The Teaching of Maltese amongst the Maltese-Australian Diaspora: Perseverance, Challenges, and the Way Forward

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Received: July 14, 2023, Manuscript No. jflet-23-106253; **Editor assigned:** July 17, 2023, PreQC No. jflet-23-106253 (PQ); **Reviewed:** July 31, 2023, QC No. jflet-23-106253; **Revised:** August 07, 2023, Manuscript No. jflet-23-106253 (R); **Published:** August 14, 2023

Abstract

This paper analysis the current teaching and learning process of the Maltese language in Australia. In a relatively short period of time language shift has occurred and for most of the Maltese diaspora English is the main language while the use of the community language is minimal. As a result of this, the teaching of Maltese must be addressed as the teaching of a foreign language. Whilst observing what happens in the schools where the teaching of Maltese takes place the researcher also interviewed teachers and students attending different classes in Melbourne and Sydney. The researcher applauds the perseverance of those who are striving to keep the Maltese language alive and at the same time notices the big challenges faced in a huge country, so far away from Malta. Assistance and support from Malta are urgently needed and this should result in more effective teaching methods as well as better prospects for language maintenance.

Keywords: Language maintenance; Language shift; Community language schools; Teaching Maltese as a foreign language, Maltese-Australians.

Introduction

Malta is a tiny Mediterranean island country with very few resources and therefore, throughout much of its history, many islanders have gone abroad in search of better pastures. Australia, the United States and Canada became the most popular migratory destinations in the last century, especially in the years following the end of the Second World War, when the island was facing economic hardship and working opportunities were limited. Since the island gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1964, migration has practically stopped. This was the result of better employment opportunities coming from new and modern investment which guaranteed that the Maltese could be successful in their own country. For many years, Australia had encouraged migration from Great Britain and later from other European countries. With the change of policy during the 1970s Australia has opened its borders to many people and currently

migration into Australia flows mainly from Asia. Nowadays, Australia is a well-developed and rich nation with a high standard of living. The first Maltese, Antonio Azzopardi, who migrated to Australia, arrived in the country in 1838 (Agius, 2001). While there was a first wave of migration, mostly of males, in the early 20th century, most of the Maltese people who settled in Australia did so after the end of the Second World War. The Maltese diaspora in Australia is a labour diaspora (Cohen, 1997). Cohen explains that a labour diaspora occurs when migrants go away from their country for better work opportunities. Since the Maltese had little choice, many decided to do that.

According to the Australian Census of 2021 there are 198,989 people who are of a Maltese ancestry living in Australia, mostly in the states of Victoria and New South Wales. Around 35,413 Maltese Australians were born in Malta, many of whom are over the pensionable age. There are 404,113 Maltese who live in the Republic of Malta as recorded in the Malta (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The number of new migrants has progressively declined since the country achieved its independence, a milestone that generated better economic openings in Malta. Also, ever since Malta joined the European Union in 2004 the Maltese have had increased job opportunities in Europe, which is more accessible and easier to settle in.

The national language of Malta is Maltese. The island, however, has officially been bilingual since 1934, when it was still a colony. Maltese and English are the two languages of the country. The Maltese vernacular, a mixed language of Semitic derivation (Cachia, 1994; Saliba, 2012), goes back more than one millennium to the Arab Period (870-1091) (Aquilina, 1988). The language, once an Arabic dialect, started moving away from its Semitic origin, with the arrival of the Normans and other European rulers. Being colonized by various rulers naturally impacted the vernacular and many words of Sicilian, Latin and, later, Italian origin became integrated in the language. This trend was sustained throughout the reign of the Order of the Knights of St. John (1530-1798) when the language was shaped by the Romance languages that the Knights and the workers that they brought on the island spoke. Throughout the British dominion (1800-1964), Maltese was influenced by the English language (Aquilina, 1988), a language that mostly due its global dominance and due to the bilingual situation on the island, continues to infiltrate the Maltese language. Maltese, which is the only Semitic language in Europe, is written in Roman letters. The official orthography of the Maltese language is relatively new and goes back to 1934 (Akkademja tal-Malti, 1998). Since Malta's accession in the European Union in 2004, Maltese has been officially recognized as one of the official languages of the European Union.

