

Parents Know Best – An Examination of Parent Perceptions and Subsequent Proposals for a More Efficient Bilingual Education Experience in the Primary Years Cycle

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Abstract

In the light of Mayo's definition of 'praxis' (Mayo, 2018) where it is posited that this involves a critical evaluation of a concept through the adoption of impartiality and consequently seeks to bring about change as necessary, this paper evaluates the results of a large scale quantitative survey with 1318 parents whose children attended Grade V - the penultimate class in the primary years' educational cycle. The paper examines these respondents' perceptions on current Maltese and English language practices in their children's classrooms and presents what parents perceive as possible solutions towards an improvement in the quality of bilingual education experience for young learners.

Keywords: *Primary Years Cycle, Maltese, English, language proficiency, bilingual education.*

Introduction

This paper presents the results of a large-scale quantitative survey conducted amongst 1316 parents whose children were attending Grade 5 primary school at the time. This exercise was undertaken in order to gauge whether parents were generally satisfied with the progress their children had made in terms of proficiency in the two official Maltese languages: Maltese and English, and if they felt that proficiency or progress was not what it should be, parents were also asked what could be done in order to improve the status quo. Obtaining insight from parent respondents was necessary in order to have a complete picture that would then complement data obtained from another large-scale quantitative study conducted over a four year period with 987 Grade 5 primary school children as well as a third qualitative study conducted with Grade 5 primary school teachers. Hence parents were asked a series of questions through a questionnaire sent home for them to complete and then return to the researcher. Primarily parents were asked how satisfied they were with

their children’s spoken and written Maltese and English proficiency; whether they thought their children would be age-appropriate bilinguals towards the end of the primary years’ cycle, whilst being invited to contribute any suggestions towards improving the primary education bilingual experience.

Parent satisfaction with Spoken Maltese Proficiency

A total of 686 parents in State schools claim to be either ‘very satisfied’ or ‘satisfied’ with their children’s spoken Maltese proficiency. Considering the fact that 745 State school parents participated in the study, this translates into a percentage of 92% State school parents who are the most satisfied with their children’s proficiency levels of spoken Maltese. Yet another high percentage of 88.7% of Church school parents also declared themselves to be satisfied with their children’s spoken Maltese progress, however the same cannot be said of Private school parents, where only 52.9% described themselves as being either ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied.’ A common factor across the three school types is the fact that most respondents (46.4% from State schools, 48.8% from Church schools and 39.1% from Private schools) only go as far as claiming themselves to be rather ‘satisfied’ with their children’s spoken Maltese – a surprising fact, considering that the Maltese language is the L1 for the majority.

Table 1.1 Parent Satisfaction with their children’s Spoken Maltese Proficiency

	School Type			Total
	State	Church	Private	
Very Satisfied	340	193	12	545
	45.6%	39.9%	13.8%	41.4%
Satisfied	346	236	34	616
	46.4%	48.8%	39.1%	46.8%
Dissatisfied	50	44	29	123
	6.7%	9.1%	33.3%	9.3%
Very Dissatisfied	9	11	12	32
	1.2%	2.3%	13.8%	2.4%
Total	745	484	87	1316
	100%	100%	100%	100%

$$\chi^2(6) = 130.98, p=0.000$$

As shown in the next table, Table 1.2, percentages dwindle somewhat (when compared with those obtained for spoken Maltese) when parents were asked to

gauge their satisfaction with their children’s spoken English. In this instance, the parents who rated themselves as being ‘very satisfied’ with their children’s spoken English goes down to 37.8%, whilst a little less than half of the sample (49.1%) stated that they were ‘satisfied.’ The percentage of those parents who recorded their dissatisfaction with English oracy rose to 13.1% (11.1% + 2%).

