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Teaching and learning English in a multicultural classroom: strategies and opportunities

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the beliefs and experiences of a group of teachers endeavouring to enhance their students' learning of English while adapting to a multicultural classroom reality.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on the results of a case study involving a number of semi-structured interviews.

Findings – The paper illustrates how the teachers and their learners adopted a number of strategies to make the most of the opportunities of learning English within a multilingual context.

Originality/value – This paper underscores the role that language-in-education policies can play in enhancing the teaching and learning of English in a multicultural classroom.

Keywords Multicultural, Multilingual, English teaching, English learning, Language-in-education policies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The emergence of English as a global language and the multicultural nature of most contemporary societies form part of the reality that teachers in different European and international contexts are compelled to acknowledge on a daily basis. The realization that multilingualism is a growing phenomenon in classrooms all over Europe means that educators might be facing a number of challenges that require new pedagogical considerations in their efforts to ensure that learners are provided with the necessary proficiency in the global language.

Multilingualism as a classroom phenomenon is not at odds with the emphasis that most countries are placing on English via language policy. English should be perceived as an empowering language that provides young people with access to a broad range of opportunities that might be denied to them if a country makes the mistake of not ensconcing it within every level of the educational system. In fact, Otwinowska and De Angelis (2014, p. 15) argue that:

> […] whereas at the national level proficiency and literacy in the national and minority languages do suffice, at the international level it is English that is the predominant means of communication and comprehension. It is the linguistic means to give speakers, especially speakers of lesser-used languages, their voice within public discourse; thus individual multilingualism should entail very good knowledge of English.

An appreciation of the significance of English within both national and international contexts entails the adoption of measures that would provide all learners with the means

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of attaining a satisfactory level of proficiency. At the same time, the learning of the mother tongue and other languages should be reinforced, given that these are an asset in their own right and endow young people with a rich linguistic repertoire that they may tap for diverse purposes.

Acknowledging that English is being learnt in an increasingly multicultural classroom puts pressure on educational leaders, policymakers, curriculum designers and teachers to address the needs of students who find themselves in what is relatively a new environment in certain countries. Nations that might have formerly consisted of bilingual citizens are now composed of a multilingual population. Coelho (2012, p. 13) points out that "Balancing the demands and needs of two linguistic communities becomes more challenging with the arrival of new communities speaking a variety of different languages". This is certainly true of Malta where the majority of the population speaks the national language, Maltese, as well as the other official language, English. However, the composition of Maltese society is changing dynamically by becoming increasingly multilingual and multicultural. This is obviously mirrored by the composition of the classroom. Teachers experience the repercussions of such change at first hand. Their experiences warrant empirical investigation to identify the means by which the learning of English in a multilingual environment can be enhanced.

By means of a study conducted at a primary school in Malta, this article seeks to explore some of the challenges that teachers are facing when teaching English within the context of classrooms made up of multilingual learners. This case study sought to identify the attitudes, beliefs and practices of a group of teachers whose classes consist of a large number of students living in Malta but originating from households having a variety of L1s (first or native language) other than Maltese. These teachers work at a school that caters for the residents of a town with an immigrant community representing around 100 nationalities. Over the past few years, they have had to reposition themselves from teaching English as an L2 (second language) to speakers of Maltese as an L1, to teaching English to multilingual learners. The latter are for the most part first-generation immigrants. These teachers are expected to teach Standard English, but this does not preclude the use of other varieties in the classroom, including Maltese English. This article examines the experiences of these teachers in dealing with the increasingly multicultural context in which they operate. It also foregrounds the opportunities they associate with teaching English in a multilingual classroom. The findings of the study serve as the bedrock for a consideration of how language-in-education policies can aid practitioners to maximize the benefits of learning English in a multicultural classroom.

