

Understanding language learning in Malta

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Introduction

The Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) in Malta has a strategic objective to maintain and strengthen standards of English language proficiency within the school education system so that Malta remains a high-performing Commonwealth and European Union country. This should perpetuate the existing, successful provision of bilingual education (Mifsud and Vella forthcoming 2017, Ministry of Education 2016) which prepares individuals from early on in life, who are equally fluent in Maltese and English, for the global employment market. To this end, the Ministry and Cambridge English Language Assessment entered into an agreement for an integrated solution which included the benchmarking of student English language levels in the school sector (Year 1) and the institutional capacity-building of Maltese teachers (Year 2).

Cambridge English Language Assessment, in collaboration with the Ministry, conducted the Year 1 benchmarking project, which aimed at presenting a snapshot of English language proficiency in two key grades at Primary and Secondary education in relation to international standards, namely the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001). The six CEFR reference levels are now widely accepted as the international standard for grading an individual's language proficiency.

In addition to benchmarking learner proficiency, a comprehensive profile of learner, teacher and parent attitudes towards English language education in Malta was investigated. This aspect of the project was designed to provide a comprehensive profile of the Maltese educational context by bringing together views from the main stakeholders. Results also feed into the Ministry's desire to deliver institutional capacity-building in assessment and teaching methodology, a strategic plan for continuous professional development of the teaching cadre, and potential international certification for learners and teachers.

Project aims

The aim of the project was to provide MEDE with a clear picture of how a representative sample of learners at two key school stages – Primary Year 5 and Secondary Form 4 – is currently performing against internationally recognised

English language standards. The two factors of 'school sector' and 'gender' were also identified as key variables in the project. Their impact on performance was investigated and will be discussed in more detail.

Results of surveys designed to elicit attitudes of the main stakeholders (i.e. learners, parents and teachers) towards English language learning, teaching and assessment will also be presented. The findings and recommendations from this phase of the project will serve as an evidence-based framework of current and target proficiency levels and can be used to inform further areas for research.

Conceptual framework

The construct of communicative language competence, which has become widely accepted as the goal of language education and as central to good classroom practice (Bachman and Palmer 1982, Canale and Swain 1980) was central to the design of this project. Communicative language competence comprises linguistic competence, as well as the ability to functionally use that competence in language activities which involve oral and/or written reception, production and interaction in different domains. The communicative view of language is also very much in line with the principles and learning outcomes identified in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for All (Ministry for Education and Employment 2012) for language competence.

All instruments used in the benchmarking project (tests and surveys) were therefore designed with the communicative view of language competence in mind. The assessment instruments are also linked to the CEFR, which provides the gold standard for measuring language competence and which allows the findings of the project to be considered against a broader international context where the CEFR is used.

Finally, an important approach to investigating English language proficiency in this project is the triangulation of data from multiple sources; while the current project is predominantly quantitative in nature, efforts were taken to (a) collect qualitative data in the form of open comments in surveys and (b) ensure that any resulting data can systematically inform future projects by linking the survey items and open comments to areas of interest by the Ministry (e.g. professional development of

teachers, language policies across sectors, sharing of good practices). Such an approach ensures that results of current and future research can be brought together coherently in developing an in-depth view of the Maltese English educational context and in highlighting areas that warrant further attention.

Research questions

The project was guided by the following key research questions (RQs):

RQ1. How do learners at two key school stages – Primary Year 5 and Secondary Form 4 – in Malta perform on a set of Cambridge English language tests on the four skills of Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking against the CEFR?

RQ2. How do learner performances at Primary and Secondary stages compare according to school sector (State/Church/Independent) and gender (female/male)?

RQ3. What are the attitudes of learners, parents and teachers towards the learning, teaching and assessment of English language in Maltese schools?

RQ4. What are some key trends in English language teachers' pedagogical and assessment practices in Maltese schools?

Methodology

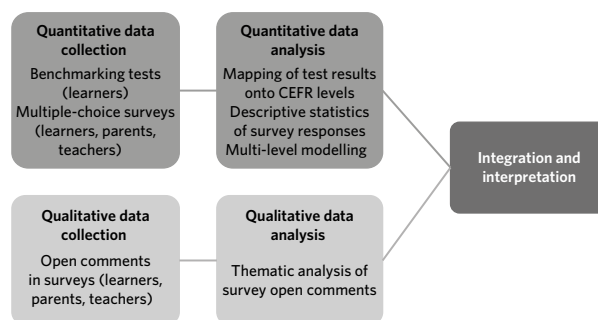
The benchmarking project aims at (a) building a profile of English language ability levels in Malta, (b) establishing stakeholder attitudes to English language learning, teaching and assessment, (c) identifying the professional development needs of English language teachers and (d) highlighting areas that require further attention in creating a truly bilingual educational system. The scope of the project therefore necessitates a research design which allows for the collection of different types of data from a variety of sources and using a range of instruments. A premise recognised in educational reform is that 'a key characteristic of the educational process is that student learning is influenced by many small factors rather than a few large ones' (Chapman, Weidman, Cohen and Mercer 2005:526); therefore, any recommendations made in this project needed to be based on an in-depth understanding of all aspects of the educational system in order to ensure that they are achievable and reduce the chances of any negative unintended consequences. As a result, the project focuses not only on measuring English language levels of learners, but also on investigating the context of learning both inside and outside of school, the availability of resources, the extent of parental support, and stakeholder perceptions. A mixed methods approach therefore formed the basis of the study and an explanatory sequential design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011) was selected in addressing the study's research questions.

Research design

Given the Ministry's emphasis on continuous research and multi-phase projects, a mixed methods explanatory sequential design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011), where a quantitative stage is followed by a qualitative stage, was considered to be the most appropriate design for a multi-phase project. Using this design, the results of the Year 1 data can systematically inform the focus of future work; for example, the benchmarking data can be used to identify high- and low-performing schools and classes and to subsequently focus observations on differences in pedagogies and practices in these schools (which will also have been stratified by school sector). Questionnaire data from Year 1 can also be used to design observation instruments and inform areas to be addressed in focus groups in future stages, and together provide a more systematic and comprehensive approach to addressing the research questions in more depth.

It is important to note that while the Year 1 benchmarking project is predominantly quantitative, care was taken to also collect a small sample of qualitative data (through open comments in the questionnaires administered to the different stakeholders) to complement the quantitative data and provide a more in-depth understanding of the educational context. These two strands of data were brought together and integrated in drawing conclusions and making recommendations using Creswell and Plano Clark's (2011) convergent parallel mixed methods (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Research design for Year 1 benchmarking project (based on Creswell and Plano Clark 2011)



Sampling framework

A stratified sampling design was used as the sampling framework for the project and ensured the inclusion of a representative sample of learners across the two key variables of school sector and gender. Schools were sampled from a comprehensive national list of schools in Malta. Sampling was undertaken separately for Primary Year 5 and Secondary Form 4. The agreed total number of learners to be sampled was 1,255 (Primary N=624; Secondary N=631) for the administration of the Reading, Listening and Writing exams. Given practical constraints and the resource-heavy nature of examining Speaking face-to-face, it was agreed for the Speaking tests to be administered to a smaller proportion of the sample. Approximately 50% of schools from the original sample

were chosen for the administration of the Speaking test using a purposeful sampling approach. This smaller sample for Speaking means that the precision criteria of results are different from the ones from Reading, Listening and Writing tests. Therefore, more caution is needed in interpreting the Speaking results. Note that in the purposeful sampling approach, important variables such as school sector and gender segregation of learners in Church and Independent schools were taken into account for school selection. This means that the quality of purposeful sampling is high, but we still cannot make the same statistical inferences as with the full sample. Nevertheless, given the importance of assessing Speaking face-to-face and in interaction, the fact that Speaking was included is an important strength of the project. A similar sampling framework was also recommended for learner surveys. Parent and teacher participation in the study was on a voluntary basis.

It should be noted that while the original sampling framework specified approximately 625 learners per year (for Reading, Listening and Writing), MEDE administered the Reading, Listening and Writing exams to *all* Primary and Secondary classes within selected schools for equity purposes. This resulted in a larger number of learners than that outlined in the sampling framework. Cambridge English marked all available Reading and Listening exams (N=3,073) and the agreed number of Writing (N=1,375) and Speaking (N=714) exams. A total of 1,250 learners, 793 parents and 132 teachers completed the surveys. Please note that not all survey respondents completed all sections of the surveys (the total number indicates all who attempted the surveys).

Data collection instruments

A range of instruments was used to collect both the quantitative and qualitative data. More details are presented below. Ethical guidelines from the University of Cambridge, the British Association for Applied Linguistics and the British Educational Research Association were followed during all data collection and data analysis phases of this project.

Benchmarking English language tests for learners

The Cambridge English benchmarking tests aimed to provide information on learners' language proficiency, in terms of the four skills of Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking as measured against the CEFR.

Attitudinal and background surveys

A series of learner, teacher and parent surveys were used in the project in order to gather stakeholder perceptions of and attitudes towards English language learning, teaching and assessment in the Maltese context. Validated statements were selected from the Cambridge English Questionnaire Item Bank and additional questions, specific

to the Maltese context and the identified areas of focus in the project, were developed in collaboration with MEDE. The statements include a variety of response options with the most common being Likert scale items consisting of a 4-point scale as well as Not Sure or Not Applicable options where relevant. The most typical response options are: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. A key feature of the surveys is the inclusion of parallel statements, which allows for a comparison of responses from learners, parents and teachers where relevant and is used for triangulation purposes and for providing a more comprehensive picture. Paper-based versions of the surveys were distributed to learners. Online and paper-based versions of the surveys were made available to parents in both Maltese¹ and English so that they could select the language in which they were most comfortable responding. Teachers were invited to complete the surveys online and in English using SurveyMonkey.

