



*Through their eyes and with their words: An exploration of the immigrant students in Malta and their perceptions of Malta's two official languages*

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**Abstract:** *In various countries in Europe, immigrant students settle into a new school – a process fraught with difficulties and challenges as they struggle to make sense of their new surroundings and new ways of being, mediated through what is often a foreign language. For such students in Malta the task is doubled as they need to cope with two languages – Maltese and English – both present in the educational setup and essential for the transition into Maltese school life. This article reports on part of a multiple case study that explored immigrant students' experiences and perceptions of the two languages in Maltese state secondary education. Through a process of trust building and interviews, the immigrant students were invited to express their feelings verbally and through drawings to better communicate what they were going through. The result is a touching wakeup call to the particular hardships faced by these students as they attempt to cope with two linguistic codes in a context that is not always supportive.*

**Keywords:** immigrant students, experiences, perceptions, languages, Maltese state secondary education

## **Introduction**

As immigrant students find their way through any new educational system, they struggle to, among other things, learn a new language through which they also need to learn other subjects and interact with their peers. Time is against them and catching up with their native speaking peers seems like an impossible task. Very soon they will also encounter gatekeeping assessment that will have serious consequences for their future (August & Shanahan, 2006; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). In most countries, immigrant students need to learn one language. That is already a daunting task. However, what are the immigrant students' perceptions when additional to all this, their new educational situation is bilingual such that they are faced with learning two languages, Maltese and English? Malta has two official languages – Maltese, the national language and English. In state schools, both languages have a role to play: English is the language of the coursebooks which are the backbone of most teaching, while classroom talk is dominated by Maltese which often functions as a bridge between the learners and the coursebook (Camilleri Grima, 2012).

## **Malta and immigration**

Immigration in Malta is a relatively recent phenomenon (Amore, 2005; Camilleri & Camilleri, 2008; European Commission, 2004a; Galea, Attard Tonna, & Cassar, 2011; Yousif, 2009), and this positions Malta at its “first steps towards realising and accepting its new role of an immigration country” (Amore, 2005, p. 20). Despite Malta's infancy in such a role, the increasing numbers of immigrant pupils in Maltese state schools (3.6% of school population) are bringing about a new challenge to the education system. In a local study on ethnic minorities, Calleja, Cauchi and Grech (2010) found that much of what is being provided in schools is sporadic and that “initiatives are often initiated by individuals out of personal interest” (p. 16). This concurs with Galea et al., (2011) who in a study on young migrant women in Malta commented that, “there are no particular policies that give direction to the processes of integration of such students within Maltese schools” (p. 107).

This indicates that to prevent immigrant children from slipping through the cracks (Murphy & Anisef, 2001) there is an immediate need for Maltese schools to be

equipped to teach culturally and linguistically diverse student populations (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2008). In providing the immigrant students with lessons in either Maltese or English or both, they would be empowering them for integration into the host society, help them overcome several barriers, have a toolkit for integration and own an entrance card to both the core of school environment and to Maltese society. It is against this background that this study on the language mediated experiences of immigrant students was carried out.

### **The centrality of Language**

A child's good use of the native language enhances positive school inclusion and better peer relationships (Palaiologou (2007), Valtolina (2004). Papademetriou and Weidenfeld (2007) assert that:

“...education is not simply a set of grades and exams; it is a socialising force, crucial to the aim of a cohesive society. Unless we unlock the potential of our children, regardless of where their parents were born, we risk ‘balkanising’ our societies. We must act now, or we risk undermining all our futures.”

(The Children that Europe Forgot, para. 9)

The language of the host country should not be the linguistic, social and academic gatekeeper (Allen, 2006) to immigrant students in their new host country, but a tool to bridge communication, learning and integration. When a child who enters a new school system is judged “not to have language” or “not to have enough language,” a heavy ball is chained to their feet (Duranti, 1997, p. 332) as language is the enabling factor for access to quality education (Mohanty 2008). While Teekens (2003) and Kosonen, Malone, and Young (2007), maintain that all educational activity is linked to language, Larsen Freeman and Freeman (2008) add that language is the tool that everyone uses in learning and teaching. Not only is language a means to an end, it is also an end in itself. It is only through competence in the medium of instruction that students can access and learn content at school, be it during foreign languages or other subjects regarded as non language such as Mathematics, Physics,

Chemistry, Biology, Science, Business Studies, and Physical Education. This clearly shows that, whilst for some students, language learning in school is focused on reaching a level of academic and social proficiency in the language of schooling so that they can have access to the rest of the curriculum, for others, learning language is a companion undertaking to learning non language school subjects (Freeman as cited in Larsen Freeman & Freeman, 2008). Therefore, whilst some students go to school to be educated through the medium of their own language, others have access to the same intellectual baggage yet this is achieved only through the medium of a language in which they are still developing proficiency. They need to learn a new and additional language to be able to participate in education, something the local students do not have to do (Kontra, 2003). This disparity in the students who have not yet mastered the language of instruction, clearly illustrates Larsen Freeman and Freeman's (2008) argument that despite language being a creature of schools, unlike other subjects, it is a medium. Furthermore, they assert that whilst other content areas are deictic in that they have a kind of anchoring in school, language is boundless as it has no borders, no frontiers and no confines. It is used by all and all the time, be it in court, at school, at home or at the supermarket. This clearly marks language as a precious resource vital for our existence. It can either serve as a potent medium for integration or as a disabling and marginalising factor.

