

## **Sociocultural Issues Experienced by Adults Learning Maltese as a Second Language**

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### Abstract

The pedagogy of language has since time immemorial majored in the use of pens and other printed materials. However, there occurred a separation of the teaching culture into two major categories; the “big C” and “little c”, meaning high and popular culture. Over the years, advancements in various pedagogical techniques have made this boundary separating the two cultures thinner and thinner. It is now blurred with the result that one may not tell which teaching culture is applicable in various circumstances. The leading cause of these changes is sociocultural issues. Present-day evaluations of the humanities have caused a shift towards a broader view to accommodate anthropological and sociological approaches. This shift has also had an influence on the techniques which are used in teaching within the classroom setting. The current study focused on providing a comprehensive picture of various sociocultural problems affecting Maltese as a second language (ML2) pedagogy and the depth to which the reported sociocultural issues are significant to ML2 and any second language teaching and learning. This study investigated the challenges experienced by thirty-five ML2 adult learners. Participant interviews constituted the sole data collection tool. The participants, who came from all walks of life and spoke a variety of first language linguistic systems, including Semitic, Romance, Germanic, Slavic, Indo-European, Indo-Aryan, and Indo-Iranian, experienced challenges regarding their linguistic abilities, culture shock, personalities, memory, and the teaching method. The current study was required to investigate challenges encountered by adult learners of ML2 and to make some recommendations for improving instruction for adult learners.

*Keywords:* adult learners, Maltese as a second language, second language acquisition, social constructivism, sociocultural theory, sociocultural issues

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a complex process and is associated with different theories attempting to explain the manner in which people acquire a second language (L2). It is worth noting that historically there has been a change in the education paradigm from cognitivism to constructivism and socioculturalism. Consequently, SLA is experiencing a significant drift parallel to the sociocultural trend. The pedagogy approach is moving towards a social experience, an active learner who is engaged in his learning, exploration, and reading ahead of subject experience and knowledge. Therefore, there is a need to have a better understanding of sociocultural issues which affect L2 learning and teaching (Tawfiq, 2020).

An L2 learner's interlanguage is perceived to have other influential factors. It is observed that SLA depends greatly on the communicative approach and the private environment. L2 learning in a place where L2 is often spoken by the native speakers, or amid the language's own culture is viewed as a significant boost (Cook, 2016), such as was the case of the current study participants. In some cases, learners may be highly motivated and determined to learn the L2. It makes the teacher's job easier since the student takes the time to study and understand more about the L2 culture. Yet in every situation where learning an L2 is required for survival in society, school, and the workplace, there are students who are disinterested in knowing the language and its culture. Such a situation may cause the teacher to use a combination of pedagogical practices to ensure that SLA is efficient.

In the modern constructivist approach, teaching shifts its focus to task-based activities from isolated practices (Waqas Khan, Rizvi, Iqbal and Asghar, 2020). Learners are exposed to more opportunities to put into practice what they learn within the classroom environment in various assigned tasks. Socio-constructivism and the communicative language teaching approach are now taking the lead and overshadowing direct grammar instruction, which was dominant in previous years (Idaresit Akpan et al., 2020; Żammit, 2021a). The socio-constructivist approach is based on the idea that SLA is a social practice through cultural and social interactions.

### **Problem and Purpose Statement**

The inclusion of Malta in the European Union (EU) in 2004 raised the status of Maltese to one of the EU's official languages. Since 1934, Maltese has been the official language in Malta together with English. Therefore, competence in the Maltese language, Malta's national language since Independence Day (September 21, 1964), is essential for expats planning to reside and integrate in Malta or participate in trading activities.

Many industries in Malta have a substantial proportion of foreign workers. They include the internet gaming (iGaming) industry, the restaurant industry, financial services, healthcare and pharmaceuticals, the hospitality sector, and the construction and other manual sectors (Micallef, 2018). The unattractiveness of manual jobs to Maltese workers indicates that the demand for foreign workers will persist, and their communication competence in the national language will be crucial to effective communication (Micallef, 2018). The requirement that foreigners speak Maltese is also crucial for the integration of new immigrants seeking job opportunities in Malta.