Data analysis

The data analyses comprised the following for the quantitative strand:

- CEFR level mapping: Rasch analysis and ability estimates.
- Descriptive statistics in the quantitative strand: aimed to provide an overall picture of CEFR language level, stakeholder perceptions, as well as the amount of variability within each group. The analysis focused on the cohort as a whole (e.g. all Form 4 learners) and on specific variables within the cohort (e.g. Form 4 boys and girls; Form 4 Church, Independent, State schools).
- Chi-square test of independence: aimed to investigate whether the different variables of interest (school sector, gender, etc.) were related to questionnaire responses. These variables were used to define groups within the data and compare responses. Standardised residuals were also computed to identify which responses were contributing to the test of significance.
- Multi-level modelling: aimed to explore and confirm whether any background or attitudinal variables (school sector, gender, language used at home, etc.) played a significant role in predicting the language level of learners.

For the small qualitative strand, a thematic analysis of open comments in surveys was carried out with the aim of identifying key themes that indicated (any) important issues brought up by the different stakeholders participating in the project. A final stage involved the integration of different sources of data in providing a coherent narrative on the main findings from the project.

¹ The translation of the parent surveys from English to Maltese was arranged by MEDE.

English language proficiency

In addressing the study's first three research questions, this section provides a snapshot of the established learner proficiency levels for Primary and Secondary learners and highlights the most salient and meaningful differences in proficiency levels that could be attributed to key variables of interest, such as school sector and gender.

A greater number of learners took the Reading, Listening and Writing tests (paper-based) compared to Speaking (face-to-face). The Reading, Listening and Writing results can therefore be generalised to the Maltese Year 5 and Form 4 populations. The smaller sample for Speaking means that the precision criteria of results are different from the ones from Reading, Listening and Writing tests. Therefore, caution is needed in interpreting the Speaking results.

Overall profile: Primary (Year 5)

Primary school learners in Malta achieved a mode of A2 in the skills of Listening, Reading and Writing whereas a mode of B2 was observed for the skill of Speaking.

When looking at the proportion of candidates at the B1/B2 levels, results are very positive and show that a large proportion of learners are at the B levels and can be considered independent users of English (65.8% for Speaking, 45.3% for Writing, 41.3% for Listening and 20.1% for Reading). Speaking is the learners' strongest skill, with 18% of candidates achieving Levels C1 and above. The high levels of performance for Speaking at this age group can be explained by the bilingual context of Malta, the reported levels of English language use at home and outside of school, and the use of English in a variety of domains in Malta (Council of Europe 2015).

Compared to the other skills, Reading has the comparatively highest proportion of learners at A1 level (32.8%) which highlights Reading as the learners' weakest skill. A possible explanation for the comparatively lower performance on Reading can be that of literacy. According to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (2011) surveys of learner competence in Reading, Maths, Science and Literacy, Maltese 10-year-olds were performing significantly lower than the international average on Reading. The PISA (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2009) surveys also suggested that the proportion of 15-year-olds in Malta who were classified as low achievers in reading literacy was significantly higher than the EU average (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2009:41-42). It is recognised in the second language acquisition literature that first language literacy can affect the development of second language reading and writing (Bernhardt 2005, Koda 2007). In response, the National Literacy Strategy (Ministry for Education and Employment 2014) is now

committed to improving biliteracy in English and Maltese through a number of initiatives.²

The distribution of CEFR levels, which cover a range from pre-A1 to C levels, reflects Malta's educational context and linguistic milieu in which language levels vary quite widely, with Maltese as the dominant language for some learners and English for others.

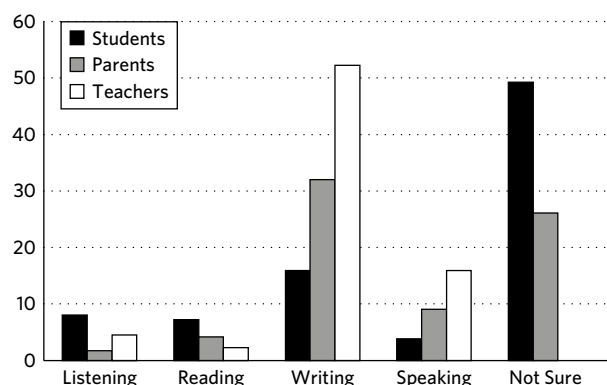
The score results were cross-checked against Primary learners' self-reports of their weaknesses in English as well as parents' and teachers' perceptions. The results in Figure 2 show that learners, parents and teachers all unanimously believe Writing to be the learners' weakest skill. Speaking is the second most selected skill by parents and teachers even though the data suggested Speaking to be the strongest skill for the sub-sample. These findings show a mismatch between score data and stakeholder perceptions of weaknesses in English and suggest that Reading should be given more emphasis for Primary learners, although a review of both parents' and teachers' open comments suggests that more focus on Reading is already considered an important priority:

If students would take the time to read every day they would improve considerably. (Secondary teacher, Church school)

My daughter's level of English would certainly improve if she reads more. (Father of State Secondary learner)

Another noteworthy observation in Figure 2 is that approximately 50% of learners had selected the 'not sure' option when asked to identify their weaknesses in English, which might indicate the absence of self-assessment skills. While this is expected for younger learners, an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses will allow learners to develop self-regulatory learning strategies which can in turn enhance learner autonomy (in line with key areas of focus within the NCF).

Figure 2: Weaknesses in English: stakeholder perceptions (%) - Primary



² education.gov.mt/en/Documents/Literacy/ENGLISH.pdf

Overall profile: Secondary (Form 4)

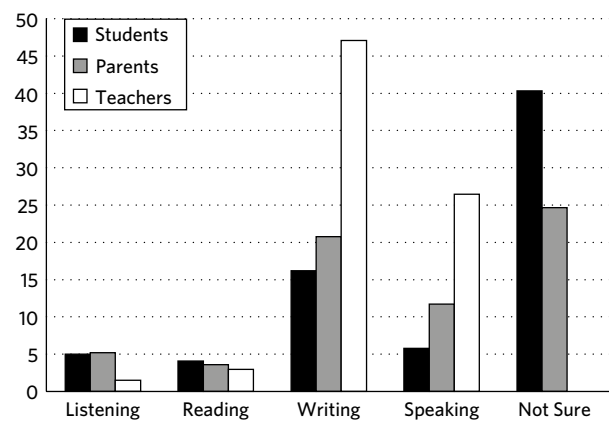
The most frequently occurring level in secondary school learners was B2 in all skills except for Listening, where B1 was the observed level. When focusing on the proportion of candidates at the B1/B2 levels, results show that, on average, about 60% of candidates are at the B1/B2 levels and that a large proportion of candidates (approximately 28%) achieve C levels for the skills of Speaking and Listening. These results reflect the bilingual context of Malta where the strong use of Speaking and Listening in everyday contexts and a variety of domains (Council of Europe 2015) is observed in the score results. On the other hand, findings also show that a proportion of learners are still at A1/A2 levels (17% for Listening, 24.7% for Reading, 26.8% for Writing and 9.7% for Speaking) and therefore below average compared to the target attainment levels of the English Language Syllabus for Secondary Schools (attainment levels 4-5 aligned to B1/B2 on the CEFR) (English Language Resource Centre 2007).

Compared to the results of the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) (European Commission 2012), in which 60% of Secondary learners were reported to achieve B2 level on the CEFR using the global average of the three skills of Reading, Listening and Writing (Jones 2013), the findings from the benchmarking project show that approximately 50% of learners are at Levels B2 and above, with 33% of Form 4 Secondary learners achieving Level B2 and a further 15% achieving C levels when the average of the three skills is used. Focusing on the skill of Speaking, results show that approximately 62% of Secondary learners have achieved CEFR Level B2 and above.

The Secondary score results were cross-checked against learners' self-reports of their weaknesses in English as well as parents' and teachers' perceptions. Similarly to the Primary results, Figure 3 shows that learners, parents and teachers all unanimously believe Writing to be the learners' weakest skill but unlike Primary results, this perception matches the score data where, compared to all other skills, Writing had the highest proportion of learners at pre-A1 and A1/A2 levels (26.8%).

Figure 3 also shows that similar to the Primary learners, a large percentage of Secondary learners (40%) selected the 'not sure' option when asked to identify their weaknesses in English. This is somewhat concerning; Secondary school learners should have more meta-cognitive awareness about their language ability and as a result more capacity to self-assess. Engaging learners in awareness-raising activities in their lessons can help learners identify their strengths and weaknesses and in turn, allow them to set appropriate language goals for themselves.

Figure 3: Weaknesses in English: stakeholder perceptions (%) – Secondary



School sector profiles

Figures 4 and 5 display the distribution of CEFR levels for each of the four skills by school sector for Primary and Secondary learners respectively. It is worth reiterating that a representative sample of learners from the different school sectors was included in the project. The figures show some differences amongst the school sectors in terms of learner performance; for example, for the skill of Listening at Primary level, approximately 67% of learners in State schools are at the A levels on the CEFR whereas these proportions are comparatively lower for Church (48%) and Independent (23%) schools. However, in the skill of Writing, Primary learners in State schools outperform learners in both Church and Independent schools, with a comparatively higher proportion of State learners at the B1/B2 levels (53%) compared to Independent (51%) and Church (37%) schools.

For the skill of Listening at Secondary Form 4, there is a higher proportion of learners at C1/C2 levels in Independent schools (49%) compared to Church (33%) and State (24%) schools. However, at the CEFR B levels, these proportions are much more similar across school sectors, with 45%, 55% and 58% of learners achieving B1/B2 levels at Independent, State and Church schools respectively. For the skill of Speaking, a similar proportion of learners at State (22%) and Church (27%) schools achieve C1/C2 levels on the CEFR. This proportion was highest for Independent schools, with 64%.