The Maltese diaspora is well integrated in Australia. While most of the community is proficient in English, the Maltese language is still used amongst a cohort of the Maltese population. According to the Australian 2021 Census, nearly 27,000 people speak Maltese at home.

It is a commonly accepted scenario that the maintenance of the mother language in migrant groups is hard when the migrants are living in a place whose main language is different from the migrants' language (Sciriha, 1990). English is not the official language of Australia, but it is the 'de facto' national language of the country. The dominance of English as an international language and the language of economic powers and prestige is very much evident (Singh, 2016). Thereby, the community languages of the various ethnic groups and the language of the indigenous populations, especially those of the smaller communities such as Maltese, are in a permanent struggle with a language of gigantic ubiquity. The dominance of the English language can be extensive and frequently threatening.

Language Maintenance and Shift

Language maintenance is the continuous use of a community language in one or more domains such as family, work, friendship, or the religious domain. On the contrary, language shift, occurs when the mother tongue is, eventually, replaced by the dominant language in all domains of language use (Pauwels, 2016).

Throughout the years, English has to be considered the international language. In her investigation among the Maltese diaspora in Canada, Sciriha (1990) discovered that the majority of parents desire that their children are fluent in English rather than Maltese. Some even considered the use of Maltese as detrimental to English proficiency. A different investigation in Australia by Azzopardi (2014) showed similar responses. In Australia, the first-generation post Second World War Maltese migrants wanted their children to assimilate in the host country, and thereby to be well articulated in English with the result that in some instances, language shift occurred, in just over one generation.

Maltese language schools in Australia

'Community language schools have been set up in an attempt to highlight the importance of first/home language retention' (Giugni, 2004). The Australian Federal Government helps in the funding of community languages classes (Azzopardi, 2014). Maltese classes in Australia started in 1968. More than 50 years later, there seems to be a crisis in this regard. In 2012, this matter was raised among the issues tabled by the members of the Council for Maltese Living Abroad. The

teaching of Maltese at VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) level in Victoria was at risk due to lack of student participation. The Maltese language school in Canberra had to close for the same reason. The one in Perth was likely to follow and even the one in Adelaide had several problems. The future, therefore, does not look rosy. In truth, the situation has been bad for many years. Chetcuti (2010) writes that there were also reports of dwindling numbers of students studying Maltese at Year 12, and that they have been dwindling from what were already considered to be meagre numbers of students.

There is the difficulty of convincing students that Maltese is a useful language in comparison to other community languages like Italian, French and other 'modern' languages, on the one hand, and new 'business-related' languages like Chinese and Korean on the other. Already thirty years ago, many Maltese parents objected to their children being taught Maltese at all (Cauchi, 1990).

Usually, Maltese language teachers follow their individual state's syllabus published by the respective Department of Education in combination with educational resources from Malta's educational system, and therefore, 'there is no one coherent system or syllabus similar to what other ethnic groups have in Australia vis-a-vis to language teaching' (Camilleri, 2019). Borland (2005) already noticed that among the constraints in teaching Maltese in Australia was the limited availability of teaching materials and resources. Members of the Maltese-Australian community have asked for help from Malta in this regard. One of their main demands is to 'produce syllabi and learning materials, including textbooks, with a foreign audience in mind' (Saliba, 2015). The recruitment of qualified teachers is also problematic (Borland, 2005). Around 30 years ago, two teachers from Malta 'were sent on an exchange programme for skills upgrading' (Camilleri, 2019). However, due to differences in 'pedagogical practices and approaches in Malta's curriculum' (Camilleri, 2019) such initiative was not very successful.