About 97 per cent of Malta's 460,000-strong population speaks Maltese, and 89 per cent, 56 per cent, and 11 per cent can hold a conversation in English, Italian, and French, respectively (Quinn, 2019). While the recognition of Maltese as an official language in the EU and in Malta represents progress, it necessitates the learning of Maltese as a second language (ML2) by non-Maltese-speaking nationals residing in Malta. The Maltese government has taken appropriate

steps to address the challenge as it requires communication competence for EU nationals working in Malta under its Directive 2005/36/EU, Article 53. The directive was necessary as Malta's accession to the EU opened up opportunities for EU nationals, third party nationals, and Maltese to exploit with respect to economic development and prosperity. The government had to adjust its policy framework to create conditions that encourage effective communication.

A white paper in 2019 proposed mandatory Maltese in all schools that follow the national curriculum, requiring students to be proficient in Maltese and to acquire ML2 (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). The national policy paper established a framework for testing and enhancing students' Maltese proficiency from preschool to secondary education. Moreover, the document argues for additional incentives to encourage migrant parents/adults to learn Maltese. While one may criticise the Maltese approach as an act of nationalism, communication competence in Maltese became necessary at the moment Malta became an EU member. Delays in requiring communication competence in Maltese would affect the country's economic well-being especially for the sectors that rely on foreign workers. The government anticipated demand for courses in ML2 as expats wishing to work, live and integrate in Malta would need to be competent in using the country's national language (Żammit, 2021b).

The growing demand for ML2 lessons resulted in the introduction of two programmes to the adult lifelong learning evening classes, namely the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) Level 1: A1 and A2 in ML2 and the MQF Level 2: B1 and B2 in ML2. In 2019, the government launched the 'I Belong' programme, which aims to improve integration for foreigners from non-EU member countries through Maltese language and culture lessons (Cassar, 2019). While the demand for Maltese has been increasing, linguistic research has not kept pace. There has been no large-scale research investigating ML2 acquisition. Consequently, the present study contributes to the knowledge base regarding ML2 acquisition of adult learners.

### **The Study Objectives**

The study aims to explore specific difficulties that adult learners experience in learning ML2. Through this research the researcher would like to determine the sociocultural factors that could be challenging for L2 adult learners.

The present study contribution to knowledge is based on the following:

1. It confirms the applicability of sociocultural theory (SCT) to SLA.
2. It provides useful information for L2 course design, textbook production, syllabus planning and pedagogy, as it explores the difficulties that adult learners experience when learning ML2 which could be applied to any other L2.

This study will first review the literature on sociocultural theories. Subsequently, the techniques used to conduct this study will be identified. Next the findings and discussion, and finally the conclusion, which will include the study limitations and recommendations for future research will be provided.

### **Research Question**

This study addresses the following primary research question:

What kind of difficulties are encountered by adult learners when acquiring Maltese as a second language?

## Literature Review

### Second Language Acquisition as a Sociocultural Phenomenon

SLA is a complex process and is associated with different theories attempting to explain the manner in which people acquire an L2. Hummel (2020) acknowledges that SLA is a challenging process as a learner can feel alienated from L2 and its embedded culture. L2 learners experience the challenge of avoiding errors when using certain aspects of their first language (L1) in L2 (Ibrahim, 2019). Instead, learners using their L1 to understand an L2 can make language mistakes due to incompatibilities between L1 and L2 (Nor & Rashid, 2018). The interference of L1 makes SLA a challenging endeavour for some learners. Alternatively, L1 can be an enabler in the SLA process. The present study will explore whether learners perceive their L1 as an inhibitor or enabler in the SLA process.

