

Perception versus Performance: A Study on Attitudes Towards, and Performance in Maltese and English

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Abstract

The National Curriculum Framework (2012) establishes ‘the knowledge, skills, competences, attitudes and values’ that a learner is expected to have at the end of the Junior Years Cycle (Year 6). Amongst the NCF’s projected outcomes is the goal of seeing that children are able to competently make use of ‘the range of age-appropriate language skills in both Maltese and English’, whilst enabling children to ‘appreciate and promote their Maltese culture and heritage’, as well as appreciating their ‘European and global contexts’ (NCF 2012, p.21).

This paper deals with one of a series of questions laid out in a questionnaire which formed part of a quantitative survey with 987 Grade V Primary school children from State, Church and Private schools. This quantitative large-scale survey was but one section of a tripartite study which included in its totality, two large-scale quantitative surveys with Grade V primary students and subsequently Grade V parents respectively, as well as a qualitative study with Grade V teachers. The research aimed not only to gauge attitudes towards bilingualism in the Maltese Islands from the viewpoint of primary school children, but also to establish what the perceptions towards and proficiency in the two official languages of the Maltese Islands; namely, Maltese and English, were. Moreover, this study is the first of its kind to carry out research on such a large-scale, not just limiting itself to one group of respondents, but rather seeking to document the attitudes and opinions towards bilingualism as seen from the perspective of the primary school sector, from the point of view of the major stakeholders involved: students, parents and teachers.

Hence this paper focuses on the results obtained when primary school respondents were asked to rate their written Maltese and English proficiency. These perceptions are then compared to an actual impromptu written task in the two languages, thus serving as a gauge of written bilingual proficiency.

Keywords: Bilingual education, bilingualism, primary education, Maltese and English

Student respondents' written Maltese self-assessment

Considering that Maltese is the L1 for the majority of the population, it is only 22% of Maltese primary students who perceive themselves as being 'very good' at writing at what is essentially their native tongue. Only 22% of this entire sample of 987 students regard their written skills as being 'very good.' A more cautious group of 38% only go as far as rating themselves as having a 'good' proficiency; yet almost just as many, are quite uncertain of their Maltese written skills. In fact, 31% cautiously state that they would rate their written Maltese skills as being only 'so - so.' A total of 9% rated themselves as being either 'bad' or else 'very bad' at written Maltese. Therefore, the primary question should not simply concern itself with determining whether it was Maltese or English that was suffering a decline, but rather become very much aware of the fact that there was yet another discrepancy between the standards of oracy and literacy in the native language itself.

As shown in Table 1, at least 28.3% State school students seem to be the ones who are most confident about their Maltese written skills, whilst a further 39.3% also top the league, perceiving themselves to have 'good' written skills in their L1.

Table 1: Students' written Maltese self-assessment by Type of School

| | State | Church | Private | Total |
|------------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| Very Good | 129 28.3% | 62 15.4% | 28 24.1% | 219 22.5% |
| Good | 179 39.3% | 156 38.8% | 35 30.2% | 370 38% |
| So - so | 125 27.4% | 148 36.8% | 29 25% | 302 31% |
| Quite bad | 16 3.5% | 24 6% | 15 12.9% | 55 5.6% |
| Very Bad | 7 1.5% | 12 3% | 9 7.8% | 28 2.9% |
| Total | 456 100% | 402 100% | 116 100% | 974 100% |