It is important to draw attention to the observed variations *within* each school sector where a distribution of performances is observed from A levels to C levels for State, Church and Independent schools. While there is a trend of higher performance at Independent schools compared to Church and State schools, no individual school sector is associated with a clustering of only high- or only low-performing learners.

Figure 4: Distribution of CEFR levels by school sector (%) - Primary

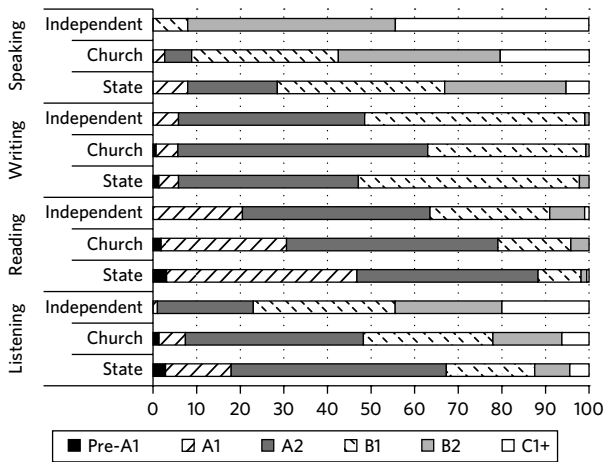
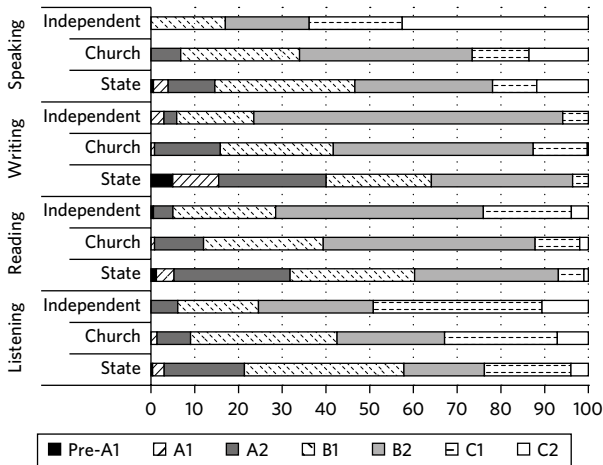


Figure 5: Distribution of CEFR levels by school sector (%) - Secondary



Gender profiles

Performances by boys and girls were also compared (see Tables 1 and 2 for Primary and Secondary levels). Results show that girls systematically outperform boys on all skills, with a higher proportion of boys at the lower CEFR levels compared to girls and an associated higher proportion of girls at the higher CEFR levels compared to boys. These differences are generally small, except for the skill of

Writing at Secondary level (Table 5) where 49% of girls are at B2 level compared to 31% for boys and approximately 11% of girls are at the C levels compared to 4% for boys.

One tentative explanation for the observed differences in performance of boys and girls relates to the differential rate of literacy development in the two groups, which has been supported in previous research (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974). Another possible explanation put forward by Chavez (2000) relates to the differences in the approach to learning that boys and girls have been found to have. There is a tendency for boys to focus more on competition and achieving mastery goals, resulting in less willingness to take risks in language classes (e.g. experimenting with the language) whereas girls emphasise co-operation and collaboration in their language learning, which is associated with better learning outcomes. While differences in performance of boys and girls are generally found to be small and not a cause for concern, it is nevertheless an area that can be monitored by MEDE to ensure that all learners receive the kind of support that they need in their language development.

Primary versus Secondary performance

The shift in language levels can be seen in the notable decrease in the proportion of learners at CEFR A levels in Primary and a higher proportion of learners achieving the higher B and C levels in Secondary stage.

The CEFR levels can roughly be seen as representing three important thresholds for success in a bilingual context: Level B1 represents low intermediate learners who are independent users of the language, but in a limited range of familiar contexts; Level B2 is widely recognised as the threshold for high intermediate, independent users of a language who can function in a second language in a range of familiar and unfamiliar contexts; Level C1 is seen as the level at which advanced language proficiency is displayed.

The high proportions of Secondary learners at B2 and C1+ levels generally suggest readiness for independent functioning in a variety of contexts for a large percentage of Secondary learners. However, there is still a considerable proportion of Secondary learners who are at the A levels (Listening=17%, Reading=24.7%, Writing=26.8%

Table 1: Distribution of CEFR levels by gender (%) - Primary

Skill	Gender	Pre-A1	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1+
Listening	Male	1.8	8.3	44.3	25.2	14.2	6.2
	Female	1.5	8.6	35.7	28.4	15.1	10.8
Reading	Male	2.4	35.4	43.9	15.2	2.7	0.4
	Female	1.5	29.7	45.8	17.4	5.2	0.4
Writing	Male	1.6	6.3	51.6	39.7	0.9	
	Female		3.5	46.0	48.8	1.7	
Speaking	Male		5.3	11.8	30.5	35.3	17.1
	Female		3.6	11.4	31.4	34.3	19.3

Table 2: Distribution of CEFR levels by gender (%) - Secondary

Skill	Gender	Pre-A1	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Listening	Male	0.2	2.6	17.3	35.3	19.7	20.0	4.9
	Female	0.3	1.8	12.8	33.4	21.3	24.9	5.7
Reading	Male	0.9	4.4	25.1	28.4	33.8	5.7	1.6
	Female	0.8	1.8	17.8	27.3	41.0	9.9	1.4
Writing	Male	3.8	9.3	27.5	23.6	31.0	4.4	0.3
	Female	1.0	2.0	11.4	25.5	49.0	11.1	
Speaking	Male	0.6		11.5	31.0	35.6	8.6	12.6
	Female		2.8	4.7	25.8	31.5	16.0	19.2

and Speaking=9.7%).³ While it is expected for a small proportion of the population to not go beyond the A levels, about one quarter of the learners have yet to become independent users of English, which may require further investigation. The NCF emphasises the need for a high level of proficiency in the bilingual context of Malta and for a variety of social, educational and employment purposes: 'in Malta it is considered paramount that young people are enabled to develop a high level of proficiency in English for active participation in society, success in education, employment and personal life, and the expression of identity' (Ministry for Education and Employment 2015:6) as well as in meeting the competitive demands of a 'globalised economic environment' (Ministry for Education and Employment 2014:41). These requirements roughly translate into a minimum English language level of B2 across the four skills for Secondary school leavers. It is recommended for MEDE to take into consideration the language levels established in the benchmarking project and the proportion of Secondary learners who have not yet progressed beyond the A1/A2 levels on the CEFR in reviewing and/or setting of language proficiency and attainment levels.

Attitudinal and background factors

In order to better understand the context of learning and teaching in Malta, learners, parents and teachers were asked to complete surveys which focused on key variables that might affect performance and levels of achievement. These included learners' level of exposure to English at school and outside of school, learner attitudes towards learning, and parental support and encouragement amongst others. The results from the different surveys that touch on similar themes are pulled together and integrated. As far as possible, results for Primary and Secondary levels are presented together for ease of comparison. The key findings which emerged as significant⁴ and meaningful are summarised in the next sections.

Respondent profiles

An overview of the distribution of learner, parent and teacher respondents by school sector and gender is provided in Table 3 and shows that the project has been successful in including a representative sample of survey respondents across the different school sectors. While there is a gender balance in the learner data, the distribution for parent respondents (over 82% female) suggests that mothers are primarily responsible for overseeing their children's education. The teacher data also shows that the majority of teachers (84%) are female. This might suggest the absence of male language role models for boys, which could also explain why boys were outperformed by girls.

Table 3: Distribution of survey respondents by school sector and gender

Participants	Grade	School sector			Gender	
		State	Church	Independent	Male	Female
Learners	P	40%	45%	15%	56%	44%
	S	51%	37%	12%	50%	50%
Parents	P	36%	47%	17%	15%	85%
	S	42%	50%	8%	18%	82%
Teachers	P	57%	31%	12%	15%	85%
	S	71%	22%	7%	16%	84%

P=Primary, S=Secondary

Exposure to English

It is a widely accepted premise both in the theoretical and practical language learning domains that exposure to a foreign language within the learning environment and/or the home environment plays a positive role in learning. The ESLC (European Commission 2012) found that greater use of English, by both learners and teachers, in the classroom was positively related to language ability (Jones 2013). The ESLC also found that parents' knowledge of the foreign language being studied and learners' exposure to it in

³ The results of candidates at pre-A1 and A1 levels were cross-checked against the special circumstances information provided by MEDE; approximately 1-5% of these candidates were listed as special circumstances candidates for the different skills.

⁴ For the chi-square analysis, the critical value to determine statistical significance was $p < 0.05$. Standardised residuals were also computed to identify which responses were contributing to the test of significance. Values larger than +2.0 or -2.0 were used to determine whether any particular response was showing a meaningful difference between groups.

the home or community was positively related to learner outcomes (Jones 2013). Therefore, in the surveys, we investigated the extent to which learners are exposed to English either in their home environment or at school.

Language spoken at home

When learners were asked to select their first language and language spoken at home, the distribution of responses was very similar. Therefore, only the results of language spoken at home are presented here. For Primary learners, there was a split between Maltese (approximately 50%) and English or bilingual (47%) with a small percentage (3%) selecting 'other'. The distribution was more skewed for Secondary learners; 71% of respondents selected Maltese as their first language, 27% selected English or bilingual and a small percentage (2%) selected 'other'⁵ which suggests the presence of linguistic minorities in the Maltese educational context. The parent reports of language spoken at home match the learner response data.

