultana, 2021, p.49)

Overall, past experience of learning MFL is not judged negatively by a large fraction of sixth formers. The greatest percentage is registered by those who rate their experience as average (33.5%), but it is worrying that no large fractions rate the experience positively either. The FLL experience was 'Pleasant' for 26.8% and 'Very Pleasant' for only 12.8% of respondents, while 14.6% state that they found it 'Boring' and 12.3% even 'Very Boring'. When questioned about the MFL Teacher who left the greatest impression on them,

respondents were indeed ready to pass a very positive judgment of their past MFL educators, with a total of 74.5% choosing the combination 'Excellent', 'Very good' or 'Good', contrary to 25.5% of participants choosing the 'Not bad', 'Bad' or 'Very bad' combination. The vast majority of the respondents think that their workload at secondary level was acceptable, as 68.5% of them opt for the 'Moderate' suggestion, with more or less balanced fractions thinking it was too demanding ('High': 14.8%) or 'Low' (16.7%).

Paradoxically, the question specifically asking whether FLL is demanding receives answers with a totally different orientation, as Figure 5 shows. Only 12.1% of participants 'Disagree' and 1.2% 'Strongly disagree' with the statement that MFL requires significant effort. Whereas 28% of respondents are 'Undecided' on the matter, 42.4% 'Agree' that MFL is highly demanding, and 16.3% are totally convinced of this ('Strongly agree': 16.3%).

One of the most crucial questions in the questionnaire was the one directed specifically to MFL learners, enquiring of them the reason why they chose to study a FL. This was an open question, allowing students to express themselves freely, so as to obtain the most authentic replies possible. The space left for the answer also allowed for long replies. In the analysis of these entries, it was possible to thematically group some responses together, as shown in Figure 6.

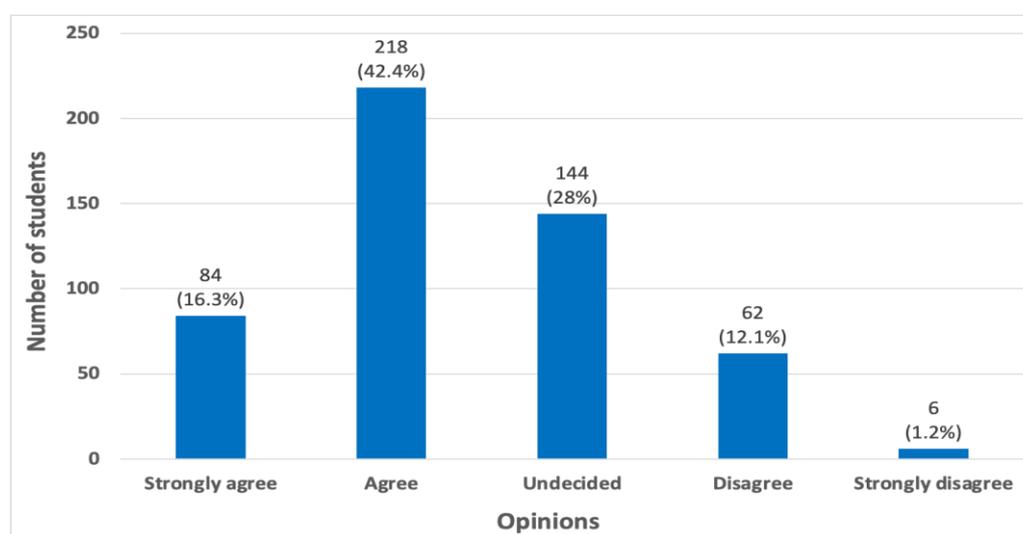


Figure 5: MFL is highly demanding: Opinions
(Source: Sultana, 2021, p.55)

For reasons of space, we will be explaining here the five main reasons for choosing to study a FL according to our sample of Sixth Formers. Love for and interest in (a) particular FL(s) is what mostly drove the respondents to become FL learners at PS level, with 44.9% having mentioned this reason, followed by 13.3% who mention their love for and interest in (a) foreign culture(s). The ability to communicate with more people, namely those speaking MFL, was

what convinced 12.2% of the participants to make this choice of subject(s), while another 12.2% think they will need MFL for their planned careers. The fifth group (8.2%) is made up of students who find MFL easy to learn.