$$\chi^2 (8) = 52.79, p = 0.000$$

As many as 27.4% are not so confident about their written skills, leading them to rate their written skills as being 'so - so' whilst 5% view their skills as being 'quite bad' (3.5%) or 'very bad' (1.5%). It must be said however that out of the three school types, it seems that State school students are the ones who seem to be the most confident with their written Maltese skills. There were more Private school students (24.1%) than Church schools respondents (15.4%) who rated themselves as being 'very good.' An additional 30.2% Private school respondents suggest that their skills are 'good.' The percentage of those who chose the 'so - so' option - 25%, is very similar to the percentage that this option garnered by State school students. In contrast to State school students however, 12.9% were quite forthcoming in their self-assessment and perceived their skills as being 'quite bad.' In line with general assumptions, Private schools respondents are those who have the greatest concerns with Maltese written skills. Seven point eight percent (7.8%) think of themselves as being 'very bad.' Therefore this would mean that a total of 20.7% Private school respondents consider their written Maltese skills as being 'quite bad' or 'very bad.' This study revealed that Church school students were the ones who were the most forward in revealing that they were the least confident about their Maltese writing skills. Only 15.4% rated themselves as being 'very good' at Maltese, 38,8% rated themselves as being 'good' at it, whilst a similar percentage of 36.8% would only go as far as saying that their written skills were 'so - so.' A further 9% thought of themselves as being 'Quite bad' (6%) or 'Very Bad' (3%). This self-assessment comes across as being rather surprising considering that Church school respondents have been fairly consistent in describing themselves as the recipients of a relatively balanced exposure to both Maltese and English.

Students' written English self-assessment

The percentage of 40.2% of Maltese primary students whose rating was recorded in this study perceive themselves as being rather 'very good' at written English (Table 2).

Table 2: Students' written English self-assessment

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|--------------------|-----------|---------------|
| Very Good | 394 | 40.2% |
| Good | 368 | 37.6% |
| So – so | 180 | 18.4% |
| Quite bad | 24 | 2.5% |
| Very Bad | 13 | 1.3% |
| No response | 8 | 0%* |
| Total | 987 | 100% |

This is followed by 37.6% of the total student sample who rate themselves as being 'good' at this. A further 18.4% are less sure of their written skills whilst almost 4% perceive their written English skills as being 'Quite bad' (2.5%) or 'Very bad' (1.3%). Table 3 presents a Chi Square cross-tabulation analysis by type of school.

Table 3: Students' written English self-assessment by Type of School

| | Type of School | | | |
|------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------|----------------------------|
| | State | Church | Private | Total |
| Very Good | 144 31.6% | 187 46.4% | 63 52.5% | 394 40.2% |
| Good | 171 37.5% | 151 37.5% | 46 38.3% | 368 37.6% |
| So – so | 113 24.8% | 58 14.4% | 9 7.5% | 180 18.4% |
| Quite bad | 18 3.9% | 4 1% | 2 1.7% | 24 2.5% |
| Very Bad | 10 2.2% | 3 1% | 0 0% | 13 1% |
| Total | 456 100% | 403 100% | 120 100% | 979 100% |

$$\chi^2 = (8) = 51.33, p = 0.000$$

Percentages for all three school types are very similar when considering all those who chose to rate their skills in the second category 'Good.' Approximately 38% of State, Church and Private schools regard their skills as being 'good.' However, discrepancies lie in the ratings provided by the three school types in the middle scale of rating, where more State school students (24.8%) seem to be less sure of their written L2 skills.

Fewer Church school students in fact seem to think less of their written skills with 14.4% opting for this choice. Only 7.5% of Private school respondents however seem to be the least sure about their English writing skills.

Success is not only dependent on one's ability to express oneself fluently when speaking a language, but is also dependent on one being able to express one's thoughts through the written medium. However, the fact that there is rather high percentage of students who at this stage in their education are already somewhat unsure of their skills, should direct educators towards evaluating how this gap may be bridged. Exposure to the language in the home domain, as well as exposure to the target language in the school domain, from the very first stages of primary is essential. If a language such as English is not the language that is being supported

through use in the home domain, then quality exposure to the language through the media could very well help to begin to address these gaps.

Moreover, if the dominant L1 is being supported in the home and the community domain, then it follows that the school domain must endeavour to make up for that lack of additive linguistic environment and create a system which moulds itself and addresses the particular needs of the student, placing that student in a target language immersion system to help the student acquire the language through play and interaction both with the teacher and with class peers.