These findings suggest very different levels of exposure to English in the home environment, which can influence performance in schools; a finding that is illustrated in the following teacher comments:

Parents have limited knowledge in English language usage. This is reflected in their children. (Primary teacher, State school)

Due to the fact that most children have a Maltese speaking background most of them find difficulties to communicate in English all the time. (Primary teacher, State school)

English language levels of parents/guardians

Learners were also asked to indicate how well their parents/guardians spoke English on a Likert scale from 'cannot speak English' to can speak English 'very well', with a 'not sure' option. The results indicated that a strong majority of parents can speak English either 'very well' or 'moderately well'. However, as pointed out by the teachers in the previous section, a small minority of parents cannot speak English and 7–23% cannot speak English very well. When cross-checked with parents' self-reports of language proficiency, similar results were found. These findings once again show the disparity in learners' English language experiences in the home environment.

English language use outside of school

The strong majority of Primary and Secondary learners report using English 'very often' or 'sometimes' when they watch TV or films, use the internet, talk to tourists and read books. However, the distribution of responses for activities such as talking in English with family and friends is more varied, with a much larger proportion of learners reporting 'never' speaking English with family, friends, or other people in their home towns. Note that in order to triangulate the data, these responses were checked against parents' reports of how often their children engage in different activities in English.

It is also interesting to note that when looking at pattern of responses for watching TV or using the internet, there were no statistically significant differences between responses across school sectors. However, in terms of English language use with friends and family, those in Independent schools were more likely to select speaking English 'very often' compared to Church and State schools. This may reflect a different milieu, with learners in Independent schools having family and friends with whom they can speak English whereas learners at State schools may not have the same access to English speakers in their immediate social circle. This differential exposure to English outside of school is likely to have an impact on performance at school level and can contribute to widening the achievement gap between learners. Approximately 20% and 10% of Primary and Secondary learners respectively reported taking private English language lessons. When parents were asked to provide reasons for why their child takes private lessons, comments generally fell in the following categories⁶:

- improving Reading
- improving English (amongst other subjects such as Maths and Maltese)
- learning issues (e.g. dyslexia) and need for more support
- for the purpose of revision and exam preparation.

English language use in the classroom

The extent of English language use in the classroom was elicited on a 4-point Likert scale from 'never' to 'very often' from both learners and teachers. Findings show a clear trend of high English language use by the teachers, with decreasing levels of use by learners as they talk to the teacher and as they talk to each other, and also demonstrate a high level of consistency between what is independently reported by teachers and learners, which strengthens the findings from these surveys.

When looking at pattern of responses across school sectors, no statistically significant differences were found for English language use by teachers (as reported by learners). However, both Primary and Secondary learners in Independent schools were more likely to select speaking English to their teacher and other learners 'very often' compared to Church and State schools. This may reflect a different approach to English language instruction in the different school sectors and/or differences in the characteristics/profile of the learners who attend these schools.

Teachers report switching to Maltese only occasionally during English classes and their open comments suggest that code-switching practices take place mainly due to lower English ability levels of some learners or for classroom management purposes.

90% of Primary and Secondary learners reported studying other school subjects in English, with similar results for

⁵ The listed first languages are Chinese, Filipino, French, German, Greek, Italian, Libyan, Nigerian, Serbian and Spanish.

⁶ These comments refer to both Primary and Secondary students.

English language use as above. The trend of lower English language use by learners can also be explained by an open comment by one of the teachers, which sheds light on the complex socio-cultural roles of English and Maltese which can manifest themselves in the classroom:

English is still regarded as an artefact [sic] in which only snobs take pride. Most of the time students address me in Maltese – I either switch to French ‘threatening them’ that I can’t follow because we’re not speaking Maltese during class. Sometimes I am successful but most of the time I am bugged by their insistence to switch to their native tongue – typical answer but I’m Maltese so why do I need to learn English? They are not concerned by any answer which I provide and this may be possibly a backlash from our Maltese colonial attitude. Will have to consult Edward Said about this.

Another possible explanation could be that English lessons are too teacher dominated and thus limiting learners’ opportunities to use English and/or to speak English to other learners. Earlier findings suggested that paired and group activities do not occur as frequently as other activities in the classroom. Given that no classroom observations were carried out, this explanation is only tentative and would need to be further explored in the second phase of the project.

Opportunities to use English outside of the classroom (in schools)

Teachers were asked to indicate the extent to which their schools offer opportunities for learners to use English outside of the classroom (English clubs, English books, films, etc.). Results show that schools generally offer such opportunities although there is still a 10% disagreement rate. Note also that statistically significant differences were observed for teachers from Independent schools selecting ‘strongly agree’ for this statement compared to State and Church schools. This suggests that Independent schools may offer more English language support compared to other school sectors. These out-of-class activities create not only opportunities to use and practise English, but can also lead to the increased popularity of English and enhance learner motivation and positive attitudes towards English. This finding also links in with the previous section where it was shown that learners in Independent schools were more willing to speak in English in the classroom. These results may reflect differences in the school sectors such as background characteristics of learners enrolled in Independent schools. It is also likely that Independent schools emphasise these features such as additional English language support to differentiate their schools from the other sectors, in order to attract parents to their schools.

Attitudes towards learning English

The academic literature on second/foreign language acquisition has indicated that learners’ attitudes towards learning a language and the extent to which they perceive the language to be useful can influence learner behaviour, both in terms of the amount of effort exerted on language learning and the extent to which they persist with learning

it when it becomes difficult (Csizér and Dörnyei 2005, Gardner 1985, Oxford and Ehrman 1993). Learners’ beliefs about their own capacity to learn – often referred to as self-efficacy – have also been found to be positively associated with academic outcomes (Mills, Pajares and Herron 2006, Multon, Brown and Lent 1991). These constructs were elicited in the surveys.

Several statements in the surveys were designed to shed further light on the motivational factors that may be influencing learners’ language learning behaviour, such as instrumentality or milieu (Gardner 1985). Instrumental motivation refers to the utilitarian benefit or incentives associated with learning a language, such as getting a job or travelling, whereas the motivational dimension of milieu refers to the influence of learners’ immediate social environment (i.e. parents, family and friends), excluding teachers, in shaping their attitudes to learning. Learners who perceive family support for language learning are more likely to persist with it and more willing to work harder at it (Colletta, Clément and Edwards 1983, Gardner 1985). Although these two dimensions of motivation are not necessarily causally linked to learner outcomes because other variables such as instructional quality, learning opportunities and learner ability all play a crucial role, the results nevertheless provide an indication of how much effort learners are willing to place on learning.

Parental attitude towards education and learning, as well as the extent of support and encouragement, have also been identified as having an influence on their child’s level of attainment (see Bartram 2006, Gu and Saville 2012) and were therefore included in the surveys.

Teacher attitudes towards a language can influence learner behaviour in terms of effort expended on learning and learner success (Csizér and Dörnyei 2005, Dörnyei 2003, Horwitz 2001). Teacher beliefs in learners’ capacity to learn can also influence or reinforce learner attitudes towards a language (Bandura 1977, Mills, Pajares and Herron 2006, Multon et al 1991). Therefore, the value placed on learning English by the teachers and attitudes towards learning English were considered important constructs to evaluate. Key survey findings on these different constructs are summarised below.

Learner attitudes and self-efficacy

Approximately 90% of Primary and Secondary learners agreed or strongly agreed that (a) they like learning English, (b) learning English is important to them, (c) they believe they can learn English and (d) they know how to improve their English, all of which demonstrate positive attitudes towards English and high levels of self-efficacy in learning within the Maltese educational context.

These results are confirmed in both the teacher surveys, where 94% and 86% of Primary and Secondary teachers agree or strongly agree that their learners like learning English, and in the parent surveys, where 95% of Primary parents and 90% of Secondary parents agree or strongly agree that their child (a) enjoys learning English, (b) is

motivated to learn English and (c) believes he/she can learn English. Over 90% of parents also strongly agreed with the statement 'It is important to me that my child learns English', which further demonstrates the value placed on learning English in the home environment.

When comparing the pattern of responses for the above statements for Primary and Secondary learners, a statistically significant difference was found for the statements pertaining to enjoyment of learning English, importance of learning English and motivation to learn, with a smaller proportion of learners and parents opting for the 'strongly agree' option for Secondary learners compared to Primary learners. This might suggest a shift in learners' attitudes and/or enthusiasm towards language learning (or learning in general) as they grow older. This is in line with previous research (e.g. Lepper, Corpus and Iyengar 2005:192) that 'positive academic beliefs and behaviours gradually erode as children progress through the school system'. Research from other educational contexts points to the more fun-oriented nature of lessons in Primary school, where teaching can be done through games, 'whereas in secondary school, learners are dealing with more cognitively demanding tasks and there is the added dimension that learners at this age are developing their sense of self, which can affect their attitude and motivation' (Docherty, Gratacós Casacuberta, Rodríguez Pazos and Canosa 2014:8). Secondary learners may also start to think more seriously about the exams and their future, which could potentially detract from the joys of learning. The majority of Primary (92%) and Secondary (81%) learners nevertheless reported enjoying English language lessons at their schools, which suggests that the schools are successful in creating a positive environment for English language learning. The following comment by a Primary learner captures this:

1. My teacher love English. 2. I love English. 3. My friends love English. 4. Every one love English. (Primary learner, State school)

Note that a statistically significant difference was observed for the pattern of responses for the statement 'I enjoy English lessons at my school' across school sectors, where 'strongly agree' was selected more than expected in responses of Independent school learners compared to Church and State schools, with the widest gap observed between Independent and State schools. This was the case for both Primary and Secondary data.