English in a multicultural context

As many European countries become increasingly multicultural, the need to underscore the significance of multilingualism is even more pronounced. At present, the European Union (EU) is made up of 28 member states and recognizes 24 official languages. Multilingualism is valued and citizens are encouraged to speak two other languages in addition to the mother tongue. At the same time, English is unarguably the global language, and being fluent in it poses a number of professional, educational, economic and cultural advantages. Around 51 per cent of EU citizens speak English, and it "is learnt on average by 90 per cent of all European students at some stage of their compulsory education" (Ruiz de Zarobe, 2013, p. 233). In many European countries, there

is a huge sense of commitment towards empowering young people by providing them with the necessary fluency in English. A case in point is Cyprus where "despite the significant presence of English in the weekly schedule of public education, an overwhelming majority of Greek Cypriot school children also take private classes in English" (Hadjioannou *et al.*, 2011, p. 511). Williams *et al.* (2013) indicate that in nearly all EU countries, English is taught at primary level and this will eventually mean that an even higher percentage of EU citizens will be able to communicate by means of the global language. There already exist signs of:

> […] the emergence of English as the key lingua franca across the EU. Already we are beginning to witness the influence of English in terms of how it segments labour markets so that only those with English language qualifications have access to the lucrative international labour market and the knowledge economy while those without such qualifications are restricted to the domestic labour market (Williams *et al.*, 2013, p. 33).

The importance given to English in Europe is also manifest in many other countries all over the world. For example, Kirkpatrick (2012) shows how language policies in a variety of Southeast Asian countries, some of which were not even affiliated with Britain or the USA, deem English to be so significant that people are required to learn the language in addition to their respective national language.

The continual growth of English should not be seen as a threat to multilingualism but rather as an opportunity to facilitate intercultural communication. The tendency to perceive English as a threat is in part a hangover from many countries' colonial past. However, what is required is a paradigm shift that allows a more positive attitude towards English. According to Saraceni (2009, p. 184):

> […] the Kuhnian paradigm shift in ELT is something that can take place if people begin to see English not any more as a language which belongs to somebody else, is expression of somebody else's culture and is spoken better by somebody else, but as a language that is part of their own linguistic repertoire, is expression of their own culture and is spoken with a local flavour or international intelligibility according to the situation.

Saraceni (2011, p. 281) believes that "the de-Anglicisation of English needs to take place […] primarily in the classroom". This is necessary to ensure that "the world's cultural flow can be turned on its head by using the very medium that is so often accused of being the vehicle of Americanisation and/or Anglicisation" (Saraceni, 2011, p. 283). It is partly for this reason that Toh (2012, p. 306) calls for "more enriching lessons" that allow "students to benefit from […] richer conceptualisations of English as a resource for multicultural understandings and how it can contribute to a reconfiguration of meanings and ideas". Speaking about the Greek context, Fay *et al.* (2010) show how by repositioning English-teaching materials from a foreign language orientation to a multicultural one, learners can be enabled to develop multicultural awareness via English.

Providing students with the means to develop proficiency in English is not at odds with the cultivation of multilingualism. According to van der Walt (1997, p. 195), those who value multilingualism and diversity "acknowledge the first or home languages of pupils in the teaching of English as an additional language and particularly where English is used as a language of learning and instruction".

Speaking about post-apartheid South Africa, Granville *et al.* (1998, pp. 267-268) put forward proposals:

> […] designed to guarantee students the right of access to the language of power, while at the same time ensuring redress for African languages. This redress will enable us to teach English as a subject without guilt and to help our students understand that all languages are valuable and are a national treasure.

Similarly, in their review of language education in China, Wenfeng and Gao (2008, p. 391) found that"the learning of English and other foreign languages does not necessarily undermine the cultural heritage and ethnic identity of minority students [but] can lead to multiculturalism and multilingualism".

In Singapore, language policy emphasizes the importance of learning English while encouraging learners to become trilingual. This "is intended to balance the need to promote economic and political development of the country and at the same time to cater for the needs of a changing society" (Chua, 2010, p. 426). Beyond policy itself, achieving a sense of parity between English and multilingualism very much depends on teachers' attitudes. In a context where English is the medium of instruction, "the ideal teacher would be represented by one who takes advantage of the multilingual competence of the students and, therefore, is flexible enough to allow the presence of the 'other' languages as a way to scaffold and enhance content learning" (Doiz *et al.* 2014, p. 357).