Language is the most essential and most basic means of expressing oneself and the inability to express oneself clearly and coherently becomes a burden which students carry throughout their lives not only in primary and secondary school, but throughout their academic and professional careers. A culture of simply ‘making do’ is not enough if present and future generations are to find stable positions in the employment sector. What this calls for is a carefully co-ordinated position where language exposure is to be given primary importance so as to enable children to truly grow in an additive bilingual environment.

Regardless of the standards of the past, good or bad, one must focus on a bilingual education system that adapts itself to the needs and sometimes failing to adapt to a system. As shown in Table 4 only 22.5% of respondents perceive their skills as being ‘Very good’, whilst a further 38% regard their written Maltese language skills as being ‘Good.’

Table 4: Comparative analysis of students’ written Maltese and written English self-assessment

| Written Maltese | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|------------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Very Good | 219 | 22.5% |
| Good | 370 | 38% |
| So – so | 302 | 31% |
| Quite bad | 55 | 5.6% |
| Very Bad | 28 | 2.9% |
| N/A | 13 | 0%* |
| Total | 987 | 100% |

| Written English | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|------------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Very Good | 394 | 40.2% |
| Good | 368 | 37.6% |
| So – so | 180 | 18.4% |
| Quite bad | 24 | 2.5% |
| Very Bad | 13 | 1.3% |
| N/A | 8 | 0%* |
| Total | 987 | 100% |

Of most concern is the 31% who describe their written Maltese skills as being 'so-so', coupled with 8.5% who consider the written Maltese skills as being 'Quite bad' or 'Very bad.' As the situation stands at the moment, Maltese is considered one of the core subjects necessary for students to progress from a secondary to a post-secondary institution.

Proficiency in oracy is of course invaluable, but in the current education system accuracy at the level of literacy is also essential, particularly because there are certain examinations which students must sit for in Maltese and others which students must sit for in English. Proficiency in written language is essential if one is to progress up the academic ladder. According to the way the curriculum is set at the moment, Maltese is a passport to post-secondary institutions.

The student respondents in this study are by far more confident of their written English language skills with 40.2% rating their skills as being 'very good', as opposed to the 22.5% who chose this same rating for Maltese. A further 37.6% consider themselves to be quite 'good.' All this augurs well for English. At least the perception towards the medium which is essential for progress in the academic and professional world is relatively good. However, there are those 22.2% who are either unsure of their written English skills (18.4%) as well as others who perceive themselves to be quite poor in this area.

The last exercise in the eight-page questionnaire presented to respondents, required the students to convey ideas about their goals for the upcoming holiday season. Having guided the students throughout the questionnaire, the researcher explained she was an inquisitive being who wanted to know as much detail about what they liked to do in their holidays and therefore it would be great if they could write four full sentences detailing what their adventurous exploits during the summer or wintery season would turn out to be. Students were invited to view this as a game, whereby the researcher would understand more about their habits through the written medium. The students were told that the researcher would have been so glad if students could spontaneously convey their ideas in full sentences in both Maltese and English.

As a result of the brevity of the exercise due to both time and logistical considerations, and given the fact that there was no tool that could be used to analyse students' written bilingual skills simultaneously, the researcher turned to international set of criteria of assessment as indicated by the KET (University of Cambridge Key English Test for Schools) which stands at Level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, for a fair evaluation of sentences written by students.

When drafting the questionnaire it was decided to have students write four sentences and to have those written as fully as possible – something the researcher emphasised both prior and during the undertaking of the exercise. When going through the written data however, the researcher ran into several difficulties because sentences were not written in full or came in the form of phrases or, at

times, single verbs, leaving very little for the markers to evaluate. Therefore in order to present an accurate representation of the students' work; it was decided to do away with the original idea of describing the written work as 'sentences' and instead refer to written work in terms of 'written expressions'.