Learner motivation

The results in Table 4 show that learners recognise the functional role and importance of learning English e.g. for employment and university entrance purposes, with the majority of both Primary and Secondary learners opting for the 'very important' option when evaluating these different reasons for learning English. Some of the open comments further illustrate the value placed on English:

I am learning English because I wish to be an Accountant and it requires English. (Secondary learner, State school)

For an amazing future. (Secondary learner, Independent school)

Everything. English is just very very important. Easy to communicate with people who can speak it. (Secondary learner, State school)

High levels of importance were also placed on other reasons, such as understanding English films, TV series and programmes. Open comments included 'understanding English music', 'talking to English people' and using English for 'social media', which indicate cultural interest in English.

Learning English to please parents/guardians was not perceived to be as important as the other reasons, although over 60% of Primary learners still regarded this as 'very important'. Not surprisingly, Secondary learners attributed far less importance to pleasing parents, suggesting that parental influence is becoming less important as learners become older.

Table 4: Reasons for learning English and perceived importance (%)

Learning English will . . .	Grade	Very Important	Important	Not Very Important	Not Important At All	Not Sure
. . . help me get into a good university.	P	81%	13%	3%	1%	2%
	S	77%	20%	2%	1%	1%
. . . help me get a good job.	P	83%	14%	1%	0%	1%
	S	81%	17%	1%	1%	0%
. . . make it easier for me to travel to other countries.	P	68%	21%	6%	2%	3%
	S	74%	23%	2%	0%	1%
. . . make it easier for me to talk to people who don't speak my first language (either online or in person).	P	70%	20%	6%	1%	3%
	S	77%	20%	1%	0%	1%
. . . help me use the internet to get information.	P	69%	22%	5%	2%	3%
	S	70%	26%	3%	1%	0%
. . . help me understand English films/TV series/programmes.	P	72%	19%	5%	2%	2%
	S	69%	25%	5%	1%	1%
. . . please my parents/guardians.	P	65%	22%	6%	2%	5%
	S	26%	33%	29%	8%	4%

P=Primary, S=Secondary

The strong majority of Primary and Secondary teachers (over 95%) agreed or strongly agreed that learning English is important to their learners. Parents of Primary and Secondary learners also place great importance on learning English for a variety of reasons but particularly for university entrance and employment purposes, with 98% selecting 'important' or 'very important' in their evaluation. Parents' open comments generally referred to the instrumental role of English for education and jobs, the ability to talk to relatives and family members and English as a universal language. Some illustrative examples are presented below:

It is imperative to learn English even for daily use e.g. to understand what is going around you Euro news and CNN. Ingredients on products are not in Maltese. Core subjects like physics, accounting, economics, sciences etc. are to be studied in English so how can you understand a subject if you do not hold a strong understanding and communication in English? (Mother of Primary learner, State school)

It is a universal language and our second official language. (Mother of Primary learner, State school)

I work in a bank and all communication through emails is always in English though we are Maltese. (Mother of Primary learner, State school)

Generally speaking, the results show great importance given to English from the perspective of all major stakeholders – learners, parents and teachers – in the Maltese context with evidence of high motivation for learning English for a variety of reasons.

Parental support and encouragement

In terms of the motivational dimension of *milieu*, the degree of parental support was elicited in the learner surveys. While 75% of Primary learners agreed with the statement 'My family encourages me to learn English', the disagreement rate (compared to other statements) was relatively high at 16%. This disagreement rate was much lower for Secondary learners at 5%; a tentative reason might be that Secondary learners are at a more crucial stage in terms of taking English exams, applying to university or entering the employment market where English plays a more important role, and as such learning English is more actively encouraged by families.

The extent of parental support in improving English outside of school (e.g. by helping with homework, or providing opportunities to use English) was elicited in the parent surveys. 90% of Primary parents reported providing this support 'sometimes' or 'very often', with 2% reporting never providing such support. The proportion of Secondary parents providing this support was lower, with 75% selecting 'sometimes' or 'very often' and 10% never providing such support.

The extent to which parents actively participate in their children's English education (participating in school activities, talking to teachers about progress, etc.) was also elicited from teachers. 35% of Secondary teachers reported that parents did not actively participate in their children's education compared to 12% for Primary learners.

This is also confirmed in the parents' survey results for the statement 'I know a lot about my child's English programme at school', which received relatively high disagreement rates of 17% and 25% for Primary and Secondary learners respectively. It may therefore be necessary for schools to allocate additional time to inform parents about the English programme at their school.

Teachers' open comments suggested that the degree of parental encouragement can vary widely for a number of reasons, including parents' educational background. Teachers also touched on the complex linguistic milieu in Malta where the choice of language has strong social connotations which can influence the extent of family encouragement in learning English:

Some parents tend to help and encourage their children, others just don't care or they are not able to do so due to social and educational issues. (Secondary teacher, State school)

There is a rift in the country between the Maltese speaking and the so called 'tal Pepe' [the English-speaking Maltese], some learners want to distance themselves from their Maltese heritage in an effort to appear more forward thinking, others insist on their heritage and resist English influence on their lives. This all depends on the parents' outlook and how they treat English in the homestead. It's a complicated linguistic milieu. (Secondary teacher, Independent school)

Schools can also ensure that they have established a clear language policy which could be used to guide and support parents in the most effective ways to help their children learn English. The absence of strong parental engagement with learning as children grow older was touched on in the teachers' open comments, where it was noted that parents can still play an important role in their children's education and that they should continue their support in Secondary school:

I believe that we need to educate parents to involve themselves more in what their children are doing as at times they believe as soon as they start attending Secondary school they no longer feel the need to follow on them doing homework and at times some students tend to feel lost or fall behind. (Secondary teacher, State school)

Teacher attitudes, pedagogic practices and professional development needs

In order to better understand the context of learning and teaching in Malta, and also, identify teachers' professional development needs, teachers at the two key school stages – Primary Year 5 and Secondary Form 4 – were invited to participate in the benchmarking project on a voluntary basis. The Senior Management Teams (SMT) at different schools, the Malta Union of Teachers and MEDE informed schools and teachers about the project and encouraged participation. A total of 132 teachers completed the teacher surveys. The following sections present the findings from the surveys. The data for all Primary and Secondary teachers is generally presented together, except

for statements for which patterns of responses were significantly different for the two school stages. Where relevant, data from parent and learner surveys which relate to classroom activities and practices and their attitudes is integrated to provide a more comprehensive picture of the learning environment.

Attitudes to teaching English

The survey results suggest that teachers have a positive attitude towards teaching English, with all but 1.4% of teachers reporting that they enjoy teaching English and are confident in their ability to plan appropriate English lessons for their learners, all of which can positively influence learning outcomes in the classroom.

The results of both learner and parent surveys suggest that teachers are generally successful in creating a positive environment for English language learning, as the majority of learners report enjoying their English lessons at school. The following learner comment illustrates this:

I believe I have a good English teacher. She takes pride in her work and explains well. She gives us hints and ideas to do better. (Secondary learner, State school)

These results are confirmed in parent surveys, with over 90% of parents agreeing or strongly agreeing that their child (a) enjoys his/her English lessons at school, (b) is making good progress in English and (c) likes his/her English teacher.

Key trends in pedagogical practices

The surveys included a section on teachers' pedagogical practices, and teachers were asked to report on the frequency of the listed activities – which represent examples of good practice in the classroom – throughout the school year.

Overall, the listed activities are reported to occur in some or most lessons, which is a positive finding. The four most frequently occurring practices are those related to assigning homework, linking the homework to classroom learning, reviewing learner homework as well as checking understanding of topics. Only 35% of teachers report explicitly stating the learning goals and objectives of the classroom in almost every lesson and a smaller percentage (29%) report providing a short summary of the previous lesson. These activities can direct learners to what they need to focus attention on in the classroom and to also help them recognise the link between different lessons, and should ideally occur in every lesson. Learners will not be able to develop autonomy if they are not clear on the objectives of their lessons. Results also show that only about 10% of teachers use paired/small group work in almost every lesson. It is therefore not surprising that more highly learner-centred activities such as asking learners to suggest topics for the classroom or to help plan classroom activities were reported to occur far less frequently in the lessons. The above findings suggest that classes may benefit from more activities that promote self-regulated learning. This is also in line with areas of prioritisation in the

NCF, which puts emphasis on promoting learner autonomy: 'given that one of the greatest effects on learning is when learners become their own educators (Hattie 2012), a pedagogy that cultivates learner autonomy should be cultivated' (Ministry for Education and Employment 2015:30). On the other hand, as noted by one of the State Secondary teachers, time restrictions and the demands of the curricula may be a limiting factor:

Although we have 6 lessons per week we have to prepare students for 2 O Levels (Lang & Literature) and we are restricted with time so there isn't enough time for students to suggest topics they'd like to discuss. By the time one sets up the laptop and does the class correction there isn't much time left for creativity etc. (Secondary teacher, State school)

The impression of time restrictions may be due to the shortening of lesson times, which may also be compounded by the recent introduction of co-ed in all State schools which may have led to new challenges for some teachers.

The statement 'Students work in groups based upon their abilities', where only 22% of teachers report incorporating this practice 'in almost every lesson' or 'in most lessons', suggests that teachers may not be recognising the importance of group work not only as an opportunity to practise speaking but also to talk about learning. Language is the tool learners use to think about a subject and talk about their thinking, which leads to cognitive development. When the response to this statement is combined with the high disagreement rate of 30% for the statement 'I find it easy to adapt lessons to cater for different student abilities in the same class', the findings suggest that teachers could benefit from more support in the area of differentiated instruction. This is particularly important in the Maltese educational context where the wide range of ability in the observed score data as well as the striking differences in levels of exposure to English would most likely translate into mixed-ability classes, and a key aspect of differentiated instruction is how to strategically group learners for different purposes to improve learning opportunities.

The above findings are restricted to teacher self-reports, and while classroom observations would have greatly enhanced the robustness of the findings, this was not possible in the first phase of the project. Nevertheless, in order to address this limitation, some of these teaching practices were repeated in the learner surveys as a different approach for triangulating the data.

