

# Stress-Related Factors Affecting Teachers of Foreign Languages in Maltese State and Church Schools

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## Abstract

While stress, and the causes that lead to it, is widely documented in studies regarding the teaching profession, this study focuses specifically on teachers of foreign languages and seeks to shed light on whether they are affected by stress in the light of a changing local educational and sociolinguistic scenario. Our main findings reveal indications that stress levels among teachers of foreign languages are considerably high, and that these are not affected by the language that they teach. Furthermore, there are significant stress level differences between teachers in state and church schools, with the former being more negatively affected by stress than the latter. Stress levels are linked to job satisfaction, with those who feel fulfilled by teaching clearly being impacted less by stress factors related to the profession.

## Introduction

Stress has been defined in many ways and, in broad terms, it may be caused by different factors and be the result of both personal (internal) circumstances and diverse (external) life situations. The American Psychological Association (<https://www.apa.org>) cites the work of Baum (1990) to define stress as any uncomfortable emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological and behavioral changes.

Teaching is a demanding profession and teacher stress is well documented, with findings indicating that several teachers experience stress as a result of their work. Stress in the profession is not a recent phenomenon, as attested by numerous works carried out in the past both locally (Borg & Riding, 1991; Cassar & Formosa, 2011; Mizzi, 2018) and internationally (Travers & Cooper, 1996; Pang, 2012; Richards, 2012; Zurlo et al., 2013; Ho, 2017). A recent newspaper article in *The Guardian* (UK) by Busby (2019) refers to the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to report that teachers feel more stressed than other workers, with one in five reportedly feeling ‘tense’ about their occupation.

In most cases, several factors cause this, including poor recognition of the profession and its contribution to society, as well as a lack of adequate resources and

salaries, which are generally considered inadequate. Most studies carried out deal with stress as a general phenomenon, which spreads across different sectors (early years, primary, secondary and post-secondary) in which teachers are employed. In our specific case, attention is focused on teachers of foreign languages, especially towards those who teach Italian. This is because foreign language (FL) teaching and learning has undergone changes in the past years. While some of these are the result of several reforms being implemented (for example, the 2012 National Curriculum Framework, the move towards an outcome-based model of education initiated in 2015 and the recently-introduced new 'vocational' areas), both in teaching and in assessment, others are of a more generic nature and are linked to sociolinguistic changes experienced in Malta. The overarching role of English has led to a situation where learning foreign languages is not deemed as necessary, or as useful, as it was in the past, since English is generally used as a *lingua franca* for communication and work purposes both locally and internationally. Italian in Malta, as widely documented (Caruana, 2013; Caruana & Pace, 2011, 2015 & 2019), has undergone a possibly unprecedented sociolinguistic shift. In the space of a few years, exposure to it has decreased drastically and, what once was a popular language among the Maltese, has now become a *sensu stricto* foreign language. Within this context, it is therefore interesting to view whether these changes are a cause of stress among teachers of these languages.

## Review of the literature

Borg and Riding (1991) carried out a local study on teacher stress, based on a self-administered questionnaire. Results, which are based on the feedback of 545 educators, demonstrate that 33.6% of the professionals consider their job as either very stressful or extremely stressful. It is interesting to note that males report greater stress than their female counterparts. In view of the Teacher Stress Inventory (TSI), especially designed for the study, the five major causes of stress are: students' demotivation, lack of adequate resources for teaching, crowded classrooms, a vast syllabus and poor prospects for career improvement.

Another study by Borg et al. (1995) was used to corroborate data from the previous study. Through another TSI, researchers concluded that the major causes of stress are those already attested in the earlier study referred to above, with the addition, however, of another factor: work overload. In fact, together with student misbehaviour, this is considered a major source of stress. An EU funded survey (Billehøj, 2007), in which Malta was represented by the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) places the following stressors, in descending order, as the major cause of concern in the profession: workload / working intensity; role overload; increased class size per teacher; unacceptable pupils behaviour; bad school management / lack of support from management.