Table 1.2 Parent satisfaction with their children’s Spoken English proficiency

	School Type			Total
	State	Church	Private	
Very Satisfied	249	193	12	545
	45.6%	39.9%	13.8%	41.4%
Satisfied	346	236	34	616
	46.4%	48.8%	39.1%	46.8%
Dissatisfied	50	44	29	123
	6.7%	9.1%	33.3%	9.3%
Very Dissatisfied	9	11	12	32
	1.2%	2.3%	13.8%	2.4%
Total	745	484	87	1316
	100%	100%	100%	100%

$$\chi^2(6) = 58.08, p=0.000$$

The highest percentage of those parents claiming to be ‘very satisfied’ with their children’s spoken English are those parents whose children attend Private schools. Contrastingly, percentages featuring this response are lowest (33.5%) in State schools, with a slightly higher percentage of 39.9% of Church school parents, standing in middle of the spectrum.

The constant exposure to English oracy in the Private school domain, coupled by the fact that it is also the language mostly used at home, makes this a win-win situation for Private school children and their parents. Nonetheless, despite all this, there are still 6.9% Private school parents who are not pleased with their children’s spoken English progress. While it seems to be evident that there is certainly no lack of exposure to English in Private schools, the fact remains that those parents who cannot or do not make use of English within the home domain, are going to witness their own children struggle when compared with their peers who hail from a predominantly, English-speaking background.

When compared with Private schools, the percentage of those Church school parents claiming to be dissatisfied is quite similar in both schools (6.9% in Private schools and 7% in Church schools); however dissatisfaction is the highest in State schools, with 17.8% clearly showing that parents are less than happy with their children’s progress, towards what is mostly the end of the Primary Years Cycle.

Table 1.3 Parent satisfaction with their children's Written Maltese Proficiency

	School Type			Total
	State	Church	Private	
Very Satisfied	142	61	6	211
	19.1%	12.6%	9.2%	16.1%
Satisfied	446	287	32	765
	60%	59.45%	36.8%	58.3%
Dissatisfied	134	118	32	284
	18%	24.4%	36.8%	21.6%
Very Dissatisfied	21	17	15	53
	2.8%	3.5%	17.2%	4%
Total	743	483	87	1313
	100%	100%	100%	100%

$$\chi^2(6) = 73.81, p=0.000$$

Out of a total sample of 1313 respondents (as three respondents did not answer this question), only 16.1% claimed to be 'very satisfied', while a further 58.3% described themselves as being 'satisfied.' It would mean that 74.4% of all parents are relatively pleased with their children's progress, whilst 25.6% (21.6% + 4%) of the total sample, have voiced their dissatisfaction. Parent dissatisfaction with written Maltese is generally lowest in State schools (20.8%) and highest in Private schools (54% - from the 36.8% + 17.2%), with Church schools parents standing between these two extremities, having 27.9% reporting dissatisfaction with the written aspect of Maltese.

Table 1.4 Parent Satisfaction with their children's Written English Proficiency

	School Type			Total
	State	Church	Private	
Very Satisfied	180	133	40	353
	24.2%	27.5%	46%	26.8%
Satisfied	426	301	41	768
	57.2%	62.2%	47.1%	58.4%
Dissatisfied	120	47	6	173
	16.1%	9.7%	6.9%	13.1%
Very Dissatisfied	19	3	0	22
	2.6%	0.6%	0%	1.7%
Total	745	484	87	1316
	100%	100%	100%	100%

$$\chi^2(6) = 37.21, p=0.000$$

Yet again, when asked about satisfaction with written English proficiency, it transpires that only 26.8% respondents from the total sample of 1316 respondents reported feeling ‘very satisfied’ with their children’s written English proficiency. Most respondents (58.4%) reported being just ‘satisfied’, whilst a total of 14.8% proved to be dissatisfied with the command of written English. Church school parents rank second in terms of satisfaction with their children’s written English skills with 89.7% (27.5% + 62.2%) reporting this. Out of the three school types, parent satisfaction with written English is relatively the ‘lowest’ in State schools with 81.4% claiming to be ‘satisfied.’