However, fostering such practices is not without its challenges, given that pedagogy is most often bound to teachers' beliefs. For example, Makoe and McKinney (2014, p. 9) show how in certain South African schools, "multilingualism is seen as an impediment and monolingualism as a resource for learning English subject matter content". The result of such a belief, "particularly in the early stages, may not only contribute to low achievements in English, but also lead to a decline in first-language proficiency" (Makoe and McKinney, 2014, p. 9). Language-in-education policies should not just prescribe what is expected of teachers and learners in the classroom but should also address how their beliefs and attitudes towards English and multilingualism can be adequately developed.

Language-in-education policies

Language-in-education policies can have a drastic impact on young people's ability to participate in a variety of social, economic and cultural domains, both in their respective countries and internationally. Sustaining a balance between English and multilingualism is crucial to enrich learners' linguistic and cultural repertoire. Olshtain and Nissim-Amitai (2004, p. 53) affirm that in a multilingual context, "the school curriculum should aim at ensuring the learners' ability to make linguistic choices in the future, while strengthening their proficiency in the dominant language – the language of social, economic and occupational mobility".

Equipping learners with the skills needed to speak English fluently and thus empowering them to pursue personal and professional goals need not come at the cost of undermining their ability to use their mother tongue and other languages.

The perils of adopting extreme positions in favour or against one particular language are manifold. For example, Martin (2008, p. 76) shows how the practice of enforcing English-only zones in schools in the Philippines is detrimental given that "that students will not learn a language if they fear it". She claims that "simply focusing on testing and training, without recognizing the multilingual context of teaching and learning English […] only reinforces fear of the language" (Martin, 2008, p. 79). Similarly, Opoku-Amankwa (2009) reports how the introduction of an English-only

language-in-education policy in multilingual classrooms in Ghana has affected children's communicative practices and lesson participation while increasing their anxiety levels. Speaking about the Swedish context, Cabau (2009) criticizes the complacency towards multilingualism engendered by the belief that English on its own suffices:

> Not only are the decision makers reluctant to relinquish the dominating status of English, but even if they support second [foreign language teaching] and learning, the general opinion that "English is enough" seems to be a formidable obstacle (p. 148).

Rivers (2011, p. 42) is cautious about strictly enforcing an English-only language policy, given that it might lead to "a negative impact upon the learner's psychological and emotional well-being through the promotion of feelings of guilt, disappointment, resignation, and indifference". The alternative would be to "move towards a more deliberate and systematic, learner-driven use of the L1 in the L2 classroom under a more realistic and principled banner of English-mainly as opposed to English-only" (Rivers, 2011, p. 42). The attempt to enforce an English-only policy in a multilingual context is highly dangerous; however, this is equally true of any attempt to sideline English and thus deprive learners of the opportunities associated with proficiency in this language.

As a bilingual country in which English and Maltese are recognized as official languages, Malta considers it desirable for its young people to develop proficiency in both languages. All learners are entitled to ample support throughout primary and secondary education for them to become fluent in these two languages. The National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p. 34) states that "the learning and teaching of the second language (generally English […]), provides access to near-universal knowledge and culture". One of the outcomes for primary education is that children should "competently use the range of age-appropriate language skills in both Maltese and English" (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p. 21). In addition to this, secondary education is meant to produce "young people who are able to communicate effectively in at least three languages including Maltese and English" (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p. 21). Despite these recommendations, at times, there still exists an element of tension between those who advocate the use of Maltese in education and those who call for the widespread presence of the L2 across the curriculum. Different stakeholders, including teachers, might overzealously adopt a stance in favour of either one of these two languages while dismissing the significance of the other. In line with Farrugia (2009a, 2009b), Camilleri Grima (2013) states that an English-only policy in Maltese classrooms is "not the most educationally beneficial" (p. 555). For Camilleri Grima (2013, p. 565), "the contention [is] whether it is fair and practical to enforce an English-only policy across the curriculum or whether it would be better and sufficient to review the teaching of English as a subject".

Given the bilingual context outside the classroom, she affirms that codeswitching amongst teachers and learners is unavoidable:

> Resolving pedagogical difficulties through codeswitching is a very elaborate and complex phenomenon, which bilingual teachers and pupils perform unconsciously, and which benefits not only the learning process but also the rapport between participants (Camilleri Grima, 2013, p. 565).