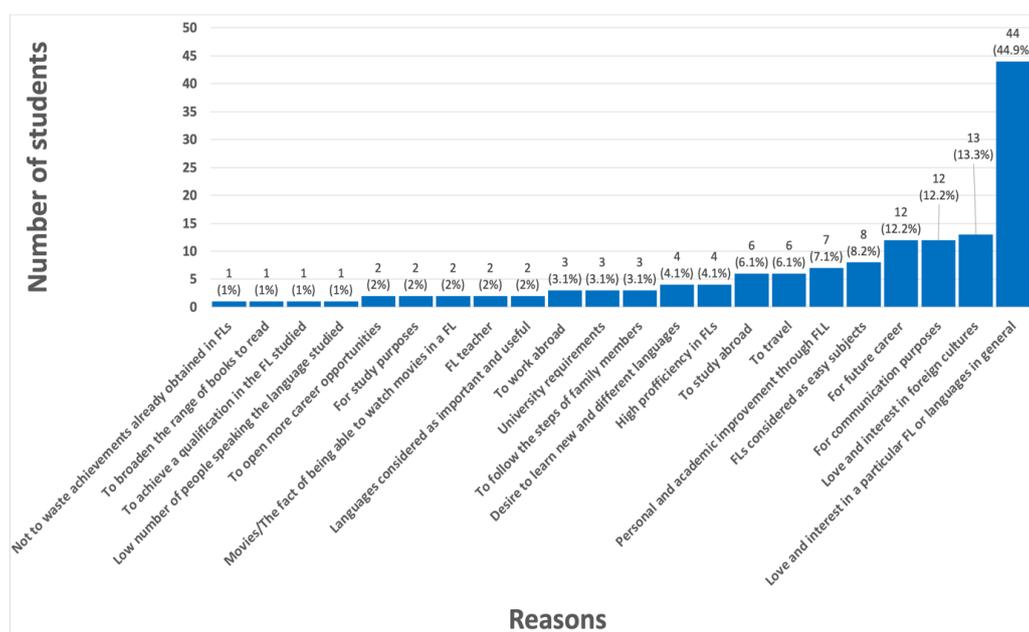


Figure 6: Reasons for having chosen to study (a) MFL at PS Level (for MFL learners only)

(Source: Sultana, 2021, p.56)

Views on the French language: a case study

The case study focusing particularly on the French language gives some results that can shed light on the steep decline in popularity of the French language. Two questions eliciting perceptions on the difficulty and nature of this language were particularly telling as they were directed at all respondents. First, participants were invited to give their opinion on whether the French language is easy or difficult. The result is marked by a significant imbalance between the extremely few respondents who think French is 'Very easy' (1.8%) or 'Easy' (2.5%) and the vast majority who think French is 'Very difficult' (18.1%) or 'Difficult' (47.9%). A little less than one-third of participants (29.8%) think French is of 'Moderate' difficulty.

The second question about French, answered by all participants, elicited their views on the nature of the language as compared to other languages. A number of traits were proposed to the respondents, of which they could choose more than one. As Figure 7 shows, the three most chosen traits are positive ones, with 'A beautiful sounding language' having attracted 59.5% of respondents, followed by 'A useful language to know' at 37.7% (to which would need to be

added the 10.7% who consider it ‘A useful asset’) and ‘A language that can boast of a rich culture and literature’ at 35.2%. The next most chosen feature (at 34.2%) corresponds to feelings of neutrality vis-à-vis French (‘A foreign language like any other’).