### **Rationale for study – literature review**

Although research has been carried out locally on children of returned migrants (Sammut, 2004; Zahra & Zahra, 1996), non Maltese speaking children (Frendo, 2005; Mifsud, 2005), immigrant students (Caruana et al., 2013; Yousif, 2009), asylum seeking children and refugees (Camilleri, 2007; The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice [JRS], 2004; Martinelli, 2006), migrant children (Galea et al., 2011; Urpani, 2008; Vassallo, 2011; Calleja Ragonesi & Martinelli 2013), minority children (Valentino, 2011), ethnic minorities (Calleja et al., 2010; Schaa, 2010), unaccompanied minors (Pace, Carabott, Dibben, & Micallef, 2009; Schlenzka, 2007; Spiteri 2013), young migrant women (Galea et al., 2011; Galea 2013) and third country nationals (Falzon, Pisani, & Cauchi, 2012), the area of these students' language mediated experiences in relation to their

educational experience still seems to have been minimally explored. This study seeks to explore that area to learn about how immigrant students in state secondary schools perceive the situation in which they need to grapple not with one language as do most immigrant students in European secondary schools, but with two – Maltese and English.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

In a bid to view the phenomenon under study through the immigrant students' eyes, to capture and authentically portray their "lived reality" (Scott & Usher, 2011, p. 93) at school, the data collection tools chosen incorporate the possibility of face to face interaction with the study participants. Such naturalistic methods of data collection, which are either collected from the setting or created by the participants themselves (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010) occur mainly through observation and interviewing (Schensul, 2008). Given that this study sought to get a deeper understanding of the immigrant students' language mediated experiences in state secondary schools, semi structured interviews were employed to gain more insight, and elaborate on such feelings, experiences, views, perceptions and to richly and thickly capture the real life situations of these students. This tool which is adequate for participants from different cultures (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010), is often employed in qualitative measurement in sensitive research which like this one, seeks to explore feelings and experiences amongst vulnerable groups (Davidson, 2008) such as refugees, unaccompanied minors and irregular immigrants.

### **Semi structured interviews**

The use of semi structured interviews enabled the researcher to garner the experiences and understand the meanings that the participants attached to the immigrants' understanding of language in their educational journey within a Maltese state secondary school. It also enabled different perspectives from different sources to provide both a complete and also a reliable approach to the study. In this person centred approach, the person's experiences, views, opinions, hopes, fears and challenges were placed at the heart, such that the very soul of this study lies in being able to explore and reveal these lived experiences and diverse insights in such a way that those outside of the studied experience are enabled to achieve a deeper

understanding of what it feels like to be inside. Moreover, “these essential sources of case study information” (Yin, 2003a, p. 89) shall allow those inside to navigate across borders and share with those outside who want to know, learn and understand more about the participants’ thoughts, feelings, experiences and life situations (Mears, 2009). In this way this “complete piece of social interaction” (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 164), “co constructed narrative of meaning and experience” (Freeman & Mathinson, 2009, p. 90), this “inter view, where knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 2), becomes an interpretive process whereby in the act of describing and narrating, each idiosyncratic experience is brought to being (Frish as cited in Mears, 2009).

### **Meet the immigrant students**

Three state secondary schools – those with the highest number of immigrant students and the widest range of nationalities – were chosen for this study. From these, a sample of 22 student (n=22); 13 girls (8 immigrants, 1 refugee and 4 unaccompanied minors) and 9 boys (8 immigrants and 1 refugee) was chosen. The age of the participants ranged from 11 to 17. The length of residence in Malta ranged from 6 months to 10 years. The sample was chosen to encompass a mixture of gender, age, length of residence, legal status, ethnicity, country of origin within and outside Europe, native language/L1 and year group (Form 1 through to 5, i.e. age 11 to 16). This purposeful selection in choosing the schools and the participants was carried out in order to capture a more vivid picture of the mosaic linguistic and cultural situation present in some of the Maltese state secondary schools.

Out of the 22 immigrant students participating in this study, 20 were interviewed twice where the second interview enabled the researcher to clarify and confirm the previously elicited information, probe for more detail, and follow up on unclear, ambiguous or inconsistent knowledge (Rogers, Casey, Ekert, & Holland, 2005). Two other students who were in Form 5 were only interviewed once due to their study commitments.