Another study carried out locally (Cassar & Formosa, 2011) provides similar results, with 37.3% of the sample indicating that they feel stressed. Contrarily to what Borg and Riding (1991) attest, in this study female teachers are more affected by stress than their male counterparts. Results also indicate that Area Secondary school teachers are more susceptible to stress than their Junior Lyceum counterparts. This finding is linked to these students' lack of motivation. With respect to this outcome, it is necessary to add that this dichotomous schooling system, in which students were placed in different schools according to their academic achievement determined by an 11+ examination, has now been phased out, with the last examination of this kind being held on May 6th, 2010. This was replaced by a benchmarking assessment system which, reportedly, will be removed in the coming years.

A more recent study conducted by Attard Tonna and Calleja (2018) revealed similar findings. 62% of the respondents to a questionnaire declared that despite the challenges of the profession, they are satisfied with their career. Yet, a perturbing finding emerges from this study: 36% of the respondents indicated that they would leave the profession if the right opportunity arose.

Although Attard Tonna & Calleja (2018) do not refer directly to stress, they document several factors regarding the choice made by teachers to join the profession and their contentment with this choice:

"I have an innate passion for teaching, the way a teacher can inspire others to pursue what their heart desires is what motivated me to get into teaching."

(Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2018, p.25)

A high percentage of professional educators is clearly gratified with their chosen career: 89% claim not to imagine themselves in another profession, which is a proof of their commitment towards teaching. Nevertheless, recent reforms in the education system, the lack of respect towards the profession and a salary deemed inadequate have led the remaining 11% to declare that they cannot keep on doing what they have studied for.

The researchers conclude that in order to attract new teachers and to keep those that are already in the profession, some measures are needed. These include a fair increase in current salaries, adequate working conditions, and the reassurance that necessary actions taken in class are met with the right structures, both within the school and beyond (Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2018).

Mizzi (2018) carried out a study based on semi-structured interviews with six teachers employed in state secondary schools, the outcomes of which are studied through interpretive phenomenological analysis. The main aim of her work is to "explore educators' notions of wellbeing so as to develop an understanding of teacher wellbeing as it relates to the Maltese context" (Mizzi, 2018, p.22). Results indicate that teachers need time to 'acclimatise' to the profession and that wellbeing is related to students' behaviour. Misconduct is, in fact, considered a matter of serious

concern, while conversely, collegiality among professionals is seen as mitigating negative feelings and contributing to one's wellbeing. The role of school leaders is also mentioned, with lack of support also causing concern insofar as one's wellbeing is involved. Within the limited remit that this study entails, with results based on a qualitative methodology that cannot be generalised, it is important to note that for all participants, despite being relatively young, "the prospect of teaching as a lifelong career was considerably daunting" (Mizzi, 2018, p.47).

Locally, there is no specific study that deals with issues of stress regarding teachers of foreign languages. Internationally, however, among the plethora of research carried out on this matter, some of which were mentioned earlier, some studies have been dedicated specifically to teaching and learning languages.

In a study carried out by Weinstein and Trickett (2016), the authors develop a measure in order to highlight stress factors specifically related to teachers of English language learners (ELL) across the United States. These are teachers who work with immigrant and refugee students, who offer support in addition to the teaching and learning that occurs in mainstream settings. Despite being limited to 98 participants, this study reveals some stress factors which are subject and context related, including preparing ELL for mandated testing, dealing with 'inappropriate' placements of students in relation to their level and carrying out administrative paperwork that is not usually done by mainstream teachers. In this case, one must point out that the language dealt with – English in the US – is a context language, and therefore bears a different status to FLs.

A qualitative study (Acheson et al., 2016) with teachers of Spanish, French and Latin was carried out in the state of Georgia, US. What emerges is a milieu characterised by a lack of interest in foreign languages because of the overarching role of English in this state. The rich thematic analysis yields five reasons for which practitioners in this particular environment perceive difficulties in their career. These include a perceived lack of community and institutional support for FL teachers, difficulties related to motivation, emotional burnout and an apparent lack of teacher efficacy. Together, these can inexorably lead to burnout and attrition.