Research approach and methodology

The investigation entitled 'The Survival of the Maltese language in Australia' was conducted in Melbourne and Sydney. This study took place in August 2018. Being physically present next to the interviewees is the most common type of interview, according to Pauwels (2016). August is wintertime in Australia, and this made it easier for the researcher to interview the people in the study, winter being the time when people are likely to be more settled in their routine. 28 adult contributors agreed in writing to participate in this research and they were interviewed over a span of 3 weeks. The investigation consisted of structured interviews, with 10 questions each that were conducted face to face. The interviewees were voice-recorded. Among the interviewees there

were 7 teachers or school coordinators of the Maltese language and 6 students who were learning Maltese at different levels. These interviews were held at schools where the teaching and learning of Maltese takes place. The interviews took approximately one hour. Since none of the interviewees in the investigation were vulnerable persons the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee (UREC) waived the requirement for a formal decree of the request to conduct the research. It was ensured that all the guiding ethics communicated by the UREC were strictly followed before the investigation on the ground and during the study itself.

All the interviews were subsequently analysed through coding. The purpose of coding is to '*name* units of data' (Newby, 2010). An alternative to coding from data is to analyse the information gathered from the interviews deductively by expounding a predetermined code structure and then tallying the collected data into such structure. This research was based on Grounded Theory originated by Glaser (1967) and therefore the constant comparative technique was employed.

Apart from interviewing members of the Maltese-Australian community, the researcher did additional qualitative investigations in the form of observations amongst a cohort of Maltese Australians, including the students and teachers at four different schools, two in Melbourne and two in Sydney. Some of these classes are held in schools, while others are held in buildings which were not designed to be schools. In these schools, the researcher could see how the lessons progressed, as well as observe the dynamics of the interaction between the teachers and the students learning Maltese. The researcher was also given a tour of the premises as well as access to the various resources and teaching aides used.

Research findings

Student attendance for Maltese classes held in Melbourne and Sydney is very low. Australia is a huge country, and the cities are very big. The Maltese community has moved farther out into new suburbs and thus transport to and from school hinders attendance. There seems to be a general disinterest in learning Maltese, which may be due to the fact that travelling to the schools is difficult. One teacher wishes to have the funds because 'if we had the money, we would give lessons in the Southeast suburbs (of Melbourne, apart from at the Maltese Community Council premises in Parkville)'. Since this investigation was conducted, the World has gone through the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the strict lockdown in place across Australia, teaching had to go online. The researcher is informed that online teaching has continued since then, and this is proving successful.

Learning Maltese could mean opting out of more interesting activities. This is because many classes are held on Saturdays, a day when other interesting activities such as sports and dancing classes take place. This presents a problem because sports are far more luring to the younger, more energetic and vibrant generation. The opportunity of learning Maltese does not even stand a chance. A retired teacher remembers that when she was teaching Maltese at the Saturday school the children 'used to moan that on Saturday they have to go to school.' Learning Maltese was thus seen as a chore, an extension of schooling. She recalls that 'I had young students who were very good, but stopped because of judo, for instance'. Roderick Bovingdon recalls that even though he started the teaching of Maltese in Australia, 'initially I used to force my children to learn Maltese every Saturday, but then I realised that I was alienating them from Australian society.'

The Maltese community, young and old, is aware of these classes. Reluctance to learn Maltese, however, is rife. One of the participants in the study admits that 'to learn another language is always good … I am intrigued, but the language is hard. It is nice to connect with my roots, but I've never decided to do it'. Thereby, when one takes into consideration the population of the community, attendance is very low. One teacher decries the situation and says that 'it is nice to have 50 kids studying Maltese, but it is nowhere near enough to keep the Maltese language alive... it is a drop in the ocean.'