Some of the traits proposed were purposefully worded to reproduce stereotypes linked to the French language. It was surprising that these were among the least chosen features. The ‘positive’ stereotype that French is ‘A refined language’ was chosen by not less than 25.9% of participants, while each of the negative traits, although persistent in the minds of some respondents, was chosen less: ‘A language spoken by proud, unwelcoming people’ (15.6%), ‘A language for snobs’ (9.1%) and ‘A language mostly for girls’ (much less chosen at 1.4%). Added together, these negative views total 26.1% of respondents having chosen at least one of them.

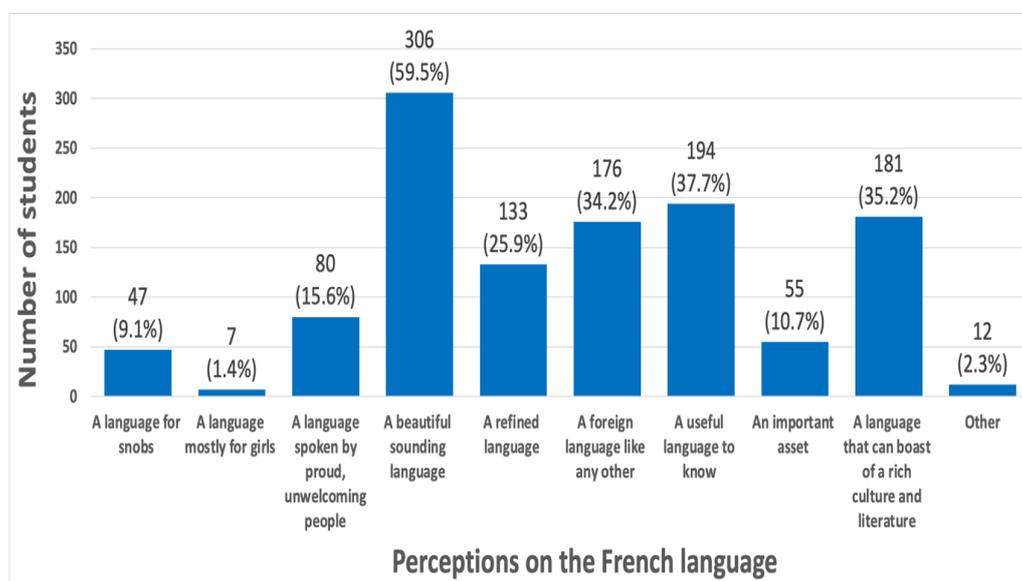


Figure 7. PS students’ perceptions on French as compared to other languages (Source: Sultana, 2021, p.61)

Views of Advanced Level French students vis-à-vis the learning of the language

Students taking French at Advanced level seem to have experienced a shock due to the knowledge gap they had to face between learning the language at Secondary and at PS level. In fact, for 64.3% of these learners, the knowledge gap was ‘Large’, for 35.7% of them it was ‘Moderate’, but no respondent chose the ‘Small’ or ‘No gap at all’ options. One student explains this challenging gap in very significant terms: “The literature in A-Level is much more difficult, obviously, but in Secondary we were not prepared with the much more difficult vocabulary and the fluency of the language during lectures.” In fact, while exactly half (50%) of the Advanced level French respondents feel that they are not being subjected to “unrealistic demands”, the other half are

divided between a majority (28.6%) who feel that the curriculum is unfeasible and 21.4% who opt for 'Maybe' in reply to the question about whether the Advanced level presents unrealistic demands.

Asked about the level of effort they put into their French studies in order to achieve their desired grades, most students claim to work 'Very hard' (28.6%) or 'Hard' (35.7%). While a smaller number say they work 'Moderately' (28.6%), no participant chooses the 'Slightly' option, although 7.1% do admit they work 'Very slightly'.