## **Settings and Sample**

This study, in which we refer to some of the main findings of the Master in Teaching & Learning dissertation by Borg (2019), stems from the outcomes reported above regarding teacher stress. It is based on the same Teachers' Stress Inventory (TSI) originally designed by Borg and Riding (1991), since this is the only standardised inventory which has been used in the local context. Having obtained permission from the main author to modify some items, the inventory was adapted in order to align it to today's educational scenario and to relate specifically to the 108 teachers of foreign languages in State and Church schools comprising the main sample of this

work. These represent 33.7% of the number to whom the questionnaire was sent via Google Forms, namely the full complement of 160 teachers of Italian and 160 teachers who teach other foreign languages in the State and Church sector.

The two tables below provide information regarding the age, sex, school sector and the subject taught by the participants:

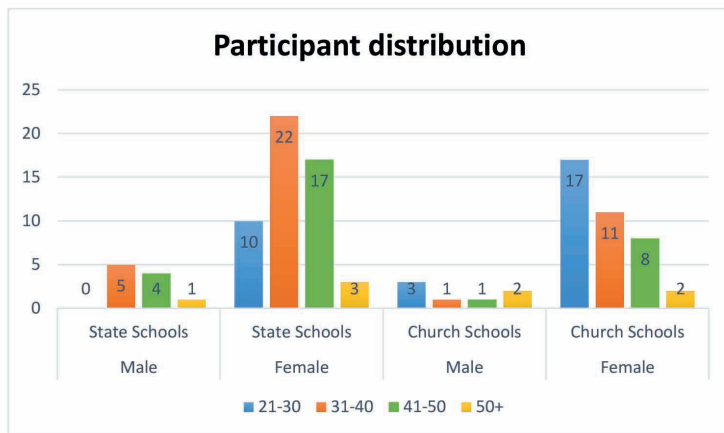


Table 1: Sample by age, sex and school sector

As shown in Table 1 above, out of the 108 respondents, 90 (83.3%) are female and 17 (15.7%) are male. One respondent chose not to indicate one's gender. The average age of the respondents is 36 to 37 years old. 63 (58.3%) respondents are employed in the state sector, whereas 45 (41.7%) are employed in church schools.

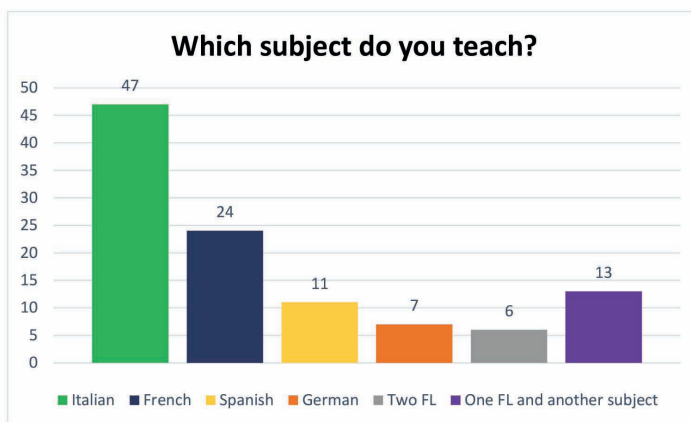


Table 2: Sample by subject taught

## Research questions

The research questions addressed in this paper are threefold:

1. What are the main factors that lead to stress among teachers of foreign languages?
2. Are there stress-related differences between teachers of Italian and teachers of other foreign languages, and does the school sector in which they teach (church vs state) affect their stress levels?
3. Is stress related to levels of satisfaction within the profession and, if so, to what extent?

Quantitative analyses were carried out using the licensed software IBM SPSS Statistics 25. The overview of the results (Section 5.1) is presented using means that result from the choice of response to the TSI inventory, namely 1 = no stress; 2 = mild stress; 3 = high stress; 4 = extreme stress.