Of the 42 student interviews carried out (20 students x 2, + 2 Form 5 students x 1) (excluding the 44 informal meetings prior to the first interview), 33 (16 students x 2 + 1 Form 5 student x 1) were carried out at the school during school hours and mainly during the lessons from which the students were exempted such as Religion, Social Studies or History. Face to face interviews were carried out on a one to one basis in an empty classroom or room which was always close to and clearly visible to any of the members of the schools' administration such as the Head or the Assistant Head of School. The remaining 9 of the 42 interviews (4 students x 2 + 1 Form 5 x 1), were carried out in the vicinity of the students' institution or home in the presence of either the cultural mediator, the support teacher responsible for their transition programme or a member of the family, at a place and time convenient to the respondents. This was due to the fact that by the time the required consent was given, the participants, despite their willingness to participate, had stopped attending school.

An interview schedule was designed in advance around the main themes that emerged from the literature and the aims of what this research aimed to explore. The interviewer did not always follow the guide to the letter as the participants' story fragments, narrative accounts of their educational experiences, thoughts, insights and meanings gradually unfolded and instigated further exploration. To ensure interpretive validity, extra precaution was taken to avoid leading or close ended questions (Ayes, 2008). The duration of the interview ranged from 45 to 60 minutes and all the data from the interviews was recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

### **Recruitment of a Cultural Mediator**

In seeking to give voice to and hence present a cross section of the different types of immigrant students present in the three chosen state secondary schools, participants from different cultures were selected. Moreover, it was conceived not only important to the research but also an ethical obligation to include immigrants from a different culture and who were also unable to communicate either in English or in Maltese. Murray and Wynne (2001) point out that research with members of ethnic minority groups facilitates access to the ideas, emotions, viewpoints,

perspectives and lived experiences of non English speaking and linguistically diverse populations living within a different and dominant culture (Twinn, 1997).

The interpreter was present, translating back and forth (Baker, 1981), acting as an intermediary between the researcher who shared neither the language nor the culture of the study participants and was thus an “outsider”, and two of the participants (Hennink, 2008; Irvine et al., 2008; Temple & Edwards, 2002).

To be able to produce accurate and truthful data, Temple and Edwards (2002) mention several matching characteristics suitable for the interpreter interviewee match. Amongst this degree of communality between interpreters and participants (Murray & Wynne, 2001) are ethnicity/race, gender, culture, religion (Baker, Hussain, & Saunders, 1991; Temple & Edwards, 2002; Wallin & Ahlström, 2006) and native language. These shared similarities helped to increase the establishment of rapport and trust with the two participants. In the recruitment of the culturally and linguistically proficient interpreter, not only were the previously mentioned criteria fundamental but also her experience in previous qualitative studies that had been carried out in various fields with irregular immigrants and refugees in Malta. This enabled the interpreter to be already familiar with the research process.

### **The immigrant students’ perceptions**

In the following section the students’ opinions, ideas and analogies portray these perceptions. Two of the participants (Kate<sup>A</sup> and Radko<sup>B</sup>) have also presented a drawing depicting their perceptions (Figures 2 and 5 and Figures 3 and 6).

As the immigrant students’ perceptions of Maltese and English unfold, through their metaphors and drawings, they reveal the qualities they attribute to both languages, and in so doing also depict how and why these perceptions were construed, thus providing a fuller picture of their language mediated experiences.

### **Perceptions and attitudes towards Maltese**

Among the participants, Maltese was perceived mainly as a difficult language. Three main perceptions emerged: Maltese as a barrier and an immobiliser, Maltese as

different and unpredictable, and Maltese embodying the traits of an athlete and a warrior.