A crucial question is the one demanding whether French lessons are proving useful enough to help students improve their language skills. While a massive 85.7% of students choose 'Yes' and only 14.3% think that lessons are not helping them build the desired proficiency in the language, some very telling remarks were added by a number of students, raising concerns about the outcome of a curriculum heavily focused on writing and literature. One participant thus expresses their frustration at the fact that:

There is very little oral practice which is not enough to become fluent."
Another questions the preparation they are receiving: *"We are not learning the language to be used on a daily basis, we are learning it for the exam and like all other subjects, [it will] probably [be] forgotten after the exam. The language should be taught to have more fluency and in daily conversations in my opinion.*

Finally, 50% of Advanced level learners of French express their wish to pursue French studies at university, while many are as yet undecided (42.9% 'Maybe') and 7.1% have already decided against doing so.

Discussion

The first part of this discussion addresses the first two research questions of the study, namely, what are PS students' perspectives regarding learning a FL in Malta, and what is discouraging Maltese students from choosing FLs as their main area of study.

As expected, the questionnaire results confirm the unpopularity of MFL among Maltese PS students, who largely prefer other areas of study such as the Sciences, or overwhelmingly take up English as a language to study at this level of education. It seems highly likely, as suspected above, that the English-is-enough attitude of English-L1 students attested by Bartram (2010) in English-L1 countries such as Britain, the US and Australia is also a characteristic of the Maltese student population, among whom English has a very strong presence as a second language and in some cases as an L1. MFL uptake is pyramidal, as in English-L1 contexts (Graham 2004): extended during compulsory FL education at secondary level, and very narrow post-16. Evidence of negative

attitudes towards MFL emerges in the answer to the question enquiring why non-language learners avoided choosing a MFL in their PS education course: a total of 59% of the students is reached when one adds up the categories that were put off by bad experiences of FLL at secondary level, those who feel that languages are limiting when it comes to a choice of career, and those who think languages do not lead you to lucrative employment. Motivation for utilitarian, instrumental purposes is therefore low, again similarly to English-L1 contexts (Graham, 2004; Bartram, 2010) These figures are further confirmed by the high percentage of respondents who do not regret having avoided FLL (64.5%), and those who already know they do not want to take up FL studies at university level (57%).

Among the potential external factors of influence on the respondents' level of motivation to study MFL, there is evidence that learning a MFL at secondary level was problematic for a number of students. Only a total of 39.6% of the participants give a decidedly positive judgment of their FLL experience at secondary level (by choosing 'Pleasant' or 'Very pleasant'). Although the vast majority of respondents hold a very positive opinion of their MFL teachers in secondary education, teachers left a negative mark on one-fourth of the participants who think teachers were 'bad' or 'very bad' (25.5%). All in all, however, the MFL experience in secondary school is not rated too negatively, as the vast majority of students (68.5%) also think that the workload they had to put in was moderate. One major problem is however that generally, learners of French as a FL at Advanced level feel they were unprepared for the degree of competence they needed to possess upon embarking on Advanced level language studies, with 64.3% underlining the initial knowledge gap they had to face in their PS education. This is presumably the case for other MFL learners too, and these students may naturally bear witness of this challenging handicap in the wider community, discouraging future PS students from taking up MFL. The possibility of this happening is not negligible in the Maltese context, with its closely-knit community.

The question of subject difficulty brings us to consider the respondents' causal attributions of success and failure in FLL, and therefore to internal factors of influence on their motivation. The majority of respondents (58.7%) agree or strongly agree with the statement that FLL is highly demanding, confirming the perception of subject difficulty observed elsewhere for FL (Stables and Wikeley, 1999; Graham, 2004; Jones, 2009; Bartram, 2010). Effort is regarded as a necessary factor for success, with a total of 64.3% of students of French stating that they work 'hard' or 'very hard' to achieve good grades, like Graham's (2004) Year 13 students, who show better understanding of the need for effective study behaviours and effort rather than relying on natural aptitude only. Students' feeling of their own agency is not always high however, as 46.7% feel that personal ability is what explains success or failure in language learning, apart from 41.8% who feel the teacher can make the difference, and

28.8% who feel that grades depend on task difficulty or easiness, reminiscent of Graham's (2004) passive non-continuers and not-sures. Respondents having indicated adaptive attributions such as learning strategy use (32.9%) and motivation (37.9%) as factors for success show higher levels of self-efficacy and possibly, even problem-solving attitudes, as in Graham's (2004) more proficient students who explain success with reference to factors within their control.