Frustrations associated with SLA are not limited to classroom settings as some L2 learners struggle to communicate effectively with the native speakers of the L2 they are learning. The societal expectations of the settings in which SLA occurs can frustrate a learner who lacks the competence to meet those expectations (Hummel, 2020). While tolerance for L2 learners by the native speakers is a crucial source of motivation, a learner's tendency to communicate flawlessly in their L1 affects their attitudes towards an L2. These adult learners can grow frustrated with their struggle and inability to gain L2 competence similar to their L1 aptitude (Karousou & Nerantzaki, 2020).

Differences in teaching materials and strategies can contribute to the irritations L2 learners experience. Hummel (2020) indicated that there are differences in teaching strategies and materials in L1 and L2 settings. An individual's performance sometimes depends on the extent to which the teaching methodology is in sync with a learner's learning preferences (Fabríz, Mendzheritskaya & Stehle, 2021). Norris, Davis and Timpe-Laughlin (2017) have argued that a theory-based approach is associated with a better understanding of SLA. Therefore, L2 educators should appreciate the role of sociocultural theory (SCT) in the implementation of effective teaching and learning strategies (Feryok, 2017). The present study is based on SCT as it is one of the concepts promoting comprehensive understanding of the SLA process (Fabríz, et al., 2021).

The notion that SLA is a phenomenon that occurs solely in the learner's head has been challenged by cognitivists as they believe that a learner's sociocultural setting plays a crucial role in SLA. SCT indicates that language learning is a socially constructed process (Makhdoumi & Zoghi, 2017). Pathan, Memon, R.A., Memon, S., Khoso and Bux (2018) indicated that SCT focuses on the things that learners learn and their solutions to the challenges they experience. The authors propose that it has made a significant contribution to the field of learning and teaching languages.

The SCT concept regards participation in socially situated activities as crucial to SLA. The theory's influence is not limited to practice in education as it is also applicable to research on SLA (Pathan et al., 2018). Research studies based on SCT have been conducted and demonstrate the utility of the theory and identify opportunities for improvement (Ohta, 2017). Researchers and practitioners in the SLA field have demonstrated the role of symbolic

mediation in SLA and education. The current study seeks to understand the sociocultural needs of ML2 learners and inform the development of appropriate teaching and learning strategies.

Teaching strategies that attend to the needs of learners are crucial to SLA as SCT identifies the importance of social and cultural interactions in SLA. Castrillón (2017) encouraged teachers to familiarise themselves with the experiences of their learners to initiate the process of developing and implementing appropriate teaching approaches. Awareness of learners' experiences can give teachers insight into learners' zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky's notion of ZPD is that what a child can do today with the help of an adult, the same child could complete later as an independent learner. Therefore, ZPD enables learners to assemble relevant learning materials (Castrillón, 2017). Teachers are recommended to search for input that encourages learners to practise because behaviour is associated with better learning outcomes. They should be creative to draw the best out of previously implemented materials (Castrillón, 2017). Castrillón (2017) stated that high-quality materials can be meaningless if they fail to contribute to the development of learners' ZPD and encourage interaction. Teachers are advised to use materials, artefacts, and activities which catalyse higher mental processes for learners to understand concepts. Integration of peer work in the learning process is crucial to development as learners share insight and strategies they use to achieve academic goals. It creates opportunities for learners to solve challenges they experience collaboratively (Castrillón, 2017). Akinyemi, Rembe, Shumba and Adewumi (2019) have argued that collaborative pair work creates conditions in which peers offer mutual assistance. Their interactions are opportunities for learners to offer feedback that facilitates the development of specific aspects of language.

Teachers' creative problem-solving is crucial to SLA learners, as teaching strategies and materials should address the learners' needs. Albaiz (2016) indicated that teachers are urged to fashion tools which boost the learning process and eliminate potential barriers. Teachers can use various means to encourage learners to learn an L2. According to Castrillón (2017), teachers can facilitate SLA through the administration of challenging assignments, which learners should attempt individually. Teachers are suggested to use the individual assignments to assess learners' progress and maintain high performance expectations (Castrillón, 2017). A teacher should always strive to create opportunities for learners to practise language and generate appropriate feedback. Challenging tasks can facilitate learning as teachers can use assessment results as the basis for offering targeted feedback and interventions to help learners acquire relevant language skills and competences.