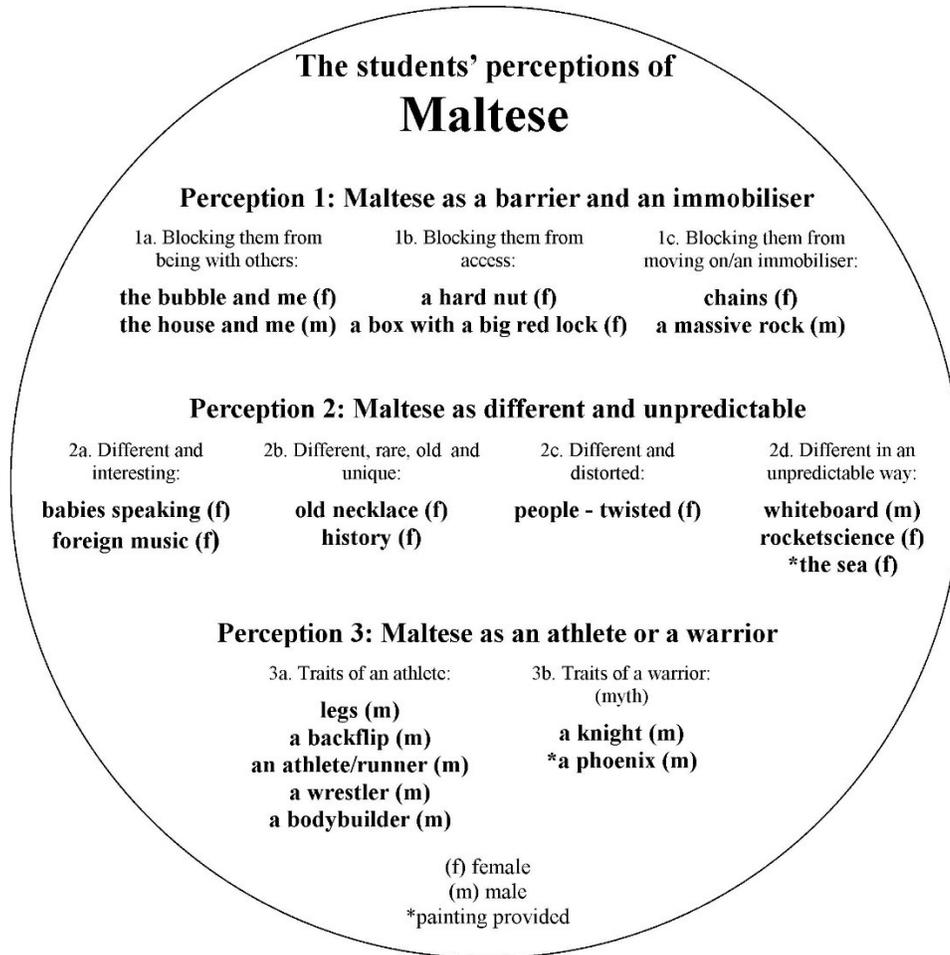


Figure 1. Summary of the students' perceptions of Maltese

**Perception 1: Maltese as a barrier and an immobiliser**

For five of the participants (Figure 1 above), Maltese was regarded as an obstacle and immobiliser. It blocked them from being with others, from accessing information and from moving on. It was interesting to note that this perception was common among the older participants who were either struggling in mainstream Maltese lessons or who did not seem to be quite happy with the language provision provided during the Maltese lesson. The main characteristics which constituted their

perception of Maltese were its impenetrability and its obstructiveness, and the separation from the others.

Alena<sup>A</sup> and Yakiv<sup>B</sup> perceived Maltese as a sort of invisible wall or barrier which separated them from their peers. Whilst Alena<sup>A</sup> compared Maltese to a “bubble” that she is “unable to pop”, Yakiv<sup>B</sup> compared Maltese to a big house in which:

... there are the children, their fathers, mothers ... and if you do not know the language you, like, out from the house. You feeling like away and you stay and just stare and you do not listen... nothing, it feels like you are not from here.

In both these perceptions, the students explained their frustration and futile struggles.

Elizabeth<sup>A</sup> perceived Maltese as “one of those really hard nuts that you can’t open...” while for Helena<sup>A</sup> it is:

a box...a medium one with a big lock on it because when I think Maltese, I think of something that you just can’t get into ... I think that I relate the lock to my inability to open up the box and get all the contents.

While for Alena<sup>A</sup>, Yakiv<sup>B</sup>, Elizabeth<sup>A</sup> and Helena<sup>A</sup>, Maltese was perceived as an obstruction denying them connectedness with others and any type of access, for Alena<sup>A</sup> also and Gerwin<sup>B</sup>, Maltese was perceived as an immobiliser. The former speaks in terms of “definitely the chains ... because it just holds me back from everything else like the subjects, the exams and... just behind, just the way it is...” (Alena<sup>A</sup>) while Gerwin<sup>B</sup> sees it as:

...a big massive rock because it is blocking your way because you cannot move it so you will be stuck there like a barrier pretty much. It is

in front of you or you are carrying it because it slows you down and you cannot do much.

Clearly these perceptions reveal the students' struggles and frustrations entwined with a strong motivation and urge to learn Maltese. Despite the schools' efforts, they still perceived Maltese as a barrier. Given that the length of stay in Malta of the five participants was as much as 8 years long, still they felt blocked and immobilised in their educational journey due to their unpreparedness in Maltese and this throws into grave doubt the efficacy and adequacy of the provisions in place, whether they are truly addressing and meeting the language needs of the immigrant students.

### **Perception 2: Maltese as different and unpredictable**

The following eight participants (Figure 1 above) perceived Maltese as different and unpredictable. While for most of the students these two distinctive characteristics of the Maltese language were deemed interesting and valued, for Ieva<sup>A</sup> these singularities stamped the deformity of the Maltese language.

This is how Enya<sup>A</sup> describes first hearing Maltese:

I just used to think it was funny such that in the beginning I thought it was like babies speaking because they don't speak proper words and sometimes they make strange sounds too ... but I was intrigued. I always liked this language.

For Mbilia<sup>C</sup> it felt like, *“you're listening to music actually ... 'cause, when I listen to foreign music I don't know what they're talking about but I do like the beat”*.