As explained above, although the research tool questions were not strictly based on proper motivation measurement model items, we would like to attempt a simple interpretation of participants' motivational positions based on the responses obtained in the questionnaire. From the point of view of Gardner's theory of instrumental vs. integrative LL goals (Tremblay and Gardner, 1995), one notices that the highest level goals that motivate Maltese PS students' choices to study languages have an integrative orientation (love for and interest in (the) foreign language(s) 45%; love for and interest in (the) foreign culture(s) 14%; to communicate 12% - see Figure 6). Instrumental goals follow (for future career 12%; languages are easy subjects 8%; for personal and academic development 7%; to travel 6% - see Figure 6). On the one hand, this may be positive, if this situation were to prove similar to those studies, such as Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Hromova (2019) which argue that integrative motivation leads to more efficient and successful LL. On the other hand, it is not positive that students are not aware of or appreciating the instrumental benefits of MFLL. While Pace (2018) stresses the fact that "Malta's economy is dependent on human resources and foreign trade with the two most important employability sectors being tourism and digital gaming for which foreign language skills are an integral and indispensable component in the provision of a high standard of service" (p.429), Maltese PS students are either unaware of these opportunities (which is quite unlikely), or they shrug off these market demands, possibly in the belief that English is a sufficient *passe-partout*. They therefore seem to be moving in the opposite direction from values of multilingualism, which is also observed in Grima (2024). In a united Europe, multilingualism possesses great significance in both cultural and economic terms (Bartram, 2010).

From a self-belief motivational point of view, the same results suggest that Ideal L2 Self prevails as a FL Motivational Self-System among Maltese PS language learners. Since, as we have just indicated and as is illustrated in Figure 6, almost all the major reasons given to explain Language learners' motivation to study languages represent the respondents' hopes and aspirations as the L2 speakers they wish to be, the students show that they are promotion-oriented and they target positive outcomes, aiming to advance in their language competence and to grow further in their love of the language and its culture. This is precisely the description that Papi et al. (2019) give of learners driven by an Ideal L2 Self system. The only motive oriented towards

the avoidance of negative outcomes, therefore reflecting an Ought-to L2 Self position, which is present among the major reasons they provide for choosing to learn a MFL is [FLs are considered as easy subjects], but this obtains only 8.2% of indications by the respondents, in contrast with the 44.9% of indications for [Love for and interest in a particular FL or languages in general] and the 13.3% for [Love for and interest in foreign cultures]. The Maltese students appear thus to be more similar to the Ideal-L2-self-driven Chilean EFL participants in Kormos et al.'s (2011) study, than to the Ought-to-L2-self/own-driven North American University ESL students in Papi et al. (2019), which is yet again a positive feature.

In response to the third research question enquiring how the French language is perceived by students and why it is no longer popular (at PS level), we find in our results a mix of positive and negative perceptions concerning the language. French is mostly regarded as a beautiful sounding language, and although less so, as a language that can boast of a rich culture and literature. It is also seen as a useful language to know, as an asset for communication. These perceived traits may potentially give rise to both integrative and instrumental goals in individuals, which would encourage the language's uptake. However, French is also very much perceived as a challenging language to learn, which could probably be having among Maltese PS students the same off-putting effect attested for French in Jones (2009) and Bartram (2010) due to the apprehension resulting from its widespread reputation of difficulty. The language also appears to keep carrying to some extent the burden of stereotypical associations, which although possibly positive to some extent ('a refined language'), certainly make it the victim of prejudices that may lead to its avoidance ('a language spoken by proud, unwelcoming people', 'a language for snobs' and 'a language mostly for girls').