Since the data did not generate a normal distribution, relations between the variables that address the above research questions (Section 5.2) were carried out via a Mann-Whitney U test. In cases where the relationships involved more than two variables, the Chi-squared test was used (Section 5.3) in order to document any variance resulting between any one of the variables under study.

## Results

In the following paragraph, each research question is considered separately and the results obtained are outlined. Several considerations presented are the result of a combination of factors, as shall be highlighted in the subsequent discussion and conclusion.

### ***5.1 Research question (1): What are the main factors that lead to stress among teacher of foreign languages?***

Table 2 below is based on the Teachers' Stress Inventory (TSI) designed by Borg and Riding (1991) as adapted for this study. Thirty indicators which are possible sources of teacher stress are listed hierarchically in descending order starting from those which are said to be the most stressful by our subjects, as per the mean included in the table. Results reveal that stress affecting teachers' work is mainly related to having too much paperwork to complete, to the perceived low status of the teaching profession, to time pressures and to the students' lack of motivation and indiscipline.


Sources of stress	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness
1. Too much paperwork	108	3.14	0.767	-0.496
2. Low status of the teaching profession	108	3.14	0.901	-0.670
3. Covering the syllabus in the time available	108	3.11	0.753	-0.321
4. Not enough time for marking and lesson preparation during school hours	108	3.09	0.803	-0.391
5. Pupils who are poorly motivated or not interested	108	3.03	0.779	-0.290
6. Non-acceptance of teachers' authority	108	3.03	0.891	-0.540
7. Individual pupils who continually misbehave	108	3.01	0.942	-0.428
8. Mixed ability groups	108	3.00	0.865	-0.265
9. Inadequate salary	108	2.99	0.779	-0.225
10. Unrealistic syllabus requirements	108	2.90	0.710	-0.011
11. Demands on after school time (e.g. marking)	108	2.89	0.753	0.053
12. Responsibility for pupils' learning	108	2.87	0.876	-0.337
13. Large classes	108	2.87	0.977	-0.470
14. Pupils' impolite behaviour or cheek	108	2.84	0.909	-0.138
15. Difficult classes	108	2.81	0.912	-0.130
16. Lack of recognition for good teaching	108	2.71	0.967	-0.150
17. Noisy pupils	108	2.49	0.779	0.333
18. Lack of time spent with individual pupils	108	2.44	0.660	0.407
19. Punishing pupils (e.g. for misbehaving)	108	2.41	0.832	0.201
20. Pressure from parents	108	2.38	0.944	0.389
21. Maintaining class discipline	108	2.38	0.974	0.099
22. Pressure from head teacher and education officers	108	2.37	0.903	0.436
23. Lack of equipment and resources for teaching	108	2.32	0.841	0.381
24. Poor school organisation	108	2.25	0.939	0.307
25. Lack of participation in school decision-making	108	2.24	0.807	0.292
26. Noise and other disturbances from classes, school playground, or surroundings	108	2.05	0.911	0.664
27. Lack of support from head teacher	108	2.00	0.976	0.675
28. Attitudes and behaviours of other teachers	108	1.93	0.770	0.504
29. Lack of support from colleagues	108	1.88	0.817	0.541
30. Lack of friendly atmosphere among staff	108	1.83	0.848	0.702
1 = No stress  4 = Extreme stress				

Table 3: Sources of stress listed in descending order

When the above data was investigated on the basis of the school sector in which teachers are employed, some differences emerged in the hierarchy. While the perceived low status of the profession and exceedingly high paperwork are considered in similar terms among all teachers of foreign languages, in the state sector the indicators regarding the non-acceptance of teachers' authority and indiscipline rank more highly when compared to church schools. Means are respectively of 3.21 and 3.17 for state schools, in comparison to 2.78 for both indicators in the church sector.

***5.2 Research question (2): Are there stress-related differences between teachers of Italian and teachers of other foreign languages, and does the school sector in which they teach (church vs state) affect their stress levels?***

For comparability purposes, the statistical analysis related to differences in stress levels regarding teachers of Italian and teachers of other foreign languages was limited to those 89 respondents who only teach a single foreign language.