Rarity for Ishbel<sup>A</sup> and Elisa<sup>A</sup> is another characteristic that lends value to their perception of Maltese. For both, Maltese is the hybridisation of something rare and precious, old and new and diverse and unique. Whilst Ishbel<sup>A</sup> perceives Maltese as a sort of jewel for in its uncommonness lies its value, for Elisa<sup>A</sup> Maltese is perceived as something old weaved into something new, because in its multifariousness lies its uniqueness just like the history of the island.

A very different language. Had never heard something like it before. ... it is something that you don't see a lot cause you don't hear it, like if you're not in this country you don't hear it like you hear other languages like French ... it's something rare like a necklace which is nice to hear but it's also strange cause it doesn't sound like the English language. Maltese is like a rare jewel, an antique one. (Ishbel<sup>A</sup>)

Maltese it's like the story of Malta; it's a little bit old and very different ... It take a lot of language to do Maltese language and that is a new thing because not a lot of places they do this thing and so Maltese it's something old because it represents a lot of people from different place that came here in Malta and it's something new because for me Maltese language it's something really new that we learn that is different from other language. (Elisa<sup>A</sup>)

In marked contrast to the perceptions above, for Ieva<sup>A</sup> Maltese “*would be an object which you'd find in many places pretty much everywhere*” something “*which is a little bit twisted; it's kind of a rare object it's a strangely made object but you find it everywhere*”. She then concluded that, “*People are quite twisted and they are everywhere ...*”, thus the best representation for Maltese rather than an object would best be a person because,

People are very complicated, everyone I mean every person is complicated and they are everywhere so I guess that's the perfect thing that comes to mind when I think of Maltese. So ... something twisted and common I mean in Malta, common in Malta. People are twisted aren't they? So.. (Ieva<sup>A</sup>)

For Stoyan<sup>B</sup>, again Enya<sup>A</sup> and Kate<sup>A</sup>, this difference of the Maltese language was perceived as a form of unpredictability. In fact for Stoyan<sup>B</sup>, Maltese was similar to “*... the white board because they always write words and everything else on it and that's why ... it's always different and new stuff like Maltese*”. For Enya<sup>A</sup>, Maltese is like “*...rocket science because obviously you don't know what any of it means ... It*

*just seems impossible at the start which rocket science to me seems impossible as well*". For Kate<sup>A</sup>, Maltese is like the sea. It is unpredictable because with Maltese "it's never that easy at the start" because "if you fall in the sea, you don't go from shallow until you get deeper but you go straight into the deep" and so "you have to work out how to get out". It is:

...all the time changing. It is like you can look at the sea, one minute you see it calm and the next minute you look at it and it is rough. It is like that. You do not know what is going to happen next. You cannot predict. (Kate<sup>A</sup>)

For me Maltese, like the sea it's fun because if you use the sea, if you are nice to the sea, I know it sounds strange but it doesn't hurt you. You can use the sea. It's nicer. It's always moving so it can move you as well ... It's useful, it's helpful..... you can swim in the sea and you'll never see the bottom. (Kate<sup>A</sup>)

In the drawing below (Figure 2), Kate<sup>A</sup> depicts her perception of Maltese. In her drawing there are two ships, one rides the wave and the other is lying at the bottom of the sea. According to Kate<sup>A</sup> the one on top represents all those people who are able to speak and understand Maltese effectively, the one below represents people for whom Maltese is an additional language and so are sunk.

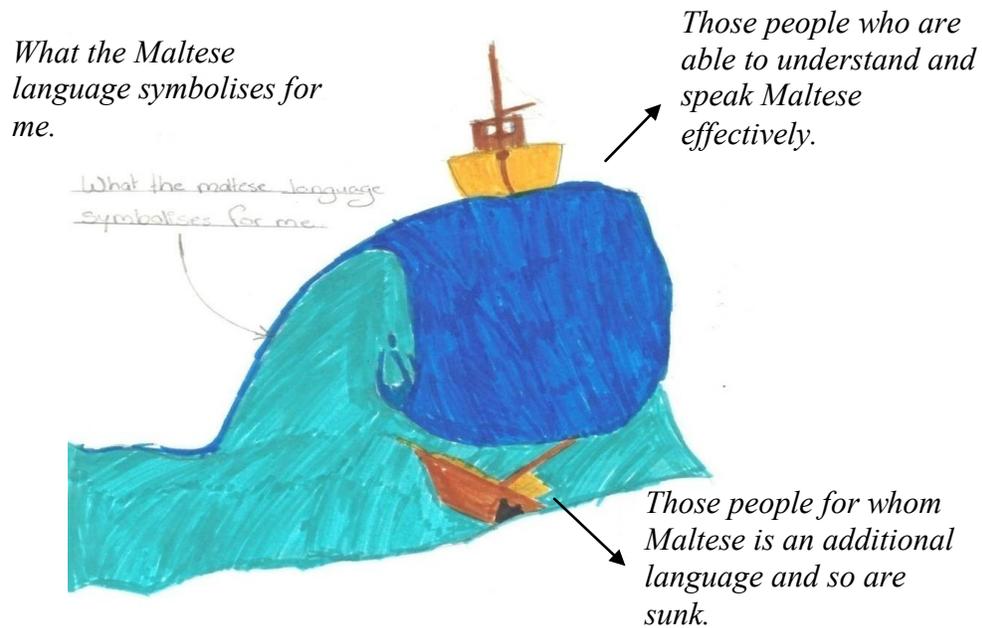


Figure 2. Kate's perception of Maltese

*Sometimes I'm in the calm but more often I'm underneath. I can't exactly say I ever ride the wave. ... Sometimes I wish to ride the wave ... So for me, when I think of Maltese I say that it was a bit difficult because I didn't have any previous lessons or training in it. So that's why I really found it difficult. (Kate<sup>A</sup>)*