Conclusion

This study has investigated Maltese PS students' perceptions toward MFL, through an online questionnaire distributed to students of four PS institutions in Malta. Results obtained confirm a mind-set which at most sees (Maltese-English) bilingualism as the norm, to the detriment of multilingualism, which was a Maltese reality until not so long ago, and which continues to be recommended by European institutions. The dominance and status of English as a language for international (and even intra-national) communication, as well as the privileging of other study areas, have led to a demotion in the attitudes of Maltese students to MFL. National plans are called for that would establish an urgent new policy framework to deliver a more robust commitment for languages in higher education, based on effective FL-promotion strategies.

Changing this situation must be centred round an effort to change attitudes. The results of this study show unequivocally that a fraction of the participant sample harbours negative attitudes towards MFLL, evident through the avoidance of FL and through comments showing a lack of both integrative and instrumental motivation for studying them. External (contextual) factors of influence, such as curricular policies, content and discontinuity, teacher personality and teaching styles emerge as factors of dissuasion vis-à-vis FL uptake. Internal factors of influence such as inadequate causal attributions of success and failure in MFLL, lack of self-confidence and low self-efficacy may compound the adverse attitudes and low motivation levels.

Among the positive measures that should be adopted, one can mention promotion campaigns such as language fairs, with the participation of employers needing competent FL speakers and successful FL-using employees who bear witness to FL usefulness. Educational preparation should include proficiency-based language courses, at higher education levels, which give students a true opportunity to develop their fluency and communication skills. Combined courses at the University of Malta would allow students to master a FL alongside their other main area of study, allowing them to build a more solid curriculum vitae and to acquire more competitiveness when approaching the employment market.

This study is marked by a number of limitations. The questionnaire as its single research tool could have been flanked by interviews seeking more in-depth views of a number of participants, to pursue further the themes researched through the questionnaire items. This would have led to more informative participant contributions, and a widening of the scope of the enquiry.

The sample was representative of the PS cohort in Malta, which gives the results obtained more reliability, although the respondents were in their vast majority female. The possibility remains therefore that had the respondent sample been more balanced as regards gender, results may have been different.

A number of known factors of influence on LL motivation were not investigated at all. External factors which were not examined include parental and peer influence, gender differences, and socio-economic and socio-cultural implications. Thus, the whole discussion on the dominance of English and its effects remains on the level of conjecture, and more research is necessary that would include explicit questions enquiring how Maltese participants feel about MFLL given their status of highly fluent speakers of English. Internal factors that could have been investigated more deeply include self-efficacy and self-confidence issues.

The present study in fact fits within a wider, continuing project intended to analyse further issues related to motivation for FLL in the Maltese context, and

constitutes a rather simple, initial step in a work-in-progress situation. In these deeper analyses, methods of research need to be varied, and should include classroom observations of the effect of motivational teaching protocols on controlled and experimental groups. Learner reactions to teacher motivational strategies can be recorded through the use of learning journals and / or pre- and post-intervention questionnaires. The project that is planned to take place next is in fact field research through an experimental model at A2 level, which aims to study learners' motivational behaviour in response to teachers' motivational teaching practices, such as in Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) or Moskovsky et al. (2013). Concomitantly, a second field investigation is planned, that will use a pre-elaborated model of motivation measurement, such as that in Papi et al. (2019). This model is preferred to other self-system models as it balances items relating to Ideal L2 Self (own/others) and Ought-to L2 Self (own/others). The project will target MFL A1 students in their second year of FL studies in Secondary Education, who study de jure one obligatory FL.

Sustained research is needed to carefully understand Maltese learners' de/motivation vis-à-vis FLL, in order to be in a position to redress the undesirable situation of agony in which FL subjects have found themselves. Research instruments need to be developed for the Maltese scenario that do not focus solely on the psycho-cognitive level, but that avoid abstraction of the effects of the situational context. It is hoped that a stronger link will be ensured even in the literature between motivational theory and Second Language Acquisition, so that studies within the framework of motivational theory can be truly useful to the FL educational scenario, a context in dire need of improvement and support.

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