Table 5 shows the learner statements paired with the associated teacher statements and the distributions of responses for the frequency of occurrence of different activities. Results generally show comparability across the two data sets, thus increasing confidence in the findings. One of the most noticeable differences in the table is the extent to which learners work on their own in completing classroom tasks, with learners reporting it to happen more frequently than teachers. While learners can certainly benefit from focused individual work, increasing well-planned, paired and group activities can enhance learner

Table 5: Triangulation of teaching practices

Frequency of English use in classroom	Source	In Almost Every Lesson	In Most Lessons	In Some Lessons	Never or Hardly Ever	N/A
The homework is useful for learning English.	Learners	65%	21%	9%	4%	1%
I link the English homework to what students are learning in class.	Teachers	76%	20%	2%	0%	2%
Our teacher gives us English homework.	Learners	65%	26%	9%	0%	0%
I give my students English homework.	Teachers	55%	39%	4%	2%	1%
Our teacher tells us what the learning goals of the lesson are.	Learners	56%	23%	17%	4%	2%
I explicitly state the learning goals/objectives/outcomes to the students.	Teachers	35%	40%	22%	2%	0%
At the beginning of the lesson, we revise the previous lesson.	Learners	28%	30%	28%	11%	3%
At the beginning of the lesson I present a short summary of the previous lesson.	Teachers	29%	33%	37%	2%	0%
The teacher asks us to think about how well we are learning and how we can improve.	Learners	42%	27%	18%	10%	3%
Students evaluate and reflect upon their own work.	Teachers	27%	34%	31%	6%	2%
I work on my own in completing classroom tasks.	Learners	44%	31%	20%	3%	2%
Students work on their own in completing classroom tasks.	Teachers	15%	37%	41%	6%	1%
The teacher walks around the classroom and helps me while I'm working.	Learners	38%	28%	24%	9%	2%
I work with individual students.	Teachers	14%	29%	45%	10%	2%
I work with other students (in pairs or groups) in completing classroom tasks.	Learners	23%	25%	39%	10%	2%
Students work in pairs or small groups in completing classroom tasks.	Teachers	10%	29%	60%	2%	0%
The teacher gives us a test or quiz to check our learning progress.	Learners	22%	22%	38%	16%	3%
I administer a test or quiz to assess student learning.	Teachers	10%	31%	53%	5%	2%

interaction and opportunities to use English, and also help promote learner autonomy.

Use of textbooks and technology in the classroom

90% of teachers report using English textbooks in their lessons, the majority of whom find them useful (84%). Nevertheless, textbooks are not the main focus of most lessons according to teachers, and over 98% of teachers use additional material/resources to supplement the textbooks and also express confidence in their ability to create these materials. Teachers' open comments on textbooks suggested that some textbooks may be too old, not suitable for all ability levels, not necessarily related to end-of-year exams and lacking practice materials, which explains why teachers frequently need to supplement the textbook with additional materials – something which they do not always find easy due to 'huge teaching loads and limited time'. These findings suggest that teachers may benefit from further training in textbook adaptation.

Learner and teacher perceptions of technology and its usefulness were also elicited in the surveys. Technology is reported to be used in most or almost every lesson by the majority of teachers. There is also a strong consensus (98%) amongst teachers in the usefulness of technology

for learning English and high levels of confidence in their ability to use technology for teaching English. Teachers also unanimously agree that their learners like using technology in the classroom, all of which highlight the important role that technology is increasingly playing in educational contexts.

Technology is generally viewed positively and sometimes in contrast to textbooks:

Technology makes lessons more attractive and students participate more, cooperate with each other, and learn through exploration. It's a resource which [makes] students interact more than when using textbooks. (Primary teacher, State school)

Other comments referred to the complementary use of different resources: 'I tend to be very eclectic in my choice of material, usually moving between basic textual resources and more digital ones.' Another comment referred to the usefulness of audio books and exposing learners to 'poems read out by their actual creators like Ian McEwan'. One teacher believed 'blogs' to be very useful for learning, subject to teaching loads.

However, the issue of lack of technological access or few opportunities for use were listed as problematic, and a

perceptive comment by a teacher also questioned the value of (current uses of) technology in enhancing learning:

Technology is yet to be introduced into the classroom in a way that actually aids the acquisition of language. Interactive white boards only serve to reiterate outdated concepts of teacher centred practice. Learners need the technology, not us. iPads are also meaningless in terms of providing linguistic acquisition for all, their interface is simple, but it lacks the input options for learners to input language in ways deemed necessary by the NCF. (Secondary teacher, Independent school)

The observation that education plus technology does not necessarily equate to better learning is echoed in a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2015) report on *Students, Computers and Learning*, where analysis of the PISA data suggested that where technologies are used in the classroom, the impact on performance is 'mixed, at best' (2015:15). An interpretation offered by OECD was that 'building deep, conceptual understanding and higher-order thinking requires intensive teacher-student interactions, and technology sometimes distracts from this valuable human engagement'. While the report is based on student achievement data in reading, mathematics or science, the findings certainly hold relevance for language learning. These are important issues to consider in terms of integrating technology in the classroom, and efforts should be made to incorporate 'pedagogies that make the most of technology' as 'adding 21st century technologies to 20th century teaching practices will just dilute the effectiveness of teaching' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2015).

It is therefore useful to consider how technology can best be incorporated in Maltese educational settings in ways that can increase opportunities to communicate in English and improve the provision of feedback. It is also important to offer professional development support to teachers in using these technologies in a linked-up fashion and in a manner that best supports the provision of individualised learning. Technologies can also have great potential in assisting teachers with differentiated instruction.

English literature in the classroom

While the above sections focused on general pedagogical practices in the English classroom, this section focuses specifically on the use of English literature in the classroom. This is in light of the emphasis placed on English literature in the Maltese Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) (Ministry for Education and Employment 2015:29) in which the importance of regularly exposing learners to a variety of literary texts is highlighted in order to 'enhance [learners'] sensitivity to language and fire their imagination'.

Approximately 90% of teachers believed that using literature can help learners learn English. While teachers generally believed that their learners were good at understanding English literature, there was a 17% disagreement rate. Teachers' positive sentiments towards teaching English through literature are captured in the following quotes:

If language is not experienced (and enjoyed) through literature, what would be the point of learning grammar? (Secondary teacher, State school)

Literature allows students to delve into the literary not factual world and allows them to widen their imagination. (Secondary teacher, Church school)

Students understand English literature but the challenging part is to get them to become critical learners and to analyse and discuss important themes. (Secondary teacher, State school)

My students really enjoy the literature lessons and it allows them to explore different aspects of the language. (Secondary teacher, State school)

The majority of Secondary learners (79%) agree or strongly agree that using English literature in the classroom helps them learn English. However, there was a 15% disagreement rate for the statement 'I believe I am good at understanding English literature', which is in line with the teacher evaluations. A close examination of learner open comments illustrates learners' mixed feelings towards English literature, with some enjoying these lessons:

It is my favourite part of the lesson and it is quite interesting to . . . and understand the thought of . . . it. (Secondary learner, State school)

I really love English literature and I think it's amazing how writers make use of the language and make it sound so lovely. (Secondary learner, State school)

Other learners, however, find the lessons more challenging or do not see their value:

I think it is boring + difficult. I don't know why we have to do it since I'm not going to study further on English. I wish it was an option. (Secondary learner, State school)

I don't think English Literature really helps us in life. (Secondary learner, Church school)

I personally think it's useless, because I only need grammar for my writing. It's not like I'm going to University and write an Essay on English Literature. (Secondary learner, Church school)

It therefore seems that, unlike learning English, not all learners attribute as much importance to studying English literature. These findings may also reflect a recent change in the teaching and assessment of literature which requires a more critical response from learners. These perceptions can nevertheless be changed by teachers through awareness-raising activities that outline the benefits of using English literature, e.g. in enhancing English language competence: Slater and Collie (1987:3) list 'valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement' as reasons for using literary texts. Other reasons include 'universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power and ambiguity' (Hişmanoğlu 2005:54).

Text selection is also a key consideration. Some of the teacher open comments referred to the need for texts which are both accessible in terms of language levels but also appropriate for different age groups.

Our school definitely is in need of a much wider choice of literature texts which cater for all abilities. This is especially useful and important when teaching literature to the lower tracks. (Secondary teacher, State school)

Finding the right texts which are accessible but not babyish is a difficulty as my students are 15 years old but their English is below elementary level. (Secondary teacher, State school)

Using graded readers linked to the relevant CEFR level of the learners is recommended in order to control for the difficulty levels of texts. Selecting literary texts which are relevant for young adults is also key in motivating learners. Another recommendation from a parent (in an open comment) was to 'make literature more accessible through arts e.g. theatre and drama'.

Attitudes to assessment and assessment practices

Assessment has multiple functions in education, including the measurement of achievement, public accountability and providing feedback to learners, and it also tells learners what we value or what they should pay attention to (Boud 2000). Learning-oriented assessment (LOA) represents an approach that recognises that the main function of

assessment, whether formative or summative in nature, is that it should improve learning (Carless 2009). LOA involves 'the collection and interpretation of evidence about performance so that judgements can be made about further language development' (Purpura 2004:236). This approach to assessment requires learners to be involved in assessment through self/peer assessment as well as by using the feedback they receive from different sources (e.g. teachers, peers, tests) to decide on what they need to do next. LOA practices have the potential to increase learner autonomy, motivation and engagement, and as such the use of LOA practices was investigated in the questionnaire. The next sections focus on stakeholder attitudes to assessment by bringing together the results of teacher, learner and parent surveys as well as the extent to which LOA practices are observed in the Maltese educational contexts based on teacher and learner reports.