A comparative analysis of the data for both spoken and written Maltese and English as presented in Table 1.5 allows for a comparative analysis for parent satisfaction with both the oral and written aspects for both languages

Table 1.5 Comparative analysis – parent satisfaction with oral and written aspects for both Maltese and English

	Spoken Maltese	Written Maltese	Spoken English	Written English
Very Satisfied	41.4%	16.1%	37.8%	26.8%
Satisfied	46.8%	58.3%	49.1%	58.4%
Dissatisfied	9.3%	21.6%	11.1%	13.1%
Very Dissatisfied	2.4%	4%	2%	1.7%

Satisfaction with written proficiency in both languages is perceivably weaker when compared with spoken proficiency in both languages according to data provided by parents in this study, therefore validating the hypothesis in this respect. As is evident in Table 1.5, whereas 41.4% are very satisfied with spoken Maltese, only 16.1% are ‘very satisfied’ with written Maltese. The same applies for English where more respondents (37.8%) are ‘very satisfied’ whilst only 26.8% are ‘very satisfied’ with written English. Therefore parents’ satisfaction with written skills is far lower than that for spoken skills.

Whether parents think that their children are going to be fluent in Maltese and English by the end of the Primary Years’ Cycle

The low p value presented in Table 1.6, proves the presence of the alternative hypothesis, signifying the relevance of the two categorical variables being analysed. Parents were asked to state whether they thought that the goal of NMC (1999) and the NCF (2012), which identified bilingualism at the end of the Primary Years Cycle as the optimum ideal, could actually be reached by their children. Despite the ratings given initially by parents, at the end of the day, only half of the total sample of 1313

respondents who answered this question (since there were three respondents who did not indicate any answer) believed that their children were going to be the age-appropriate bilinguals that the Maltese educational system aims for them to be.

The differences in terms of the language exposure being received by the respondents' children, are more apparent in the variety of responses acquired from Table 1.6. Twenty point four percent (20.4%) of the respondents (a total of 268 respondents) said their children were going to be more fluent in Maltese, whilst almost just as many, 18.5% (a total of 243 respondents) have been described by their parents as being more likely to be fluent in English. Four point six percent (4.6%) do not know which language their children are going to be more fluent in.

Table 1.6 Whether parents believe that their children will be bilingual by the end of the Primary School years by Type of School

	School Type			Total
	State	Church	Private	
Yes	358	273	25	656
	48.1%	56.6%	28.7%	50%
No	60	20	5	85
	8.1%	4.1%	5.7%	6.5%
More fluent in Maltese	198	70	0	268
	26.6%	14.5%	0%	20.4%
More fluent in English	82	106	55	243
	11%	22%	63.2%	18.5%
	46	13	2	61
Don't know	6.2%	2.7%	2.3%	4.6%
	744	482	87	1313
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

$$\chi^2(8) = 188.04, p=0.000$$

It is only Church school parents who believe that their children do stand a chance of reaching the ideal stage where they are fluent in both languages by the end of the Primary Years Cycle. This was the opinion as expressed by more than half the respondents (56.6%) whose children attended Church schools.

Less than half of the State school parents (48.1%) believe that their children will end up being fluent in both languages. As many as 26.6% of the respondents stated that their children are going to be more fluent in Maltese and this would be no surprise given the dominance of Maltese language exposure both within the home as well as the school domain. A further 11% said their children are going to be more fluent in English, whilst 6.2% of the State school respondents did not indicate an answer other than a 'Don't know.'

Towards improving Maltese language proficiency – parents’ perspectives

Respondents were asked what could be done to improve the level of Maltese teaching from their point of view and were able to select more than one answer from a list of pre-coded responses. Being a multiple-response type of question, the total number of answers selected by respondents add up to 1875 individual responses.

Table 1.7 shows that the response most-commonly selected by parents 26.1% of the time was the move to have ‘specialised teachers’ teaching in schools, so that the level of spoken and written Maltese used by teachers when delivering classroom content, would be a reflection of their own area of specialisation thus enhancing the quality of teaching.