In all the previous perceptions, all except for Ieva's<sup>A</sup>, the participants' ideas of Maltese showed a readiness and a positive attitude towards it, which is a fundamental element in the acquisition of a new language (Gardner & Clément, 1990; Baker, 1992; Huguet, 2006). It might seem that such a positive attitude towards Maltese stems from the fact that in their respective school there was some provision in place.

The students' perceptions below differ from the previous ones in that for some of the participants Maltese is associated with either an athlete or a warrior.

### **Perception 3: Maltese as an athlete or a warrior**

Portelli (2006) studied boys' perceptions of Maltese and English in an all-boys' Church Comprehensive Secondary School. He found that many boys



*will stop me using Maltese; if anybody does so I will challenge him to a boxing match. (Yonas<sup>B</sup>)*

*... to learn Maltese you need time and patience but then when you get it, you are like a bodybuilder. You need time, sacrifices and training but then after you get it, it pumps you up hehe (smiling). (Zoran<sup>B</sup>)*

In the second interview Kjell<sup>B</sup> added that Maltese reminded him not just of a back flip but also of a knight: *“because everyone can learn Maltese and everyone can be a knight but then to be a good knight you need to be strong, you need to be fast and careful”*:

*... to be a knight you can't be a knight alone, you need to train, you need to get skills, you need to get speed, it's not something easy, then once you are a knight if someone comes and attack you, you know where you have to protect you ... so a knight knows where he should protect himself. To be a knight you need to train to know Maltese you need to train like a knight. In Malta if you know Maltese you become like the knight. (Kjell<sup>B</sup>)*

This rather combat-like and mythical association of Maltese was echoed by Radko<sup>B</sup>. For Radko<sup>B</sup>, Maltese was a phoenix which is big, *“fire yellow and red”*. Red because *“it is like hard colour just like the phoenix is hard and big for me and I do not can drive it ... He is strong and hard to drive”* (Radko<sup>B</sup>). However, despite the phoenix's majesty, Radko<sup>B</sup> was eager to tame the phoenix as he himself explained about the drawing.

*This is me (referring to the boy riding the phoenix).*

*This is Maltese (referring to the phoenix).*



**Figure 3. Radko's perception of Maltese**

*This is me (referring to the boy riding the phoenix), this is Maltese (referring to the phoenix) – it is a phoenix and I don't can drive because I don't can speak Maltese and for me it's very hard and again driving the phoenix is hard 'cause phoenix is not like cat, you can do everything with cats it's not something problem for you, the cat come here and you put it again on the floor but come one phoenix and step here, it's difficult to control the phoenix. Maltese I don't can ride it and that's why I am not near computer (for him it represents the English language) because I am busy with phoenix. It is something hard for me. Sometimes phoenix make me small angry because I don't can speak Maltese and I*

*try and I try and I try but I don't get but I try again. I want to tame it. If i tame him, he help me. He is important for me . (Radko<sup>B</sup>)*

This last perception of Maltese as an athlete or warrior is singularly interesting. Despite deeming Maltese as a difficult language, the six boys felt challenged and motivated to learn it. They did not perceive Maltese simply as a barrier, a hindrance or an unpredictable force but also as a challenge. In the difficulty to achieve or get hold of it, there also lies its satisfaction and pride. This reflects a positive cognitive-affective orientation towards Maltese which appears to indicate that these students possess a strong motivation towards learning Maltese.

### **Perception of English**

In her case study Ennser-Kananen (2012) found that for seven high school senior students in a suburban U.S. American German foreign language classroom, English was considered to be the default language in school and in the classroom context. They ascribed to English the role of the most powerful language in the classroom. In Malta's state schools although as Frenco (2005) and Sammut (2004) have revealed, much is carried out in Maltese, English is the medium of all reading and writing activities in the Maltese classrooms (Camilleri Grima 1996; 1997; 2002; Angermann, 2001). McBrien also found that for some Somalian refugees in USA, the desire to learn English was a major theme. They valued education and the need to know English as a way to better their situations (McBrien, 2011). Furthermore, English has become the primary language of international communication, the lingua franca of the world (Grenier & Nadeau, 2011). All of these three main points were clearly illustrated by the participants. Their perception of English ranged from it being the language of school, the language that enables a better future and the vehicle with which any person can move freely in the world and communicate with many peoples at various stops. Moreover, English was also perceived as something refreshing and natural (Figure 4).