While the current study does not dwell on the learners' culture, it provides crucial information on learning ML2, which teachers can use to assist learners. Kapur (2015) argued that knowing learners' needs enables researchers and educators to design programmes which promote the creation of learning environments that encourage the realization of the desired outcomes. According to Kapur (2015), minimally structured problem-based learning rarely results in desirable outcomes. Challenging input has been demonstrated to have positive effects on learners who exhibit high cognitive functions (Castrillón, 2017). Tasks which encourage learners to use the available tools to mediate their performance are crucial to optimal performance (Storch, 2017). While L1 is a tool that learners use to develop their L2, the extent to which L1 serves the needs of L2 learners remains inconclusive (Storch, 2017). Hamidi and Bagherzadeh (2018) acknowledged that the consideration of L1 and L2 as mediational resources does not necessarily indicate the utility of L1 in SLA as it can lead to either positive or negative outcomes. The argument indicates that L1 can be an enabler or a barrier to SLA.

Therefore, educators must determine the instances in which they encourage the use of an L1 to aid SLA.

SCT emphasises the need for assistance that suits a learner's potential abilities. Nava and Pedrazzini (2018) have identified teachers' feedback as crucial input in SLA. They insist that an educator's feedback should stimulate learning as learners progress in SLA. They emphasised the role of interaction in SLA and the need for teachers to offer feedback whenever necessary. Corrective feedback, for example, is crucial to SLA as it attends to an individual learner's specific needs (Nava & Pedrazzini, 2018). On the basis of SCT, corrective feedback should consider a learner's current and potential level of performance (Storch, 2017). It should be responsive to a learner's indicators of SLA (Storch, 2017). However, Storch (2017) cautioned against providing the same corrective feedback to all learners as this technique might hinder SLA because not everyone learns in the same way and at the same rate.

Exposing learners to the native speakers' L2 culture is an approach that has been associated with increased use of L2. In their study, Chen and Yang (2017) indicated that teaching L2 learners the culture of English native speakers was associated with active participation in communication and enhanced the learners' speaking skills. Educators are advised to identify and use culturally relevant books in bilingual classrooms (Rodríguez, 2014). Books facilitate learning about an L2 culture for learners to identify with characters. While the present study does not dwell on the influence of culturally sensitive materials in the teaching and learning of Maltese, the participants come from different backgrounds. In this sense, culturally sensitive books could influence their learning of ML2. Rodríguez (2014) has argued that culture-relevant books motivate learners to learn a new language as the learners can identify with the realities portrayed. In this case, an emergent question the present study attempts to answer is whether the teaching and learning materials influence learning or whether culture representativeness influences ML2 learning.

Cultural representativeness of teaching and learning materials is relevant as SCT views L2 learning as a socially and culturally situated process. SCT postulates that learning and cognitive development are consequences of social interactions (Banković, 2015). A teacher is encouraged to investigate the learners' needs to design teaching strategies and gather relevant materials. Herrera (2016) encouraged L2 educators to invest time in learning the learners' strengths and weaknesses to develop culturally appropriate teaching materials. Herrera (2016) referred to the approach as biography-driven teaching as a teacher takes time to learn about a learner before designing classroom materials to use in L2 teaching. It involves an exploration of learners' sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic dimensions of culturally and linguistically diverse learners' biographies to gather knowledge on the manner in which learners use their L1 and L2, their way of acquiring knowledge, and their participation level in activities where L2 is the language of communication (Herrera, 2016). Teachers have the responsibility of gathering information on the learners' experiences regarding their use of L1 and L2. Such information allows teachers to develop culturally responsive teaching and learning materials. Teachers are encouraged to create environments in which learners appreciate that their culture-bound interpretations are valuable and respected in the classroom. These arguments indicate that teaching must be learner-centred for learners and instructors to achieve their goals.