Table 1.7: Parents’ suggestions towards improving Maltese language proficiency in schools by Type of School

		Type of School			Total
		State	Church	Private	
Specialised teachers in Maltese	Count	302	165	23	490
	% within school types	29.3%	23.8%	15.1%	26.1%
	% across school types	61.6%	33.7%	4.7%	100%
Earlier exposure to Maltese	Count	130	108	33	271
	% within school types	12.6%	15.6%	21.7%	14.5%
	% across school types	48%	39.9%	12.2%	100%
More time for spoken Maltese in class	Count	225	168	52	445
	% within school types	21.9%	24.2%	34.2%	23.7%
	% across school types	50.6%	37.8%	11.7%	100%
More use of Maltese in the curriculum	Count	158	128	27	313
	% within school types	15.4%	18.4%	17.8%	16.7%
	% across school types	50.5%	40.9%	8.6%	100%
Use only Maltese in the early years	Count	50	19	2	71
	% within school types	4.9%	2.7%	1.3%	3.8%
	% across school types	70.4%	26.8%	2.8%	100%
Use Maltese exclusively during lessons	Count	2	0	0	2
	% within school types	0.2%	0%	0%	0.1%
	% across school types	100%	0%	0%	100%
Other	Count	57	56	6	119
	% within school types	5.5%	8.1%	3.9%	6.3%
	% across school types	47.9%	47.1%	5%	100%

Don't know	Count	105	50	9	164
	% within school types	10.2%	7.2%	5.5%	8.7%
	% across school types	64%	30.5%	5.9%	100%
Total	Count	1029	694	152	1875
	% within school types	54.9%	37%	8.1%	100%
	% across school types	100%	100%	100%	100%

$$\chi^2(14) = 52.85, p=0.000$$

A closer look at Table 1.7, specifically at the row percentages across school types, indicates that there are more State (61.6%) and Church school parents (33.7%) who tend to believe there is indeed need for teachers to be specialists in the language they are teaching so as to provide learners with a more authentic language learning experience. On the contrary, only 4.7% Private school parents chose this response. It must be pointed out that this support for having specialised teachers in English is not new. In fact, in her monograph, 'Profiling English language use in Malta', Sciriha (2013, p.64) had also found that parents were all for having specialist teachers to teach English because the general mind-set was that quality of the content being passed on, and more importantly the way lessons would be imparted through the use of accurate pronunciation and use of the language would prove to be beneficial to the students.

The second most common response indicated by parents in this present study was a response that was selected 23.7% of the time. Parents indicated the need for more time to be devoted to spoken Maltese within the classroom. Unfortunately, both teachers and parents complain about vast curricula, sometimes loaded with information that is not always that relevant to the students' needs in addition to the fact that there is little time that may be spared to having spoken interaction within the classroom. On the other hand, although the researcher believes that more participation in class would certainly allow students to practice their target language and enrich themselves by being exposed to the language when they listen to their peers, there is very little time that may be devoted to the spoken medium, keeping in mind the fact that class numbers are not small.

The third most-cited suggestion by parents was to have more use of Maltese in the curriculum (16.7%). The National Minimum Curriculum (1999) had directed schools to make use of English for subjects such as English, Maths and Science, whilst other subjects such as Maltese, Religious Studies and Social Studies were to be taught through the medium of Maltese. The fact that parents cited this suggestion amongst others, shows the understanding that exposure to quality Maltese is somewhat limited in some schools.

Amongst other initiatives, parents recommended:

- a) keeping the two languages separate - the One Parent, One Language approach has helped in raising bilingual children successfully. Having part of

a sentence spoken in English and part spoken in Maltese was not helping improve proficiency in either language.

- b) giving more importance to Maltese by making further use of the language through the use of e-books and other technology - the need to have more interesting books in Maltese in all school libraries, as well as the need to have Maltese language programmes that would be of interest to young children was also frequently cited by parents.
- c) that they themselves adopt a proactive approach through collaboration with the school to give priority to both languages, without the constant code-mixing that does little to help students acquire proficiency in either language.
- d) empowering parents to help their children on their journey towards bilingualism. At times, parents themselves are at a loss, particularly when they themselves cannot cope with Maltese or with the subject matter being tackled at school.

Towards improving English language proficiency – parents’ perspectives

Parents were asked what may be done to improve the level of English teaching in school. As shown in Table 1.8, the most commonly-selected response selected by parents to help improve the level of English being learnt by their children was to allow for ‘more time for spoken English in class.’ This was a response selected no less than 552 times (27.5%). The second most common suggestion was that of having ‘specialist teachers in English’, a response selected 525 times (26.2%), whilst the third more popular suggestion was to have ‘earlier exposure to English’ a response indicated 436 times or 21.8% of the time.