Both Farrugia (2009a, 2009b) and Camilleri Grima (2013) believe that codeswitching is a resource for teachers and learners in Maltese classrooms. However, the issue is further

problematized by the fact that Malta's performance on recent international studies leaves much to be desired in terms of young people's attainment in both Maltese and English. For example, Malta ranked 35th out of 45 countries in the 2011 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2013), which measured the reading attainment of 3,598 Maltese students aged 10 years. Moreover, PIRLS shows that, "6 per cent of Maltese schools have more than 90 per cent English-speaking pupils; 12 per cent of the schools have between 51 per cent and 90 per cent and 82 per cent of the schools have less than 50 per cent English-speaking pupils" (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2013, p. 9). This indicates that Maltese society is becoming increasingly multicultural, and hence, the classroom is gradually becoming a multilingual environment where switching between Maltese and English might risk putting non-Maltese speakers at a disadvantage.

To some extent, the situation in Malta is typical of other small countries that experience a tension between proponents of the use of English in education and those who feel duty-bound to safeguard the national language by curtailing the use of English in the classroom. For example, Hilmarsson-Dunn and Kristinsson (2010, p. 208) report that:

> There exists a conflict in Iceland between the necessity of having a population educated in English, in order to communicate in the wider world, and the desire to keep the indigenous language intact and fully functioning.

The question is how to effectively equip learners with a high level of proficiency in English while ensuring that their mother tongue and other language needs are adequately supported. One seemingly simple solution is to ensure that the number of hours allotted to language instruction is substantial. Nonetheless, PIRLS (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2013, p. 12) shows that in Malta, the time devoted to language instruction over an entire scholastic year consists of only 181 hours; 51 fewer hours than the international average (232 hours). Moreover, the number of hours dedicated to reading as part of language instruction (37 hours) falls way short of the international average (71 hours) and is the lowest of all the countries participating in PIRLS. This is exacerbated by the fact that the number of hours reserved for reading across the curriculum (104 hours) is much less than the international average (146 hours). These results seem to entail that Malta needs to consider new ways of maximizing the time spent on language instruction, so that learners are provided with the opportunity of becoming competent speakers of English, Maltese and other languages.

The study

The study was conducted at a primary school (henceforth School Y) located in the northwest of Malta, the largest island of an archipelago in the central part of the Mediterranean Sea. The country is situated 93 kilometres south of Sicily and 290 kilometres north of Libya. It gained independence from the British Empire in 1964 after having been a colony since 1800. It joined the EU in 2004. The population amounts to around 425,000 (National Statistics Office, 2014b), and the country is one of the most densely populated EU members. According to the 2011 census (National Statistics Office, 2014a), there were more than 20,000 non-Maltese nationals living in the country; however, since then, the number of migrants has increased substantially. Unpublished

statistics produced by the Ministry for Education and Employment (2015) show that the number of non-Maltese students in primary and secondary schools has been on a steep increase for the past five years.

The population of School Y stood at around 800 students and almost a quarter was made up of learners originating from a variety of countries and speaking a wide array of first languages. To cater for the needs of learners who might not speak English or Maltese, the school organized inclusion classes that addressed the language needs of these learners. Moreover, one Language Support Teacher was meant to help the class teachers with the task of teaching English and Maltese to these learners.

Given the fact that they provide depth in relation to beliefs, knowledge and experiences (Lodico *et al.*, 2010), semi-structured interviews were held with six teachers at School Y, these representing around 17 per cent of all the school's primary-level teachers. The selection of teachers was made on the principle of representation of genders, level of teaching experience and year groups taught. As shown by Table I, the six teachers who participated in this study were on average quite experienced and had spent a number of years teaching at School Y.

Each teacher was responsible for teaching a class belonging to one of the six-year groups that constitute primary education in Malta. Even though the study did not involve the participation of a Year 1 teacher, Teacher 1 (henceforth T1) acted as a complementary teacher and, hence, had experience of teaching Year 1 learners. A complementary teacher addresses the literacy needs of learners from any year group who are found to require special assistance based on a class teacher's assessment using a core competences checklist for Maltese and/or English (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, 2012, p. 17).