Learner views on assessment

Results in Table 6 suggest a strong link between summative forms of assessment and learning from the perspective of learners, with the strong majority of both Primary and Secondary learners attributing an important role to tests

Table 6: Learner attitudes towards assessment

Statements	Grade	Strongly Agree & Agree	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Don't Know
Tests are important because they motivate me to study.	P	95%	4%	2%
	S	80%	18%	2%
Tests are important because they help me focus on what I need to learn.	P	95%	5%	1%
	S	87%	11%	2%
I really have to understand the lessons to get good marks in English.	P	95%	4%	1%
	S	82%	15%	2%
I work harder in class when preparing for a test.	P	92%	6%	2%
	S	82%	15%	4%
It is clear to me what I am supposed to learn.	P	95%	3%	2%
	S	84%	10%	5%
It is clear to me what I will be tested on.	P	88%	8%	4%
	S	82%	12%	6%
It is clear to me how what I am supposed to learn fits in with what I will be tested on.	P	88%	6%	6%
	S	81%	11%	8%
The feedback the teacher gives me during class helps me perform better at the end-of-year exams.	P	92%	5%	3%
	S	87%	11%	3%
The annual exams are related to the work we do in the classroom throughout the year.	P	90%	5%	5%
	S	89%	6%	4%
Taking English tests helps me understand my strengths and weaknesses.	P	88%	9%	4%
	S	89%	9%	3%
Judging my own work and/or the work of other students in class is useful for learning English.	P	77%	16%	7%
	S	72%	21%	7%
I am able to judge the quality of my work and the work of other students in my class.	P	75%	15%	11%
	S	75%	18%	7%
I worry about taking English tests.	P	53%	43%	4%
	S	54%	41%	4%

P=Primary, S=Secondary

in motivating them to study harder, focusing them on what they need to learn and making them work harder in class, despite half of the respondents reporting feeling worried about taking English tests. Note that the proportion of Primary learners who agree with the statements is consistently higher than Secondary learners, which might suggest a shift in attitude towards exams at the different school stages, which possibly reflects the higher-stakes nature of tests at higher levels. Although assessment within Malta has a formative component in providing feedback to students and parents (e.g. half-yearly exams), some exams are used for determining the banding/setting of the Primary and Secondary English classes which may explain why learners indicate some anxiety about examinations.

Learners also notice the relationship between annual exams and work that is done in the classroom, and attribute a strong positive role to teacher feedback in influencing their performance. There is also evidence of learner awareness of the diagnostic value of tests, with the majority of learners agreeing with the statement *'Taking English tests helps me understand my strengths and weaknesses'*. In light of these positive attitudes, it is important to build a continuous assessment programme that takes advantage of these positive attitudes by encouraging student reflection based on results and helping learners identify next steps in their learning programme.

The highest proportion of disagreement is observed for statements relating to the usefulness of self and peer assessment for learning English as well as learners' ability to carry out this evaluation. The percentage of Primary (11%) and Secondary (7%) learners selecting the 'don't know' option in terms of their ability to self/peer assess confirms earlier findings regarding weaknesses in self-regulating learning.

Parent views on assessment

Parental attitudes towards different forms of assessment were also elicited in the surveys. No statistically significant differences were found between patterns of responses of parents of Primary and Secondary school learners. It is interesting to note that the statement *'It is important that my child is able to assess his/her own progress'* elicited the highest agreement rate from parents, indicating the value placed on self-assessment and increasing children's autonomy from the parents' perspective. Similar to learners, parents also view the diagnostic role of tests in helping children understand their strengths and weaknesses. Results suggest a positive attitude towards summative assessment in increasing motivation and focusing learning, and the low agreement rate for the statement *'In general, preparing for tests will not help my child's English improve'* shows that parents also see a link between summative forms of assessment and learning.

Parents' open comments on assessment touched on the need for more feedback, past papers, model answers and holistic assessment of English (not limited to testing Writing). It should be pointed out that summative assessment of all four skills takes place regularly in both

Primary and Secondary stages. English literature is also assessed at Secondary school and feedback is provided on all components. Nevertheless, parents emphasised the need for assessment at more regular intervals (rather than annually or bi-annually) as an efficient approach in reducing cramming and test-related anxiety, and encouraging regular work and studying. There was also evidence of mixed attitudes towards tests:

In my opinion it's important for my child to have tests and assessments in English to see where she stands. (Father of Secondary learner, Church school)

I do not believe that exams reflect a child's true capability or potential in any subject. (Father of Primary learner, Church school)

Teacher views on assessment and LOA practices

Results show that approximately 90% of teachers attribute a positive and important role to tests in motivating learners to study, helping them focus on what they need to learn and improving learning in general. Teachers in general have a positive attitude towards summative forms of assessment and annual exams in supporting learning. While the majority of teachers (83%) believe the annual exams to be at an appropriate level for their learners, further analyses of responses by school sector suggested that teachers in State schools were less likely to 'strongly agree' with this statement compared to Church and Independent schools. This might reflect different assessment policies across school sectors; the State annual exams are set centrally and include an evaluation process whereby teachers are invited to send in their feedback, whereas Independent and Church schools set their own school exams.

It is interesting to note that while half of the teachers believe that learners see summative assessment as jumping through hoops, the learner results suggested otherwise, with the strong majority of both Primary and Secondary learners reporting feeling motivated by tests. One of the teacher comments refers to the double-edged sword of summative assessment in not only motivating learners but also creating test-related anxiety:

Exams do motivate students to study harder but it is also true that they bring a lot of stress on students as well as parents. (Secondary teacher, State school)

The majority of teachers (95%) strongly agree or agree that learners should assess their own work. However, this proportion is markedly lower for peer evaluation (58%); this result should be further examined, given the importance placed on self/peer assessment in the LOA framework in promoting learner autonomy.

Teachers also report engaging in LOA practices such as informing learners about the criteria on which they will be evaluated and providing feedback on learner strengths and weaknesses following tests. These results were confirmed in the learners' reports of classroom practices and therefore triangulate the teacher self-reports. A teacher's open comment also referred to alternative ways of assessment in the classroom with a focus on learning:

I believe that testing and exams should not be the centre of teaching. Children should be made more aware of the need to learn English. I can still assess my pupils by giving them short tasks to perform such as writing a story or engage in a discussion. (Primary teacher, State school)

Lastly, the majority of teachers (86%) report developing their own classroom tests and also express their confidence in their ability to design appropriate classroom tests. Given the common practice of test development by teachers, an assessment literacy course could greatly benefit teachers in designing high-quality tests that best support learning.

Improvements to English language learning and teaching

Lastly, learners, parents and teachers were asked to describe the one thing that they believed would improve the learning and teaching of English. The most recurrent themes are summarised below:

- providing more resources (textbooks, books, films) in schools and more opportunities to use English outside of class (e.g. film clubs, school trips)
- implementing full English immersion in classes, with a consistent language policy across school sectors
- teacher training that focuses on bilingual education and differentiated instruction
- motivating learners through extra-curricular activities, use of educational technologies, integrating literature with English learning and introducing a wider variety of activities (e.g. games, videos and quizzes)
- increased (and better) use of educational technologies
- revising textbooks, making them more interesting and relevant to the Maltese context
- reducing class sizes to allow more teacher-learner interaction
- increase in paired and group work
- increased feedback from teachers and monitoring of learner progress
- more regular revisions for exams
- less emphasis on final tests/exams and more focus on formative assessment.

Factors influencing performance

A multi-level analysis (hierarchical linear modelling – HLM) was performed on the score data in order to explore whether performance of Primary and Secondary learners in the Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking⁷ tests varies by a number of different individual (e.g. gender, first language) and grouping (e.g. school sector) variables. Given the sample size, there was a limit on the number of

variables that could be entered into the model so factors hypothesised to have a strong impact on performance (e.g. school sector, level of exposure to English, gender) were included in the analysis. The following is a summary of the results.

Primary

- **School sector:** in the skills of Reading, Listening and Speaking, learners in Independent schools performed better than learners in State schools. A different trend was observed for the skill of Writing: learners in State schools outperformed those in Church schools, which was statistically significant.
- **Gender:** in the skills of Reading, Listening and Speaking, there was no statistically significant difference between performance of male and female learners, although girls performed slightly better than boys. In the skill of Writing, girls outperformed boys with a statistically significant difference.
- **Language spoken at home:** results showed that those learners who report speaking both English and Maltese at home (bilinguals) perform significantly better on the Listening and Speaking exams compared to those who report only speaking Maltese at home. No statistically significant difference was observed for performance on Reading. Those learners who had reported 'other' as the language spoken at home (i.e. linguistic minority learners) performed significantly worse than Maltese L1 learners on the Writing exam.
- **Speaking English with family:** learners who reported speaking English 'very often' with their family performed significantly better in the Listening exam than those who reported 'never' speaking English with their families.
- **Use of technology in the classroom:** learners who reported using technology in the classroom in 'some/most/almost all' lessons performed significantly better than those classes where technology was 'never/hardly ever' used for Listening and Speaking.
- **Paired and group work in the classroom:** learners who reported working with other learners in most lessons performed significantly better than learners who 'never' or 'hardly ever' participated in pair/group work for Speaking and Reading.

Secondary

- **School sector:** no statistically significant effects were found for school sector for the skills of Listening and Reading, although a trend of higher performances in Independent schools compared to Church and State schools was observed. However, learners in Church schools outperformed those in State schools on the Writing exam and this difference was statistically significant.

⁷ The results of HLM analysis on Secondary Speaking scores are not reported because only 67 observations were available in the data matrix (due to missing values in the dependent and explanatory variables).