Insofar as all factors taken into consideration are concerned, no statistically significant differences are registered. This leads to the conclusion that teaching Italian or teaching another foreign language does not have a marked effect on teachers' stress levels. Having said this, two trends do emerge, albeit at a descriptive, non-statistically significant, level. The first is that a larger number of teachers of Italian relate stress to an inadequate salary (85% of the sample, vs 64% of teachers of other foreign languages), and that class size is also a larger cause for concern for the same group. Indeed, 34% of the teachers of Italian state that this causes stress while this figure decreases to 26% for the other group. A possible reason for the latter outcome is the size of the class, with classes of Italian being usually larger than those of other foreign languages.

In contrast to the above, statistically significant differences clearly emerge between respondents in the state and church sectors when a number of factors are taken into consideration, as listed below:



	State schools				Church schools				Mann-Whitney
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	
Difficult classes	7.9	23.8	33.3	34.9	4.4	46.7	33.3	15.6	U = 1089.0 p = 0.032
Non-acceptance of teacher authority	3.2	19	32.7	46	8.9	24	46.7	20	U = 1032.5 p = 0.011
Pupils' impolite behaviour or cheek	3.2	27	30.2	39.7	8.9	42	35.6	13.3	U = 962.5 p = 0.003
Individual pupils who continually misbehave	4.8	22.2	23.8	49.2	6.7	33.3	35.6	24.4	U = 1069.0 p = 0.022
Noisy pupils	4.8	39.7	41.3	13.3	8.9	62.2	22.2	6.7	U = 1025.5 p = 0.008
Punishing pupils	7.9	39.7	38.1	14.3	17.8	53.3	24.4	4.4	U = 1019.0 p = 0.008

Legend: 1 = No stress; 2 = Mild stress; 3 = Much stress; 4 = Extreme stress.

**Table 4: Differences in stress levels between state and church schoolteachers (values included as percentages)**

### ***5.3 Research question (3): Is stress related to levels of satisfaction within the profession and, if so, to what extent?***

Apart from thirty indicators linked to various sources of stress, the TSI also included two more general questions. One was aimed at understanding the perception of how stressful it is being a teacher, whilst the other was more focused on job satisfaction. The latter was given prominence in Attard Tonna and Calleja (2018) locally, as well as in Klassen and Chiu (2010; 2011) internationally, as lack of job satisfaction is linked to stress and burnout. According to 80.5% of the participants, teaching causes much stress or even extreme stress: this means that only one out of five subjects view stress as mild or do not feel any stress.

With regards to job satisfaction, on the other hand, the results are more positive: 60.3% view their profession as rewarding and they feel satisfied with their occupation. Interesting findings are obtained through a comparative analysis of the two questions above, with the chi square test leading to a statistically significant outcome ( $p = 0.017$ ). Results indicate that the more stressful the teaching profession is considered, the less it is viewed as rewarding and satisfying. Consequently, if levels of stress in the profession are lessened by tackling the matters that lead to it, then there will be a likelihood of the profession being perceived more positively, thereby increasing work-related fulfilment. This is illustrated in table 5 below:

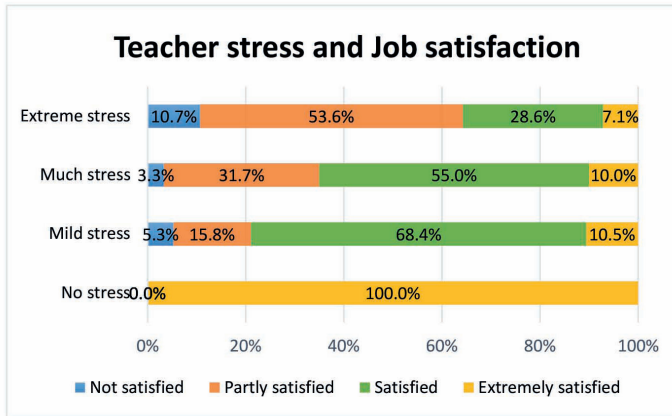


Table 5: Teacher stress and job satisfaction compared

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our main findings can be summarised as follows: there are indications that stress levels among teachers of foreign languages are considerably high, and that the language that they teach does not lead to differences in the said levels. Furthermore, there are significant stress level differences between teachers in state and church schools, with the former being more negatively affected by stress than the latter, especially because of reasons related to class management. Student behaviour patterns are linked to teacher burnout, as documented in Hastings and Bham (2003), among others. Finally, stress levels are linked to job satisfaction, with those who feel fulfilled by teaching clearly being impacted less by stress related to the profession.

In the study, the number of subjects who indicate that they are affected by ‘much’ or ‘extreme’ stress is considerably higher than that reported by Borg and Riding (1991) and by Cassar and Formosa (2011). This may also be because we opted for a four-point Likert scale in this study, rather than for a five-point one. Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that among our participants, namely teachers of foreign languages in state and church schools, stress levels are higher than those documented in past studies. These studies were carried out with teachers of all subjects, that is they did not focus specifically on teachers of foreign languages as we did. The higher levels of stress we document is also evident in the slight, albeit noticeable, decrease of the figure of those who do not experience stress at all: 23.3% in Borg and Riding (1991) compared to 19.5% in this study.

These stress levels can also be attributed to the subjects that these teachers specialise in: foreign languages. They tally, to a certain extent, with observations made in previous studies (Pace, 2017; Caruana & Pace, 2019) that students’ motivation towards foreign language learning has declined over the years. The

reasons for this are generally attributed to the over-arching effects of English as a global language of communication, but also to the unfortunate perception that learning a foreign language may not be directly useful from a professional career's point of view. Our results are quite similar to those reported in Acheson, Taylor and Luna (2016), referred to in Section 2.

The reasons which lead to stress in foreign language teaching are related to out-of-class tasks, such as paperwork, and lack of time for marking and lesson-planning. This is analogous to results obtained in previous studies such as the ones in Borg et al. (1995) and Lui and Ramsey (2008). The stressors listed in Table 3 also find remarkable analogies when compared those listed in the EU-funded study carried out by Billehøj (2007) in which Malta participated. Time pressure, in the sense that there is a syllabus that must be covered on time, also relates to stress, and so are difficulties related to class management and students' motivation.

It may come as a surprise that the often-mentioned inadequate teachers' salaries is not among the main causes to which stress is attributed, although similar findings are also documented in Attard Tonna and Calleja (2018). On the other hand, the perception that the teaching profession has a low status has a stronger impact. This indicates that the profession requires, first and foremost, better recognition and that there is a dire need to inform the public adequately of the responsibility it entails and of the importance that it plays in society. Educating the general public about educators' professions is crucial, both to attract quality teachers as well as to retain those who have chosen teaching as a career.

This study provides some important indications of stress-levels as related to teachers of a specific area in the Maltese curriculum. It would be useful, for comparability's sake, to investigate whether similar results are also present in other areas, including among teachers of the two local context languages, English and Maltese. Results document stress related to the profession as a rather widespread phenomenon that cannot be ignored. Furthermore, it seems clear enough that if measures are taken to increase teachers' fulfilment – especially by addressing 'out-of-class' tasks such as excessive paperwork and by providing better support structures to address class management issues – the profession could stand to gain significantly. This would be especially the case since in Borg (2019), which also included a qualitative component through interviews, there is evidence that some teachers of foreign languages are resilient and that they can deal with stress despite the difficulties they face, as aptly put by a teacher in a local church school:

Although I love teaching, I feel a bit stressed because on entering class you have to deliver a lesson; you would have planned this but, often, you must abandon this plan: you realise that your students cannot reach the level you expect, or you may have planned too much ... this causes stress. Not to speak of other causes that increase stress. However, whatever happens, we put stress aside and do it day after day.

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## Bio-note

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