Table 1.8: Parents’ suggestions towards improving the level of English in schools by Type of School

		Type of School			Total
		State	Church	Private	
Specialised teachers in English	Count	326	175	24	525
	% within school types	26.2%	26.2%	26.7%	26.2%
	% across school types	62.1%	33.3%	4.6%	100%
	Count	280	136	20	436
	% within school types	22.5%	20.4%	22.2%	21.8%
Earlier exposure to English	% across school types	64.2%	31.2%	4.6%	100%

More time for spoken English in class	Count	337	195	20	552
	% within school types	27%	29.2%	22.2%	27.5%
	% across school types	61.1%	35.3%	3.6%	100%
More use of English in the curriculum	Count	164	71	12	247
	% within school types	13.2%	10.6%	13.3%	12.3%
	% across school types	66.4%	28.7%	4.9%	100%
Use only English in the early years	Count	35	12	3	50
	% within school types	2.8%	1.8%	3.3%	2.5%
	% across school types	70%	24%	6%	100%
Use English exclusively during lessons	Count	2	0	0	2
	% within school types	0.2%	0%	0%	0.1%
	% across school types	100%	0%	0%	100%
Other	Count	30	32	2	64
	% within school types	2.4%	4.8%	2.2%	3.2%
	% across school types	46.9%	50%	3.1%	100%
Don't know	Count	71	47	9	127
	% within school types	5.7%	7%	10%	6.3%
	% across school types	55.9%	37%	7.1%	100%
Total	Count	1246	668	90	2004
	% within school types	62.2%	33.3%	4.5%	100%
	% across school types	100%	100%	100%	100%

$$\chi^2 (16) = 20.05, p=0.218$$

a) - More time for spoken English practice in class

As has already been mentioned, it is no secret that syllabi in Maltese schools are rather loaded. Teachers know it is always a struggle to manage to cover a syllabus in good time. Giving children the opportunity to be able to express themselves through the spoken medium of the target language is of course ideal and necessary and a re-evaluation of the curriculum content might be necessary.

Potentially, educational authorities could look at the successful Finnish educational systems, where the focus during the early primary school years is more on active engagement and understanding of the world and the way it works, possibly putting literacy on the back burner, whilst immersing young children in a world of spoken interaction, where creativity and expressive skills are put on the forefront, rather than exposing children to curriculum content which might be unnecessary and inappropriate during the primary years. This is a crucial time when the critical period for language learning should be fully exploited with attention being given to the development of comprehension skills which precede production. This might be one of the sectors that we may truly improve upon.

b) - Introducing Specialist English language teachers in the primary classroom

The second most-commonly selected response was the need to once again have ‘specialist teachers in English’ (26.2%), a selection indicated 525 times. This response was the highest in State schools (62.1%), followed by Church school parent respondents (33.3%). Only 4.6% of Private school parents (4.6%) selected this response.

Parent respondents further commented that ‘The teachers should have better English. In general, some texts given at school are very poor’ (This was a comment made by a Church school parent hailing from the Northern Harbour area). Yet another parent complained that ‘We should have teachers who are able to speak and write good English’, and in the words of another, ‘The children need to be exposed to English without switching or reverting to Maltese – no translating or code-switching.’ Yet another parent went as far as to say that we should have where possible, ‘British teachers with a good British accent (because when) Maltese people learn English in school, they think they might be good (at it but) when they come to talk to a British person, (the latter) can’t understand anything (that the Maltese people say).’

c) - Making English a priority during the early years

The third most commonly selected response (21.8%) selected 436 times, was the call for earlier exposure to English in the primary school sector. This response was most commonly selected by State school parents (64.2%), followed by Church school parents (31.2%) and lastly by Private school parents (4.2%).

d) - Parents providing adequate target language exposure in the home domain

Other parents also rightly believed that a school and its teachers cannot perform miracles and that support from home was crucial if successful language learning was to take place, ‘My children are English speakers and they have no problem with this language’, whilst another parent maintained that, ‘It has to come from the family.’ This is all very well, if the parents or the guardians in the home domain can support quality English language use and are at home long enough to expose their children to quality English language use. If this is not the case, then a child would only receive English language exposure from television programmes and the rest of social media.