Collaborative dialogue is crucial in SLA. Ammar and Hassan (2018) indicated that collaborative dialogue involves reflection on and talking about languaging that facilitates problem-solving and knowledge building. Collaborative dialogue is an opportunity for learners

to refine their knowledge or acquire deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Swain, Kinnear and Steinman, 2015). It facilitates SLA as learners have opportunities to support each other in solving linguistic problems regardless of their L2 abilities (Swain et al., 2015). Collaborative dialogue facilitates learning even when the interacting learners are novices. Novices become experts in creating linguistic forms once they embrace the art of solving problems collectively (Swain et al., 2015). The experiences of the learners in the present study will be useful in determining whether they use collaborative dialogue to promote their ML2 learning.

### **Method**

The current study's goal was to determine the participants' experiences in ML2 acquisition. A review of the methodology and its elements is crucial for justifying its selection for this study and for demonstrating its role in answering the research question effectively.

This research included 35 international participants ranging in age from 19 to 74 years old and coming from various walks of life. They spoke diverse L1 language systems, including Semitic, Romance, Germanic, Slavic, Indo-European, Indo-Aryan, and Indo-Iranian. There were two doctors, three nurses, two hairdressers, two salespersons, one chef, three receptionists, two iGaming company managers, three builders, two plumbers, three electricians, two students, five housewives, three teachers, and two nannies. They were learning Maltese for various reasons, including finding employment, helping their children with their studies, communicating with workmates, feeling a sense of belonging in Malta, understanding and communicating with domestic workers such as plumbers, electricians, and builders, communicating with Maltese neighbours and friends, farmers, and salespeople, and showing respect for the country that was hosting them. They were attending ML2 Level B1 evening classes after passing their ML2 speaking, reading, writing, and listening tests in levels A1 and A2.

First, the researcher acquired ethical authorization from the University of Malta's Faculty Research Ethics Committee. As she knew four teachers who taught the participants, with their assistance, the researcher reached the participants via email, whereby the researcher explained the study, in particular, that there were no expected risks or inconveniences and that they could refuse to answer any questions and still remain in the study, or they could withdraw their participation from the study without giving any reasons. Each participant understood the purpose of the study and afterwards agreed to participate.

Researchers usually choose a qualitative approach in exploratory situations as they seek to promote an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2012). In the present study, a qualitative approach was employed to understand the participants' experiences in learning ML2. One-on-one interviews were conducted as the data collection tools.

Interviews were administered for a deeper understanding of the 35 ML2 learners' attitudes, perspectives, and learning difficulties while learning ML2. Each interview lasted roughly thirty minutes. The thirty-five interviews were completed in six days (three hours each day). Interviews were held online via Zoom. The interview guidelines consisted of the following five open-ended questions exploring the study's primary themes:

1. Do you learn languages just like other subjects?
2. Do you learn Maltese like other languages?
3. Do you prefer learning Maltese at the lifelong learning centre or on your own?



4. What is your main problem in learning Maltese?
5. What is your opinion about the best way to learn Maltese?

The interviews focused on the participants' challenges when learning ML2 and the learners' learning process. The researcher adopted open-ended questions to allow the participants to express themselves without the restrictions associated with closed-ended questions (Singer & Couper, 2017). The researcher used the NVivo software programme to analyse the interviews and categorise the interviews into themes (Zamawe, 2015). This qualitative approach promoted the data collection that would encourage an in-depth understanding of the research phenomenon and answer the study's research question: *What kinds of difficulties are encountered by adult L2 learners when acquiring Maltese?*

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **The Challenges the Learners Experienced when Learning Maltese**

In this study, the 35 participants experienced various challenges while learning ML2. The challenges included lack of exposure to Maltese, as some learners spend their four-month summer vacation in their home countries, culture shock, loss of memory due to ageing, lack of appropriate and timely feedback or correction from Maltese speakers, lack of motivation to learn ML2, the teaching methodologies, and the learners' different learning styles.