The main aim of this grading exercise was to provide a raw score that would serve as an indication of the levels of written proficiency for both Maltese and English. The nature of this exercise was not to catch respondents out on what they did not know, but it was held in order to serve as a neutral assessment of what they did know. Hence this very brief assessment was intended as part of a normal classroom activity.

A measure of the language proficiency of the subjects was needed and hence an appropriate, language exercise was designed. Such a performance test, in which a sample of students' creative writing abilities are investigated, are 'elicited' from the individual taking the test and then 'judged' by trained individuals who reach an agreement about the rating procedure (McNamara, 2001). This study therefore gathered evidence of general written language abilities from the performance in the designed task, so as to enable the researcher to reach an assessment of how capable students were in communicating their thoughts or ideas in both languages. Data of course was limited only to an assessment of this particular student cohort at a fixed point in time. Table 5 highlights the crux of the matter. It throws the spotlight on the actual performance of students at a given point in time in written Maltese. As might be well imagined, it was Private school students who fared the worst out of the three school types, because 27.5% of the student respondents produced work which merited no more than 0 marks.

Table 5: Respondents' performance - Written Maltese Expression

| State Schools Maltese | | 0 marks | 1 mark | 2 marks | 3 marks | 4 marks | 5 marks |
|-------------------------|-------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Verb Only | 5% | | | | | | |
| Phrase Only | 20.6% | 6.1% | 9.1% | 13.7% | 28.2% | 25.6% | 17.4% |
| Meaningful expressions | 65.5% | | | | | | |
| Blank/Undecipherable | 5.4% | | | | | | |
| Church Schools Maltese | | 0 marks | 1 mark | 2 marks | 3 marks | 4 marks | 5 marks |
| Verb Only | 7.6% | | | | | | |
| Phrase Only | 9.6% | 6.9% | 5.4% | 13.1% | 27.8% | 24.4% | 22.4% |
| Meaningful expressions | 70.2% | | | | | | |
| Blank/Undecipherable | 6.7% | | | | | | |
| Private Schools Maltese | | 0 marks | 1 mark | 2 marks | 3 marks | 4 marks | 5 marks |
| Verb Only | 1.7% | | | | | | |
| Phrase Only | 14.2% | 27.5% | 5.8% | 11.7% | 18.3% | 15.8% | 20.8% |
| Meaningful expressions | 55.8% | | | | | | |
| Blank/Undecipherable | 25% | | | | | | |

Students in State schools were the ones who were most commonly awarded 3-4 marks. Indeed, 28.2% were awarded three marks and another 25.6%, produced work which was given 4 marks. These results are quite closely followed by students in Church schools, 27.8% of whom were awarded 3 marks and 24.4% whose work was likewise awarded 4 marks. Table 5 presented above, has shown that there was a total of 28.9% State school students, 25.4% Church school students and 45% Private school students whose written Maltese work was only awarded 0 - 2 marks. This shows that these students were clearly not adequately prepared to deal with the challenges that a bilingual education system presents given that they were unable to express themselves when asked to write four simple sentences about immediate goals or plans that they had for the upcoming holiday season.

The same analysis was carried out for students' English written proficiency, the results of which are presented in Table 6 below. When comparing results for Maltese and English, one notices an increase in the percentages for those students whose work was awarded the lower marks. When analysing written English work, one may note that there is a total of 40.3% State school students whose work was given between 0 – 2 marks (when previously in Table 5, only 28.9% produced work that was attributed these same low grades). In addition, 37.4% Church school students also obtained a score ranging between 0 – 2 marks (when previously as shown in Table 5 only the work of 25.4% had been placed within these bands when their Maltese writing was being assessed).