- **Gender:** girls outperformed boys in all three skills of Listening, Reading and Writing, although this difference only reached statistical significance for Reading and Writing.
- **Language spoken at home:** unlike the Primary results, no statistically significant differences were found for the effects of the language spoken at home, although a trend of higher performances by those who either use both English and Maltese or just English at home compared to those who only use Maltese in the home environment was observed.
- **Speaking English with family:** learners who reported speaking English with their family 'not very often' performed slightly better in the Writing exam than those who reported 'never' speaking English with their family.

Recommendations

Improving language levels and narrowing the achievement gap amongst learners

Findings from the benchmarking study generally showed high levels of English language performance by learners; a large proportion of Primary Year 5 learners were found to be at the B1/B2 levels, with Speaking as their strongest skill and Reading as the weakest skill. A high proportion of Secondary learners achieved CEFR Levels B2 and above across the four skills, which generally suggests readiness for independent functioning in a variety of contexts. However, a considerable proportion of Secondary learners were still found to be at A1/A2 levels and yet to become independent users of English. Focusing on school sector, some variations were observed amongst the different sectors in terms of learner performance, with a trend of higher performances by Independent schools compared to Church and State schools, although there were exceptions to this trend. Variations were also observed *within* each school sector where a wide range of performances was observed from A levels to C levels for State, Church and Independent schools. In other words, no individual school sector was associated with a clustering of only high- or only low-performing learners. Lastly, the wide range of observed CEFR levels from pre-A1 to C2 reflects a complex educational context and linguistic milieu in which language levels vary quite widely in the population. In light of these findings, the following recommendations are suggested for improving language levels and narrowing the achievement gap between learners:

- MEDE to take into consideration the language levels established in the benchmarking project in reviewing and/or setting of language proficiency/attainment levels.
- It is important for the Ministry to investigate why a proportion of Secondary learners have not progressed beyond CEFR A1/A2 levels (26.8%, 24.7%, 17% and 9.7% for the skills of Writing, Reading, Listening and Speaking respectively) and are yet to become independent users of English. An understanding of the reasons may allow

MEDE to identify a variety of measures to best support this group of learners in their language learning journey. The results would also need to be taken into account in ensuring that the LOF has the necessary procedures in place to support teachers in addressing the needs of lower-level learners and in helping them improve their language proficiency. Note that a number of interventions have already been put in place by the Department of Curriculum Management within the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) and include the introduction of Core Curriculum Programme (CCP) and Alternative Learning Programme (ALP).

- Benchmarking results suggested Reading to be the weakest skill at Primary Year 5. This is likely to be associated with literacy levels. More emphasis on quality experiences at Primary school and in Reading (literacy) is therefore recommended. These efforts can support the work of the National Literacy Strategy, 2014, which is committed to improving literacy in Maltese and English through a number of initiatives.
- The wide range of observed abilities from A1 to C1 and/or above within classrooms and the striking differences in levels of exposure to English outside the classroom and in the home environment reflect the bilingual context of Malta. In order to reduce the achievement gap between learners, it is important for schools to offer additional support and opportunities for practising English outside of the classroom, e.g. English clubs, libraries, school events or online activities. Providing parents with straightforward and non-technical information on how people learn languages, the importance of exposure to English in the home environment and its positive effects on learning along with useful tips on what this means for them as parents and how they can support their children may also prove useful.
- The wide range of observed abilities from A1 to C1 within classrooms means that teachers can greatly benefit from training in differentiated instruction and techniques for teaching mixed-ability classrooms; a professional development need which was heavily emphasised in the teacher surveys.
- Steps should be taken to reduce variations in performance across the school sectors. Sharing of best practices can be one solution. The teacher surveys suggested a strong collaborative learning community amongst the Maltese teachers. This can be built upon by bringing teachers from different school sectors together, arranging peer observations between schools so that examples of good practice could be shared. Language policies which are considered effective at the school level (e.g. Content and Language Integrated Learning) could be shared in the teaching community in an effort to reduce achievement gaps between learners and within school sectors.
- Girls systematically outperformed boys at both school levels. While these differences in performance

were generally found to be small and not a cause for concern, it is nevertheless an area that can be monitored by MEDE to ensure that all learners receive the kind of support that they need in their language development. Boys can also benefit from having more male language role models in increasing their motivation to learn English.

Improving learner motivation and attitudes towards English

Generally speaking, the survey results showed great importance given to English from the perspective of all major stakeholders – learners, parents and teachers – in the Maltese context, with evidence of high levels of motivation for learning English for a variety of reasons. However, a few issues such as the socio-cultural role of English in Malta, the extent of parental support at different school stages and attitudes towards English literature emerged from the surveys. The following recommendations are made in light of the findings:

- Teachers in Malta touched on the complex linguistic milieu in Malta where the choice of language in daily life has strong social connotations. This can influence English learning, with some learners positively associating the use of English with the modern world while others resist the English influence in their lives as they negatively associate it with Malta's colonial past. This can affect attitudes towards learning and their motivation to learn English or Maltese, and care should be taken to address (any) such stereotyping at schools sensitively in order to reduce any negative attitudes towards language learning.
- More parental involvement in learner education (particularly for Secondary learners) was emphasised by teachers. It is therefore recommended for schools to encourage more parental involvement and raise awareness of the important role of parents in increasing their children's motivation. For example, parents could be directed to useful online sources such as Cambridge English TV (www.youtube.com/user/cambridgeenglishtv) or the Cambridge English website, which offers tips and advice for parents in supporting and motivating children's language learning (www.cambridgeenglish.org/learning-english/parents-and-children/information-for-parents), or other similar online materials. Schools can arrange for and/or allocate more time for face-to-face information sessions with parents about the English programme and the language policies adopted at their children's school or engage with parents through more regular communication and via different media, e.g. school website, texts, emails or tweets.
- While learners (and parents) at both school stages placed great importance on learning English, attitudes towards learning English literature were more mixed. These perceptions can nevertheless be changed by teachers through awareness-raising activities that outline the benefits of using English literature, e.g. in enhancing English language competence. It is recommended for teachers to select texts which are both accessible in terms of language levels but also appropriate for different age groups. Using graded readers linked to the relevant CEFR level of the learners is recommended in order to control for the difficulty levels of texts. Selecting literary texts which are relevant for young adults is also key in motivating learners.

- Teachers emphasised the need for more resources (e.g. textbooks, books, films) in schools and more opportunities to use English outside of class (e.g. film clubs, school trips). Out-of-class activities not only create opportunities to use English but can also lead to its increased popularity and enhance learner motivation and positive attitudes towards English.

Improving pedagogic and assessment practices and promoting learner autonomy

Survey results generally suggested that teachers have a highly positive attitude towards teaching English and report high levels of confidence in their ability to plan appropriate English lessons for their learners, all of which can positively influence learning outcomes in the classroom. Findings showed that a number of different pedagogic activities – which represent examples of good practice in the classroom – occur in some or most lessons, which is a positive finding. However, some more learner-centred activities did not occur very regularly in the classrooms. Technology was reported to be used frequently in the classrooms and was viewed positively by learners and teachers alike, although lack of technological access, opportunities for use as well as the extent of technology's effectiveness in enhancing learning were listed as possible issues. In light of the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- Results showed that only about one third of teachers explicitly state the learning goals and objectives of the lesson while about 10% use paired/small group work in almost every lesson. Highly learner-centred activities such as asking learners to suggest topics for classroom lessons or to help plan classroom activities are reported to occur far less frequently. Learners will not be able to develop autonomy if they are not clear on the objectives of their lessons or if they are not regularly engaged in peer interaction and group work as well as other learner-centred activities. Altogether these findings suggest that classes may benefit from more activities that encourage self-regulated learning. Classes may therefore benefit from more paired and group work which is monitored and supported by the teacher in order to increase the effectiveness of such activities. Another suggestion is to incorporate more online resources and activities which can be completed outside of the classroom in order to promote self-regulated learning. Some schools in Malta are encouraging their students to reinforce their learning on the Virtual Learning Environment and through digital lessons. If proven to be useful, these practices can be more widely shared amongst schools.

- Results suggested the absence of self and peer assessment skills amongst learners. It is recommended for teachers to include more awareness-raising activities in the lessons in order to help learners identify their strengths and weaknesses and in turn, allow them to set appropriate language goals for themselves. As an example, teachers can introduce the concept of learning contracts where students, with their teachers' support, set their own language goals and outline actions which they will take to achieve these goals. Teachers should also be trained to support learners in effective self and peer assessment skills as part of their teacher training.
- Technology is used frequently in the classrooms and it is viewed positively by learners and teachers alike, although lack of technological access, opportunities for use as well as the degree of the technology's effectiveness in enhancing learning were listed as possible issues. When integrating technology in the classroom, it is important not only to ensure access to all but also to incorporate 'pedagogies that make the most of technology' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2015). It is therefore recommended for schools and teachers to consider how technology can best be incorporated in Maltese educational settings in ways that can increase opportunities to communicate in English and improve the provision of feedback. It is also important to offer professional development support to teachers in using these technologies in a linked-up fashion and in a manner that best supports the provision of individualised learning. Technologies can also have great potential in assisting teachers with differentiated instruction. One of the areas of professional development that teachers rated as having high levels of impact was 'individual or collaborative research on a topic of professional interest'. Technology and how to best incorporate it in the Maltese educational contexts can be one such area of focus for action research and can be promoted by the Ministry. In order to encourage collaborative research, teachers should also be presented with incentives such as the opportunity to publish papers.
- Classroom test development was found to be commonly practised by teachers. An assessment literacy course can therefore greatly benefit teachers in designing high-quality tests that best support learning.
- The scope of the current project did not allow for the inclusion of more qualitative methods such as classroom observations in examining teaching practices in the classrooms. Future phases of the project could include such methods in order to more accurately capture what goes on in the classrooms and to illustrate a richer picture of the teaching and learning context in Malta.

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