### **The Distinctiveness of Learning Languages**

The thirty-five participants stated that learning Maltese was challenging and not similar to other forms of learning. Unlike in the case of learning other skills, such as swimming or riding a bicycle, the participants insisted that one could forget an L2. They attributed the experience to the need for continuous exposure to the L2. The response of one participant reveals the difference between learning other skills, such as braiding and language.

Take, for example, braiding our own hair. When I was young, my mum taught me how to braid my own hair. Due to hair extensions, I stopped braiding my hair. Now, after more than 15 years of not braiding my hair, I started to braid my daughter's hair, and it's as if I have never stopped braiding. With languages, it is not the same. If I do not practise Maltese, I know that I am going to forget it; just as I am forgetting the Itsekiri language, because I am not practising it.

(Nigerian housewife)

The Nigerian housewife's experiences with practical and language skills indicate that learning an L2 is a demanding process that requires active engagement in activities and situations which exposes the L2 to the group. The Nigerian housewife's account demonstrates that practice is necessary and crucial to SLA. This finding reinforces SCT's perspective that collaborative dialogue is crucial in SLA (Mahbube, Mansoor, Saeed, 2021). Therefore, ML2 learners need opportunities to practise their language skills beyond the classroom assignments.

Going abroad for several months or being sick and not attending ML2 classes for more than three months were the primary reasons that the participants identified as a barrier to the process of developing Maltese language competence. Such interruptions affect the learners' exposure to ML2. They deny them opportunities to communicate with L1 speakers to develop their communicative competence (Shona, 2019). A learner summarised her experience as follows:

Due to my job, I have travelled to far-away countries during summer, and I was too busy. I have talked a lot in Italian and English. I have to admit that I did not have any chance to speak or read in Maltese, and I did not study at all.

(Czech doctor)

### **The Uniqueness of Learning Maltese**

While all participants indicated that learning Maltese was not similar to learning other languages, the Arabic L1 speakers did not find the process unique. The non-Arabic participants' expressions have pedagogical implications as they perceive that learning Maltese is different from other languages due to the approach teachers take when teaching Maltese. A participant's response illustrates this argument clearly.

When I was learning Arabic, we learnt the present tense before the past tense, like how we learn the other European languages. But when I am learning Maltese, I am taught the past tense before the present tense because of the *mamma* (like Arabic, the basic verb in Maltese is in the past tense instead of the infinitive). Why don't they teach us the present tense first in Maltese and then the past, like how Arabic teachers taught me Arabic?

(German teacher)

The learner's experiences in the extract above reinforce the importance of a biography-driven approach to teaching. Herrera (2016) indicated that a biography-driven approach is a framework for the development of culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers are advised to take time to know and understand the needs of their learners holistically (Herrera, 2016). The approach involves the exploration of a learner's strengths, weakness, interests, use of L1 and L2, and the ways they learn (Herrera, 2016). In the case of the German teacher above, educators did not pay attention to her experiences in L2 settings. They did not consider how her previous L2 sessions were taught to develop teaching approaches and gather materials relevant to her needs. SCT indicates that learners from different backgrounds cannot have a similar way of acquiring knowledge. Learners' experiences and exposures influence the manner in which they acquire new knowledge. Teachers must attune their teaching strategies to L2 learners' needs to reduce the inhibiting role of culture on SLA.

The German teacher's experiences in learning Arabic, Maltese, and other European languages reinforce the notion that L1 and L2 are important mediational resources as postulated by SCT. In this regard, L1 can enable or hinder SLA due to similarities and differences in grammar. Storch (2017) acknowledges that an L1 can be a crucial resource in languaging. Furthermore, Bingjun (2013) indicates that L1 can exert beneficial as well as damaging effects on SLA. Anticipating and planning for potential grammar-specific challenges is necessary as some learners are bound to struggle in L2 settings due to their previous experiences of learning other languages. However, teachers do not always control when a student uses L1 to assist in learning L2.