The face-to-face interviews were held in a one-to-one manner and each one lasted about 30 minutes. The purpose of each interview was to probe the views of the teachers with respect to the teaching and learning of English in a multicultural context. Given that it was not possible to conduct classroom observation, the interviews were also used to form an understanding of the strategies these teachers adopted when teaching the language. At the start of each interview, every teacher was asked whether he or she preferred doing the interview in English or Maltese. Given that all the interviewees opted for Maltese, each transcript had to be translated into English. Permission to conduct these interviews was granted by the Head of School and the Director of Research and Development within the Ministry for Education. Every teacher gave his or her consent for the interview to be audio recorded and for it to be used in the study. Each interview was subsequently transcribed. The transcribed responses were coded and a number of categories emerged from the data. These categories were then grouped in terms of a number of broad issues: the use of English in a multicultural context, attitudes

Teacher	Gender	Years teaching	Years at school Y	Year group taught
T1	Male	11	11	Complementary
T2	Female	11	11	2
T3	Female	3	2	3
T4	Female	15	12	4
T5	Female	7	7	5
T6	Male	10	6	6

Table I. Study participant information

towards English, teaching and learning strategies and the opportunities in learning and teaching English in a multicultural classroom. These categories were used to organize the findings discussed in the next few sections.

Using English in a multicultural context

As mentioned already, School Y had learners originating from a wide selection of countries. This meant that teachers taught classes made up of learners with a range of language backgrounds. Apart from English and Maltese, some of the languages mentioned by the interviewees consisted of Russian, Thai, Serbian, Bulgarian, Arabic, French, Italian, Hindi, Turkish and Romanian. All the teachers indicated that their classes were multilingual, some of them to such an extent that Maltese L1 speakers constituted a minority. In fact, one teacher stated, "Out of a class of 19, I only have four pupils who are of pure Maltese origin" (T3). In such a multicultural environment, it was also very common to find learners who did not speak either English or Maltese. One teacher pointed out that "there are students who come to us without knowing how to speak English or Maltese. Right now we have around 150 such learners" (T1). A colleague of his explained:

> I have a class of 24 and basically everyone speaks English. This year so far I haven't had a learner who speaks no English at all. But I've had such cases in the past (T6).

The multicultural nature of these teachers' classes seemed to be the norm rather than the exception, and hence, the specific set of pedagogical knowledge and skills required to operate effectively within such an environment was a necessity rather than an accessory.

Given the multicultural nature of these teachers' classes, English was used for a variety of purposes. They explained how English was used both inside and outside the classroom, both to learn and play. As one teacher pointed out, "The language learners use the most is English. They have to" (T5). The teachers claimed that during recreational periods children could be observed using mostly English to communicate with one another whilst playing. These teachers seemed to agree with the idea that learners "know that English is the only means to communicate with friends and teachers [...] even when it comes to requesting basic things [...] English is a lingua franca for most students" (T6).

It seems clear that at School Y, the use of English is prevalent in both formal and informal contexts and learners are presented with plenty of opportunities for exposure and use.

All the teachers described English as being more than a subject that they were meant to teach for one hour every day. In class, the interviewees felt constrained to use mostly English with the learners, irrespective of whether they spoke Maltese or not. This was essential to ensure that the rest of the class could understand what the teacher was saying to one particular learner. English was used to teach all the subjects forming part of the curriculum, even those subjects that are traditionally taught in Maltese, such as Religion and Social Studies. This was because the teachers could not afford to use Maltese for a substantial stretch of time without risking that an entire segment of the class failed to comprehend the subject matter. One teacher affirmed that he taught "most subjects in English. For example, I had to learn certain religious terminology that I had never used before in order to teach Religion" (T6). The fact that the teachers themselves

had to expand their own lexical knowledge to teach the curriculum in English seems to indicate how teaching in a multicultural environment compels teachers to enhance their own language proficiency.

Attitudes towards English

The teachers explained that in general their learners had a very positive attitude towards English and found it natural to speak the language. This was even apparent in learners originating from a Maltese-speaking household. The teachers agreed with the claim that "our Maltese students don't feel forced to speak English. They find it natural to switch depending on whom they're speaking to" (T1). A colleague of his affirmed that "even the Maltese pupils find it natural to speak English because they're used to interacting with foreigners" (T3). Another teacher suggested that "some Maltese students might not like speaking English in the lesson but find it normal to do so when playing" (T5). This implies that School Y provided its bilingual learners with an environment in which they considered it normal to engage in code switching and language accommodation depending on their context and interlocutor.