Concluding comments

Data collected revealed that 71.4% of all parent respondents claimed that they used Maltese with their children in their home domain and this reaffirms the fact that Maltese is the predominant L1 spoken within the Maltese household. Moreover results have also shown that in the majority of State schools as well as in some Church schools, students are exposed to what is a predominantly Maltese language environment in the school domain.

Forty-seven point one percent (47.1%) of the respondents are aware of the fact that Maltese is the predominant language in the school domain. What is surprising is the relatively high percentage of 32.5%, who are under the impression that English is the language that dominates the school environment. This impression is rather misleading. As Camilleri-Grima (2012) has noted,

In Maltese classrooms, there is continual interaction between the written text in English as the basic point of reference, and the oral discussion in Maltese (with code-switching) through which participants reiterate, interpret and reinterpret the written text. By using Maltese and code-switching, participants reason out problems for themselves, and find their ways to the solutions required

(Camilleri-Grima 2012, p.556).

This study has revealed that although 41.4% of all parents are 'very satisfied' with their children's spoken Maltese, only 16.1% described themselves in such positive terms when asked about their satisfaction with written Maltese. Therefore this raises some questions, since if one is able to speak a language but has limited written proficiency, there is the danger of missing the necessary threshold levels of competence (Cummins, 1976) that is absolutely vital if cognitive advantages yielded by a sound bilingual education are to be reaped.

Moreover, parents rated their children's spoken English far better than they rated their children's written English, with most (58.4%) claiming to be 'satisfied' with performance at this stage. Those respondents claiming to be 'very satisfied' with written English only amounted to 26.8%. It seems to be evident that whereas parents consider themselves as being satisfied with the spoken aspect of English, there are yet again differences which show written English to be more challenging. A distinction however must be made between students attending the three school types. This study has shown Private school parents to be the most satisfied with both English oracy and literacy, whilst far lower percentages exhibit this same degree of satisfaction from both State and Church school parents.

Private school children hail from a home background where the L1 is predominantly English. They are then immersed in an education system where their L1 is further developed and hence parent satisfaction with progress made is thus understandable. On the other hand, the situation in State schools is one wherein some students struggle with a system that would make comprehension much easier had the language of instruction been the language they felt most confident in. The relatively high rate of dissatisfaction with written English is thus made evident in the responses of State school parents, where 18.7% express dissatisfaction; whereas this percentage decreases to 10.3% for Church school parents, given that Church schools expose their students to far more English in a context where English is more than simply a language of instruction. Indeed it is the medium of communication between students themselves, whilst also being used as the language of communication in most Church schools.

This gap between spoken and written proficiency in both Maltese and English is reflected in the overall finding - only 50% of the parents who participated in this second phase of the study, predicted that their children would be sufficiently fluent in both languages. Hence, it is Church school parents who mostly believe that fluency was potential reality for their children at the end of the Primary Years' cycle.

In contrast, less State school parents (48.1%) and even less Private school parents (28.7%) said that bilingual fluency was going to be a reality for their children. This goes to show therefore, that not all children are being equipped to deal with the challenges or reap the advantages that an intensely additive bilingual programme should offer. Despite current standards and current practices and despite parent satisfaction at this stage in their children's lives, children will be making the leap into the secondary school system however some students will be offset by the apparent disadvantage of being fluent in one language but not in the other, when both are needed for their academic success. A lack of fluency in either one or the other language, act as a spoke in the wheel of success and is one of the reasons why some students inevitably lag behind or falter. Unless rigorous, quality exposure to both languages occurs as from the earliest days of primary school education and unless parents contribute by exposing and supporting their children's first and second target languages, then it seems that illiteracy, or weakness in either or both languages will hold some children back from achieving their full potential.

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Bio-note

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