### **Implicit versus Explicit Learning**

The different learning styles expressed by learners in this study indicated that they experience the learning process differently. Learners who preferred to learn ML2 implicitly, that is by being unaware that they are learning (Tavakoli, 2018), found learning ML2 to be fun and exciting as they enjoyed reading Maltese books and newspapers, understood Maltese drama

and news on TV, comprehended and sang Maltese songs, communicated with Maltese “beautiful and friendly people” (Venezuelan receptionist), and also learned from their peers (Akinyemi et al., 2019). Their preference for implicit learning reinforces the notion that social context contributes to SLA (Tavakoli, 2018). The following participant expressed his successful implicit learning even though sometimes he was disappointed with the Maltese speakers’ lack of feedback or answering him in English or Italian:

Since I live in Ħaż-Żebbuġ village and own a large home overlooking the fields, I was able to learn Maltese pretty effectively, especially when compared to my colleagues in the Maltese class. Many Maltese people, including fishermen, tailors, farmers, shoemakers, builders, plumbers, salesgirls, electricians, and gardeners, appreciate speaking Maltese to me. I am disappointed that they do not correct any errors I may make when speaking Maltese. I always express my dissatisfaction when they respond to me in English or Italian.

(Italian chef)

On the other hand, the learners who preferred explicit to implicit learning invested in buying textbooks and private tuition and memorised Maltese words and grammar rules. They found the learning process boring and considered the ML2 learning process to be a commitment and duty. Therefore, those learning ML2 implicitly enjoyed the ML2 learning process more than the explicit learners.

### **Culture Shock**

Culture shock was one of the major issues affecting some learners’ ability to acquire and understand Maltese. The difference between a learner’s culture and Maltese culture was a crucial determinant of the learners’ experiences. For example, during his interview, a learner revealed how culture shock affected his ML2 learning process.

When I first came to Malta five years ago, I really had a culture shock. The Maltese are typical Mediterranean, very nice and friendly and quite relaxed and laid back. They really love food, and they eat large portions—and in fact many of them are overweight. Of course, since they are driving to work, there are lots of cars, and you rarely see Maltese people biking. As I am working here and my children are going to school here, I decided to learn Maltese, even though I do not see myself living here for good and Maltese is a very hard language to learn. Although Malta is so small, it is quite cosmopolitan, and I meet people from so many different places in the world. Many Swedes are coming here; there is a Swedish community here and we meet quite often. I think that Malta attracts many entrepreneurs because of the business-friendly environment, good weather, taxation, and low cost of living.

(Swedish iGaming manager)

The Swedish iGaming manager’s account of his experience in Malta reveals the cultural challenges he encountered in Malta and potential reasons for learning Maltese. Concentrating on the culture shock issue, the Swedish iGaming manager’s experience shows that differences in L1 and L2 cultures could be potential barriers to SLA. In this case, the Swedish iGaming manager has to unlearn his perceptions of the Maltese people to have meaningful experiences through interaction and engagement in sociocultural events. It calls for deliberate teaching strategies that encourage learners to value the cultural differences of an L2 culture and their way of life. Su (2012) has emphasised the importance of introducing learners to situations that

challenge their learned perspectives to initiate their interest in the L2 culture. The Swedish iGaming manager's experiences indicate that cultural projects are crucial to encouraging adaptation to the L2 culture. The experiences of the Swedish iGaming manager also indicate that the perception that studying abroad offers the best opportunities for one to develop their L2. This is in line with the findings of Yang and Kim (2011) in the sense that learners can face situations that can alter their initial ambitions to learn an L2. The Swedish iGaming manager's claim that there is a large Swedish community in Malta and that they meet often can alter his ambition to learn Maltese unless other motivations are superior.