All the teachers indicated that their learners strived hard to improve their proficiency in English irrespective of which language learning level they were at. They seemed to agree with the idea that "students make a bigger effort to learn English, especially the ability to have a conversation" (T6). This positive attitude towards learning English apparently resulted in better results in assessment but was not evident in the case of Maltese. In fact, one teacher asserted that "everyone gives English priority but most of the foreign students resist Maltese because they have no need for it" (T2). She continued by saying that "the tendency in this school is for our students to do much better in English than in Maltese" (T2). A colleague of hers remarked that "in this school we notice a discrepancy between English and Maltese […] Students feel a need to learn English but not Maltese and so they fare better in it" (T6). The need to communicate with teachers and peers in a multicultural school environment seemed to be one of the main motivating factors behind these learners' efforts to bolster their English language proficiency.

Teaching and learning strategies

Given the fact that these teachers were sometimes faced with the challenge of teaching learners who spoke neither one of the country's official languages meant that they had to resort to basic communication strategies such as signing and translating. Owing to his role, the complementary teacher in the group of interviewees came in contact with many such learners, and he explained how "we first start communicating with them using signs and then the other students help us" (T1). What he meant by this is that "we encourage students of the same language to translate for us until the child picks up some English" (T1). A colleague of his described how she used the same strategies:

> Those who don't speak Maltese – half my class this year – communicate with me in English. Some speak it well, others not so much. We use signs or someone to translate for us (T2).

For these teachers using signs was as important as the ability to capitalize on the assistance provided by certain learners in the class. This meant knowing how to exploit group work as effectively as possible. In fact, the complementary teacher explained, "When I group students I make sure that they can help each other […] The children help you out" (T1). Another teacher implied that relying on her students' assistance was

necessary given the mixed abilities in her class: "I ask those who speak English fluently to help the beginners. I can't attend to everyone's needs at the same time" (T4). These fluent speakers were expected to act as interpreters between the teacher and pupils who were still in the initial stages of learning English. Moreover, all the teachers indicated that translation was a task that they had to carry out with respect to the materials used in class. As one teacher pointed out, "I sometimes have to teach Maltese through English […] I have to translate everything" (T2). The emphasis placed on translation as a communicative strategy did not detract from the value given to English as the medium of learning and instruction.

In classes in which the teachers had a number of beginners they used narratives and visuals and gave a lot of importance to increasing their learners' store of vocabulary as well as developing their speaking skills. One teacher stated, "I use plenty of pictures and stories but teaching English is easier than Maltese since most students have to speak it anyway" (T2). What she implied by this was that even in the case of beginners, learning English was aided by the fact that they were immersed in an environment where the L2 was necessarily present because of the multilingual composition of the class. Another teacher asserted, "I tend to use plenty of visuals and start with a lot of vocabulary so as to give them the basic tools" (T3). The main aim for these teachers seemed to be that of facilitating communication and that is why oracy took centre stage. As one teacher pointed out, "I don't need to encourage them to practise their English speaking skills in class because they have to do it all the same" (T5). The strategies employed by these teachers probably proved effective because they were not just meant to teach the target language in a vacuum but were driven by a communicative need.

Opportunities

The teachers seemed to be aware of a number of opportunities in learning and teaching English in a multicultural classroom. All of them maintained that students had a highly positive attitude towards learning English and this was because a multicultural classroom was "a good language learning environment. The students are receptive to learning English and this facilitates my job" (T5). One teacher suggested that besides the advantages she enjoyed as a result of this, learners benefitted by making relatively better progress in English: "The pupils' attitude towards English is very positive and that makes my job easier. Perhaps the subject in which we fare better when compared to other schools is English" (T4). Another interviewee identified other benefits to learning English alongside speakers of other languages as opposed to doing so in a monolingual classroom:

> Our Maltese students aren't insular. They're used to a multicultural and multilingual environment and don't find it strange to switch between languages. They've grown up in such a context and so they're open to the world (T1).

It seems clear that a multicultural classroom can be rewarding for both teacher and learner, especially because it engenders the right kind of motivation on the part of the latter.