Funds are a problem; the schools get very little help from Malta and no help is forthcoming from the Maltese-Australian community in general. One teacher confirms that 'the main challenge is to get the students and to promote the Maltese language since we do not have money.' He claims that 'I put notices in churches since we do not have money.' Clearly this is not enough. Another teacher argues that the Maltese-Australian community should be self-sufficient, and this is because 'the Maltese community in Australia is rich... but we are not helped by the Maltese who own big businesses in Australia.' On the other hand, another teacher would like to receive more funds from the government of Malta. She claims that 'in 2016 the Maltese Government gave us 9000 Euro, once. If the Government does not help us, I cannot attract students and teachers. I wish that I get paid and that I pay the teachers well.'

Added to this is the lack of good and qualified teachers of Maltese, especially in the teaching of Maltese as a foreign language (which is the status of the language to most members of the Maltese-Australian community is) that hinders the prospects of the schools that teach Maltese. Those currently teaching the language are mostly either volunteers or teachers who specialise in other subjects. This is a problem even in Malta, where teachers of the language to foreigners 'have never received any specialised training in the field' (Saliba, 2015). In fact, Saliba (2015) suggests that all

student teachers of the Maltese at the University of Malta are trained to teach the language as a foreign language and graduate teachers should be given the opportunity of re-training in the different methodology needed to teach Maltese as a foreign language.

One teacher admits that 'I started teaching Maltese grammar, like we used to do in Malta, but after following a course on second languages I realised that these people would like to know how to say, "good morning," and "how are you?" Teaching Maltese as a foreign language is very different from teaching Maltese to native learners. However, it seems that many students who do make the effort and study Maltese are happy with the outcome. One student says that they 'are taught basic language, like reading, writing and listening skills.' The student declares that 'we have good teachers, and they know what they are doing'. Another student agrees and states that 'our teachers really do a good job. They encourage us to keep going on.' This student hopes that 'when I go to Malta I will be able to practise what I'm learning.' Another student is glad that the lessons taken have been useful since 'we have lots of Maltese clients, so yes I do use it (the language) at work.'

No books were ever published with the Maltese Australians in mind. Such market is neither big nor profitable. It is, thus, deemed necessary for more resources to be devised and created so that the teaching of Maltese could be more effective. For most of the community, except for the first-generation, Maltese is a foreign language. Therefore, the teaching process and the resources used must be in line with that. One teacher laments that 'the books we have were not designed for Australian students, so you cannot just use a book without updating it'. Some of the resources being used have been declared outdated in Malta. This teacher admits that 'I still use *Id-Delfin* since it is graded.' *Id-Delfin* is a set of 6 books written for Maltese primary school children in the 1970s and not in use anymore in Maltese schools. This is because its content is obsolete and it depicts a country set in another era. One student decries the fact that 'we do not have the proper books to use, as per student, such as one liners or easy story books.' One teacher argues that 'we need primary school resources; simple things ideal for our students; if they are bilingual it is even better.'

On the other hand, the Maltese language schools are rather proactive. They hold classes at various levels, even pre-school. They also organise book clubs to reinforce what is being taught. There is a consensus that the way forward is using technology and innovative teaching methodologies. One teacher remarks that 'we use technology a lot as well.' Another teacher thinks that 'Maltese lessons and resources should be designed in Malta by the language experts and the schools can buy them at a reasonable price, maybe through a subsidy scheme.' Saliba (2015) suggests that 'a short needs analysis questionnaire should be distributed to the learners before or during the first lesson to

obtain information about their backgrounds, aims and teaching method preferences.' At the end of the course, Saliba (2015) suggests that the students are encouraged to evaluate the course to help improve the teaching learning process.

However, since the number of students is dwindling, it is difficult to sustain the numbers required for the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and the Higher School Certificate (HSC) examinations of New South Wales even though the minimum number of students required is 15 from all over Australia. One teacher declares that 'we need just 15 students in one year from all over Australia in a cycle of three years and this is proving to be very hard.'