The students' perceptions of English			
<p><b>Perception 1</b></p> <p>English as the language of school</p> <p><b>a pen (m)</b>  <b>*a book (f)</b>  <b>*a computer + desk (m)</b></p>	<p><b>Perception 2</b></p> <p>English as the language enabling a better life</p> <p><b>irregular immigrants (1m, 2f)</b></p>	<p><b>Perception 3</b></p> <p>English as the language of the world</p> <p><b>a big elephant (m)</b>  <b>money (m)</b></p>	<p><b>Perception 4</b></p> <p>English as a very natural language to learn and to use</p> <p><b>a glass of water (f)</b>  <b>water (m)</b>  <b>rain (m)</b>  <b>air (m)</b>  <b>hands (m)</b></p>
<p>(f) female                      (m) male                      *painting provided</p>			

Figure 4. Summary of the students' perceptions of English

**English as the language of school**

For most of the participants, English was mainly related to school. Stoyan<sup>B</sup> pointed out that English reminded him of a pen, “*the marker of the board, because you always write with it. In English you have to write a lot and that’s why*”.

*What the English language symbolises for me.*

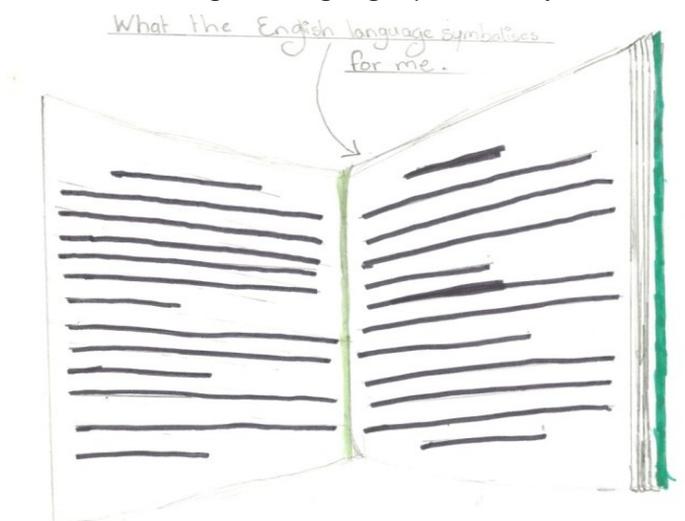


Figure 5. Kate's perception of English

For Kate<sup>A</sup> English suggests a book (Figure 5),

*....because it has many, like, old words that people don't understand or use and it has many new like not proper words that people use all the time and some people would use different words. Because it's sort of it's like you can just keep on reading it and it will never end and then you just keep reading it and I like books. Yeah, it's like it comes without you realizing, it's sort of natural. Sometimes like in English if it was in a wave then I'd be on top so it's like for me it's easy but for some people they don't find it easy so like it's different to everyone's point of view. (Kate<sup>A</sup>)*

Radko's<sup>B</sup> too sees English through a school lens. For him English is a computer and a computer desk (Figure 6). Beside this desk there is no one. When asked why, he simply replied that he is busy taming his phoenix (Maltese) because unlike the phoenix (Maltese) which takes up all his time, English is easier and thus does not need so much time studying it.



**Figure 6. Radko's perception of English**

*I am not here because it's easy and I'm somewhere. The computer, it's easy for me and I leave it, it's not very easy but it's not like Maltese. Maltese I don't can ride it and that's why I am not near computer because I am busy with phoenix. It is something hard for me. Here what I do (referring to the pc) is study what I know; I know this and I study. Here I waste time, here, here (referring to the pc/English) I want speak Maltese more more more. Here I want to speak English but English is not like hard like Maltese. Computer easy, phoenix hard so I stay more with pheonix. (Radko<sup>B</sup>)*

For Aziza<sup>C</sup>, English is the language of school and:

*All the schools should be changed and use English during the lessons. I will speak with my people my language but when I am at school I want to concentrate on English to do good at school.*

### **English as the language that enables a better life**

For Yonas<sup>B</sup> mother and grandfather, English is the hope for a better tomorrow: “My grandfather ...encourages me to learn English, to learn more”. He adds that his grandfather teaches him English whilst singing:

*(singing) hey Joseph, mouth and tooth and ear and nose and eye and mouth. I am body, this is arms, this is hands, this is finger, this is leg, this is toes, and this is shin. (Yonas<sup>B</sup>)*

To Yonas<sup>B</sup>, English is “a woman, because parts of it are soft (meaning easy) and parts are not; ..... smart and friendly, steady like a chair, strong not faint, (showing that whilst holding on to the chair he was steady).

For Freweini<sup>C</sup>, English is important “to get better life; to get a job. We need to improve our English and we need to learn more and we can get a work”.

### **English as the language of the world**

This study found that among all the participants, Maltese was deemed as highly important for any immigrant who is living in Malta, and English was perceived as the most important language in the world.