Another undesirable experience of the ML2 learners is the issue of forgetting learned concepts of their L2 and surprisingly, even of their L1. The phenomenon of losing L1 lexical competence has been demonstrated to be common among adults learning an L2 (Chunpeng & Hee-Don, 2017). Moreover, in this study, ML2 adult learners reported that they struggled to find the best strategies to use in learning ML2 verb conjugations. Some learners attributed their struggles to learning verb conjugations to ageing. Learners who attributed their struggles to declining memories indicated that their memories were excellent in childhood and adolescence. This confirms the maturation hypothesis theory, which generalises that certain actions and mechanisms, such as language learning, are innate but are not present when the necessary organs and neural networks have developed (Muñoz-Luna, 2013). While there are sociocultural strategies that enhance the learners' memories, some participants in the current study did not realise desirable outcomes following their exposure to such approaches as rote learning. One learner indicated that effective rote learning did not help them improve their Maltese as they could not remember the learned concepts.

If I do a lot of drilling, let's say, on verb conjugations, and I am really good at putting verbs into the past tense, that doesn't mean that I can apply what I've learnt in a conversation with a Maltese, or that I am going to use the past tense appropriately. I have memory problems, and my memory is getting worse as I grow older!

(Spanish nanny)

The Spanish nanny's experiences in learning ML2 indicate that age is a crucial determinant of the effectiveness of the teaching and learning strategies employed in SLA. The findings reveal the limitations of strategies, educators use to enhance the motivation of L2 adult learners. The strategies believed to enhance learners' motivation in such studies as that of Muñoz-Luna (2013) might not be applicable in situations where a learner's memory fails them in their L2 endeavours. Therefore, future research should consider age-specific motivations to contribute to the literature on the strategies that enhance an L2 learner's motivation.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

The evidence presented in this study should be interpreted cautiously due to the limitations of the methodology. While qualitative studies ensure in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, they rely on narrated experiences. It is difficult to ascertain the credibility of the findings in this study due to recall bias. The possibility of oversimplification of the phenomenon is another limitation of the study.

Consequently, future research should consider a mixed-methods approach to advance knowledge on the difficulties that adult learners experience in learning ML2. A mixed-method approach can advance the contribution of the present study to the field of SCT in SLA as it will

promote the collection of qualitative and quantitative data to inform practice and further research.

The learners' experiences as expressed in this study indicate that teachers and learners contribute to the SLA process. Future researchers should consider investigating the question in this study from teachers' perspectives. Such studies are crucial to enriching evidence on the sociocultural challenges that ML2 learners experience within and outside the classroom setting. A study which uses teachers as respondents will be crucial to identifying their role in the struggles of ML2 learners as well as solutions.

### **Conclusion**

The study under consideration investigated the challenges that adult learners experience in learning ML2 and included some recommendations for improving instruction for L2 adult learners. While the study did not focus on the role of culture in the acquisition of Maltese, the responses from participants indicate that exposure to the L2 culture is crucial to learning ML2. The importance of exposure to the target country's culture and social practices has been demonstrated by learners who lacked opportunities for languaging. Therefore, educators in SLA settings are encouraged to use culturally responsive teaching and learning strategies to facilitate the learners' transition from their cultures to the culture of the native speakers of L2.

The study also indicates that learners' learning styles affect their experiences when learning ML2. The implicit learners perceived the process as enjoyable as they learned through participation in social activities. Their engagement with Maltese speakers created opportunities for using the language and learning the manner in which certain phrases are used. On the other hand, the explicit learners found learning ML2 boring. They had to invest their time and resources in studying from books, memorising Maltese words and grammar rules, and paying for private tuition. The learning styles reveal variation in learners' needs and indicate that educators should not use the same approach to teaching ML2. They should appreciate that learners prefer teaching and learning materials/affordances which suit their needs.

The study shows that ML2 acquisition is a dynamic learning process that requires input which challenges learners to engage themselves in social activities. There were instances in which some learners despair as they struggled to communicate with Maltese speakers fluently. The learners' struggles in learning and using Maltese reinforce the importance of instruction that addresses the learners' needs. Teachers need to consider every learner's experiences when developing teaching strategies to use in the delivery of instruction. The activities included in the learning process should complement the teachers' and learners' efforts in teaching and learning Maltese respectively.

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