According to this teacher 'Maltese was always at risk because of the mentality that English is better … English is the key to economic prosperity'. While it is nice to have a few classes at different levels, this is a very small amount compared to what is needed to ensure the sustainability of the language. The number of students attending classes is not higher because, as previously explained, Maltese is not an economic language and employment prospects for workers fluent in the Maltese language are next to none. It is true that there are some openings for those who want to work with the old Maltese community, yet these are very limited when compared to other career opportunities. Many of the students interviewed said that they never speak Maltese but are hoping to be able to do so when they visit Malta. Therefore, Maltese is seen as a *holiday language* as one teacher declared. Ironically, however, that when they do visit Malta, most people would speak to them in English.

Another hindrance is the fact that there is no or little reinforcement from home. One teacher declares that since 'parents do not speak the language at home; there is no practise after school.' Another teacher confirms this and laments that 'it is annoying to talk to students who have learnt Maltese, but they do not answer in Maltese.'

Interestingly, there were occasions when the partner of a Maltese Australian decided to learn Maltese. One of the teachers interviewed claims that there are instances where 'a non-Maltese partner wanting to embrace the language and culture of their married partner' and decides to take lessons in the Maltese language. Another teacher is married to a second-generation Maltese-Australian who could not speak Maltese but is now fluent in the language and he even sat for the Higher School Education examination. One teacher states that:

Maltese community language schools help students learn and use Maltese and connect young Australians to the language, heritage, and culture of Malta. They contribute to strengthening the

Maltese-Australian community in both a social and academic way as students and families become empowered with the knowledge and skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing Maltese.

Conclusion

If the teaching of Maltese is to remain relevant and effective, the use of technology together with other measures needs to be affected. Everything comes at a price. One of the main pillars which can help the maintenance of Maltese in Australia, schools, needs the money to function. Schools need solid financial backing to attract and pay well trained professional teachers and sustain their continuous professional development. Money is needed also to secure the best teaching resources. These include books, handouts, flash cards, audio-visual resources, and interactive resources. Money is also needed to promote the schools and their efforts to endorse and acquaint the public with the benefits of learning Maltese. The Government of Malta could invest in establishing an institute in Melbourne and Sydney, like The Instituto Cervantes, The Alliance Francaise or The Italian Association of Assistance, which also operate in Australia. Such backing from the country of origin would assist the Maltese language and, in turn, its culture in Australia. Possibly, on a smaller scale, branches could also operate in Adelaide, Canberra and other major cities where needed. The Education Department of Malta should capitalize on the fact that we are living in a digital age. Therefore, a digital platform for Maltese to be taught through online classes could be created. The teachers selected for such initiative should be qualified in the teaching of Maltese as a foreign language. This would be useful not just for the diaspora in Australia, but also in Canada, the United States, and other countries. Students in Australia and other parts of the world would not need to travel long distances to go to classes and, in this way, all those interested would be able to enrol without any difficulty. Another suggestion is the setting up of an air school, similar to Alice Springs School of the Air142, which delivers education to the remote areas of Australia. Air schools, traditionally, conducted lessons over the radio, but are, nowadays, using the internet.

The Government of Malta could think about giving a number of incentives to those Australian students who sit and pass the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), the Higher School Certificate (HSC) or their equivalent, in Maltese, at the end of Year 12. The incentives, yet again, could take the form of financial backing. The University of Malta should also provide scholarships for a number of Maltese citizens from around the world, including Australia, who would like to pursue their studies in the Maltese language. The Council for Maltese Living Abroad could try to tap European Union funds, which are allocated to help endangered languages within the European Union. Since many Maltese Australians have dual citizenship, they are also citizens of

the European Union. Such funds would be able to help the schools that teach Maltese in Australia and any club or organisation which promotes the Maltese language. Effective teaching of Maltese should, in the long term, help the Maltese diaspora to maintain the language.

Acknowledgement

I confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

Conflict of Interest

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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