Table 6: Respondents' performance - Written English Expressions

| State Schools English | | 0 marks | 1 mark | 2 marks | 3 marks | 4 marks | 5 marks |
|-------------------------------|-------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| <i>Verb Only</i> | 4.3% | 10.4% | 11.5% | 18.4% | 32.5% | 18.2% | 8.9% |
| <i>Phrase Only</i> | 41% | | | | | | |
| <i>Meaningful expressions</i> | 37.7% | | | | | | |
| <i>Blank/Undecipherable</i> | 9.3% | | | | | | |
| Church Schools English | | 0 marks | 1 mark | 2 marks | 3 marks | 4 marks | 5 marks |
| <i>Verb Only</i> | 6.9% | 7.1% | 10.8% | 19.5% | 30.3% | 21.4% | 10.8% |
| <i>Phrase Only</i> | 30.8% | | | | | | |
| <i>Meaningful expressions</i> | 44.3% | | | | | | |
| <i>Blank/Undecipherable</i> | 6.2% | | | | | | |
| Private Schools English | | 0 marks | 1 mark | 2 marks | 3 marks | 4 marks | 5 marks |
| <i>Verb Only</i> | 3.3% | 1.7% | 6.7% | 15.8% | 39.2% | 20.8% | 15.8% |
| <i>Phrase Only</i> | 27.5% | | | | | | |
| <i>Meaningful expressions</i> | 62.5% | | | | | | |
| <i>Blank/Undecipherable</i> | 1.7% | | | | | | |

On the other hand, this trend is not observed in Private schools which had the least (out of the three school types) percentages of work which was rated as being of the lower quality (0 - 2 marks). In fact, as had been seen in Table 5, the work by 45% Private school students had been given between 0 – 2 marks for their Maltese work. Indeed, the work by Private school students was mostly assigned the average and higher marks. Only 24.2% (15.8% + 6.7%+ 1.7%) produced written work that was placed in the lowest bands. From amongst the three school types, Private school students ranked first from amongst the three school types, to produce work which was consistently awarded 5 marks. This top mark was achieved by 15.8% of Private school respondents, followed by 10.8% of Church school attendees, whilst only being achieved by 8.9% of State school students. A comparable percentage of Church and Private school students achieved 4 marks, (21.4% and 20.8% respectively), whereas State schools yet again ranked third with 18.2% achieving 4 marks. Most State school students' work (32.5%) was given 3 marks and this may therefore be considered as the median, with another 30.3% Church school students and 39.2% Private school students also obtaining this grade.

Given that the written English work by Private school students was given a rating that saw it mostly being given between 3 – 5 marks, this therefore shows that 75.8% Private school students seem to be able to perform better in written English than their counterparts in other schools. Additionally, the quality of work produced by 62.5% Church school students was also awarded a mark ranging between 3 – 5. State school students ranked last in terms of the quality of English written work they produced. Only the work produced by a little more than half the respondents (59.6%) who participated in the study was awarded 3 – 5 marks.

Concluding remarks

It is indeed of concern to see that 40.3% of the State school students, 37.4% Church school students and 24.2% Private school students who participated in this study, are certainly going to need that extra help and attention if they are ever to successfully complete their secondary education. As it is, it is clear that they are struggling to express themselves in an education system whose very foundation is based on written examinations to see them through to their next level of education. Clearly disadvantaged, these students and others facing their same predicament, cannot aspire to progress in a system where some examinations are set in the English language and where their aspirations for decent jobs in the work-force, remains unachievable. It is unacceptable that in this modern day and age, there are students who are struggling to express themselves in simple English sentences, when students have been given the opportunity to partake of a bilingual education system from the age of five.

From the results obtained in this study, it is evident that there is the need to address the lack of exposure to quality English and Maltese where this is lacking and ensure that students are able to express themselves via the written medium in both languages. Inability to perform adequately in one language or another is clearly a demeaning factor for students and despite their young age, students are very much aware of where their strengths and weaknesses lie. This study has shown the majority of this particular State school student cohort as being unable to write meaningful expressions about their immediate goals and aspirations at this level towards the end of their primary school years cycle. This shows these students to be quite a way off from the original goals and aspirations of the National Curriculum Framework (2012).

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Bio-note

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