For Kjell<sup>B</sup>, Timotei<sup>B</sup>, Yonas<sup>B</sup>, Aziza<sup>C</sup> and Freweini<sup>C</sup> this is an advantageous characteristic of English as it can be used as a short-cut to communicating with all peoples. For every immigrant it is the link from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

Kjell<sup>B</sup> explains that English is something “*all must learn*” as it is the “*language where in all the world they speak it*”. He continued that it is impossible to learn all the languages of the places he visits so “*if I know English, I can still communicate with only one language*”. Similarly Timotei<sup>B</sup> said that “*English is the popular language of the earth ... all countries speak in English*” and with it, as Freweini<sup>C</sup> points out, “*we can communicate with all peoples*”.

The idea that English is the key to the world was also expressed by Mihai<sup>B</sup> and Yakiv<sup>B</sup> respectively. Whilst for Mihai<sup>B</sup> English is like ‘a big elephant’ because of its size, for Yakiv<sup>B</sup> (below) it is like ‘money’ because with it one can do everything:

*... much of the population of the earth they speak English, most of them. So English for me is something big like an elephant because this language is big and is spoken in most of the countries even in Romania, even in Malta, in Italy, in most countries they speak English. (Mihai<sup>B</sup>)*

*English to money because if you don't have money you can't do anything but if you have money you can do anything; if you know English you can do anything but if you don't have English you stay alone. (Yakiv<sup>B</sup>)*

A study among immigrant and Spanish students in Spain (Ibarranan, Lagabaster, & Sierra, 2008) found that the immigrants had a far more positive attitude to English than did the Spanish children. The reasons given for this – similar

to those expressed by immigrant students in this study – are that English is the passport to the world and access to employment.

### **English as something natural to learn and use**

The previous perceptions highlight the importance most of the participants attribute to English. For some, English is considered as something natural both to achieve and also to live with. This contrasts with most of the participants' previous perceptions regarding Maltese when for most of them, learning Maltese entailed some kind of effort, perseverance, endurance, stamina and power. This could also be so because English was already a familiar language in their home country whilst Maltese was not.

Helena<sup>A</sup>, Zoran<sup>B</sup>, Kjell<sup>B</sup>, Gerwin<sup>B</sup> and Timotei<sup>B</sup> all perceived English as something natural and refreshing. Quite interesting was the fact that three of the five students associated English with water and rain mainly because of its fluidity. For Helena<sup>A</sup>, English was perceived as something refreshing like a glass of water, for Zoran<sup>B</sup> as something natural and for Kjell<sup>B</sup> it was deemed similar to the rain which given its natural occurrence, its falling is expected:

*English I think might be a glass of water. English seems to me at least, it seems clear and it's just free, refreshing. (Helena<sup>A</sup>)*

*Because with homeworks and all, it came like very natural, like water. (Zoran<sup>B</sup>)*

*English is like rain; something that, now we say that rain you can't decide when it comes but you know that it will come. You don't know when but you know if I think I will never say no this year it will never rain because it must rain for the. (Kjell<sup>B</sup>)*

*... it's because you know if you go in another country and you don't know the language like I did, I speak English because you know everyone in most of the countries know English and that's why it's like*

*rain, it's something natural that you learn it, it's good to learn it. It's everywhere the same. (Kjell<sup>B</sup>)*

A similar idea to that of the rain, is Gerwin's<sup>B</sup> seeing English as air. He uses it much in the same way as he does with air:

*English for me it's very easy, it's like the air, for me I can use without knowing like when you breathe, you simply don't think about it but you do it all the time. It's easy for me I can walk through it.*

Timotei's<sup>B</sup> perception of English adds to this idea of naturalness, the notion of usefulness. In fact for him English is like “*hands because ... with hands I can read the books and go up more*”. Despite the usefulness of English, he also added that to be able to move, “*I need the hands and legs as I can with hands and legs I can go up but only with hands or legs only I cannot. I need the four, both the hands and the legs*”. He added that without hands or legs, “*I cannot walk, I cannot read, I cannot touch, I cannot move, I cannot sleep... I need all four*”.

## **Conclusion**

Through the metaphors and the drawings that the immigrant students shared in this section, they tried to convey their perceptions of the Maltese and English languages. In so doing, they tried to give a fuller picture of their language-mediated experiences and how what they have experienced has affected the way they perceive these two instruments of power and empowerment. According to Igoa (1995), there is a very important distinction between power and empowerment. Whilst people use power to control others, people can only empower themselves. One hopes that immigrant students in Malta are ‘empowered’ and not ‘caught in power’ by Malta’s two official languages.

Grouped thematically above, the students’ perceptions can be said to share the same characteristics: they are forward-looking and positive. This attitude should provide fertile ground for the work that still needs to be done with immigrant students to accelerate their learning of both Maltese and English, to facilitate their integration

and help them deal with the emotional adjustment of life in a new country and new schools where so much is mediated through language.

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