According to the teachers, a multicultural classroom had the capacity to lead to higher levels of proficiency in English. All the teachers agreed with the idea that "the students' fluency improves very quickly because there is a need to learn English" (T3). This enhanced fluency was also a result of the fact that "English acts as a medium for

teaching other subjects and so students are using it all the time" (T6). Moreover, some of the teachers indicated that as a result of constant use, they had experienced an improvement in their own proficiency. As one interviewee remarked, "I myself have become more fluent in English and so have the Maltese students. We all benefit from it" (T2). This finding is particularly interesting in light of the fact that all of the teachers seemed much more confident doing the interview in Maltese despite knowing that it dealt with the subject of teaching English. At the beginning of the interview, one of them asserted, "It's not that I don't like speaking English but I feel more comfortable speaking Maltese" (T1). A colleague of his confessed, "I don't want to make mistakes since you're recording this" (T4). These quotations are in line with the idea that non-native English-speaking teachers might experience "a certain level of threat and insecurity in relation to their confidence and authority" (Diniz de Figueiredo, 2011, p. 430). Even though they probably lacked the confidence to do a recorded interview in English with someone whom they knew to be a language specialist, these teachers seemed to believe that using the L2 in a multicultural classroom on a daily basis might have had an effect on their proficiency.

Conclusion

The above-mentioned findings indicate that the teachers who participated in this study were aware of the opportunities of a multicultural classroom environment and sought to take advantage of this as often as possible. However, they felt stressed by the inordinate amounts of preparation that they were required to do with minimal assistance. The only support they could count on was that provided by their colleagues, and while this seemed to strengthen their sense of collegiality, the teachers felt almost isolated from the rest of the educational system. The teachers at School Y felt as if they were being ignored because their learners did not represent the majority of students in Maltese primary schools. According to one interviewee, "The school has gained a reputation for being made up of a foreign majority and this has led some people to see it as abnormal and hence to be ignored" (T4).

If teachers are made to feel as if they have to fend for themselves without the possibility of relying on any assistance from outside the school, they are going to find it much harder to face the challenges posed by a multicultural classroom environment in which learners of varying levels of ability are equally entitled to succeed.

Given teachers' concerns about mixed ability classes, it is necessary to form an understanding of the different levels that exist amongst L2 learners in Malta. A learner corpus made up of written and spoken data collected from a representative sample of the learner population would provide a comprehensive picture of their use of English. O'Keefe *et al.* (2007, p. 21) explain that "As well as providing an empirical basis for checking our intuitions about language, corpora have also brought to light features about language which had eluded our intuition". Learner corpus analysis enables teaching and assessment to be in line with learners' abilities and needs.

The situation at School Y seems to illustrate the need for evidence-based policy-making in relation to English teaching. The voices of teachers need to be heard by those responsible for drawing up educational and language policies, designing curricula and devising pedagogical guidelines. Hayes (2010) argues that centralized programmes to reform English teaching need to consult teachers prior to implementation; otherwise, the risk is that they may lack impact at classroom level. He contends that

"understanding the social world of teachers and teaching is crucial to a complete understanding of English language teaching" and considers it "important for the future of education in any society, of which English teaching is a part, that teacher agency is understood and is recognized as an essential element in the educational process" (Hayes, 2010, p. 317).

The top-down imposition of a one-size-fits-all approach is detrimental to the learning process. This is even more so in a society that is becoming increasingly multicultural. As one teacher put it, "This is a growing phenomenon which will affect all schools eventually. Those in authority need to come here and learn from us before making a mess of things" (T1). Unless teachers are roped into the process of identifying the best classroom practices for their learners, the latter will continue to be short-changed by those in authority and it will be solely up to teachers to act as a bulwark against failure.

As the classroom environment evolves to accommodate multilingual learners who live in a multicultural society, the demands on teachers of English change, and hence, adequate measures need to be taken to ensure that they are able to support their learners in developing a satisfactory level of proficiency in the global language. English language proficiency is not a panacea to social injustice; however, it can be empowering for young people if they are given the opportunity of adding it to their linguistic repertoire. This underscores the need for language-in-education policies that acknowledge the linguistic diversity of contemporary society and the future contexts in which young people will live, study and work in. It is essential that such policies nurture the multilingualism of each learner by instituting ways of reinforcing the learning of English, the mother tongue and other languages.

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Further reading

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