The Influence of English Language Skills on Students’ Performance in Vocational Education

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Abstract

Post-secondary vocational education and training institutions such as MCAST, have contributed to the growth of the higher education sector. One of the reasons why students opt for vocational education, rather than a more academic path, is that they have not obtained the required qualifications to study at university level, one of these qualifications being English Language at Ordinary or Intermediate Level. Having weaker language skills might prove a challenge or a barrier to students’ performance in their vocational studies. This is particularly relevant in the Maltese context where students are expected to communicate adequately in the two official languages, Maltese and English. Maltese remains the mother language of the overwhelming majority of the population, yet English is predominantly used when it comes to lecturing, course notes, textbooks research and assessment (Sciriha & Vassallo 2001; Sciriha & Vassallo 2006; European Commission 2012). Thus, students who do not have a sufficient level of skills in the language, may be at a disadvantage. The objective of the present research is to discover whether there is any correlation between MCAST students’ level of ability in the English language and their performance in vocational subjects. An understanding is sought of how language skills can enhance and contribute positively towards the acquisition of technical knowledge, skills and competences of students in a Vocational Education and Training (VET) college setting. Grounded theory methodology is adopted as it lends itself well to a constructivist stance and due to its rigorous and systemic approach to data collection and analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to probe into students’ perspectives on the importance of the English language and its influence on their academic achievement. A parsimonious model is presented following a process of constant comparison and analysis.

Keywords: English language, language skills, language competency, student performance, academic achievement, vocational education and training.

Introduction

Students following vocational education and training (VET) courses, in comparison to those undertaking more academic studies, may have weaker language skills which could have an impact on their ability to understand technical concepts, communicate clearly and express their knowledge effectively when working on assessment tasks (Mulder et al. 2007). In fact, while higher educational institutions that are more academic-oriented, tend to establish language level requirements among the enrolment criteria, vocational educational institutions such as MCAST tend to focus more on the practical element of
their areas of study and thus do not establish such language entry criteria for all courses on offer, especially those pegged at lower EQF levels. Despite this, students are expected to have adequate language skills to perform well, a scenario which is even more pertinent in Malta where Maltese students attending MCAST are often expected to communicate well in the two official languages, Maltese and English, since both are used in course delivery. Moreover, whereas knowledge of a second language in other countries is regarded as an added bonus, the general conviction in Malta is that if students are to succeed in their future career, they might also need to be skilled in other non-official languages (Sciriha 2016). Using personal experience as an English language lecturer, the proposed study will analyse whether MCAST students' level of ability in the English language affects their success rate in vocational subjects.

Despite the fact that Malta is officially, a bilingual country, Maltese remains the mother tongue of almost 98% of the population, as indicated by various scientifically-representative surveys, with a much smaller percentage of Maltese nationals whose mother tongue is English (European Commission 2012; Sciriha & Vassallo 2001; Sciriha & Vassallo 2006). For these speakers, the practical use of English as a second language varies from code-switching to a proficiency in either one or both of the two languages, an issue investigated in various studies (Caruana 2007). Since English is the key language used in higher educational institutions, including MCAST, dealing with coursework and assessment tasks might prove a challenge particularly to those students who have insufficient language skills. Moreover, one can never place enough emphasis on the importance of effective communication in English to enhance job opportunities. Having students furthering their studies, progressing from one level to the next and graduating, is highly rewarding for both the college and its faculty. Thus, analysing one of the factors which may lead to student success, namely student competence in the English language, is of particular interest in this research endeavour.

Dimensions of Bilingualism

A common feature of the current language situation in Malta is the use of a mixture of Maltese and English, a phenomenon also known as ‘Manglish’ or ‘Minglish’, which Aquilina noted as far back as 1971. He described it as, “an ill-sorted of so-called English and so-called Maltese, a hotchpotch unworthy of educated people” (Aquilina 1971: 176). It is interesting to consider the fact that Manglish or code-switching branches out into several varieties depending on whether Maltese or English is the dominant language for the speaker. Ellul (1978) was one of the first researchers to clearly distinguish these diverse linguistic varieties into five categories: Maltese only (M), Maltese as the main language with an occasional word in English (Me), an equal use of both Maltese and English (ME), English as the predominant language with an occasional Maltese word (Em), and English only (E). At least one third of the population practise code-switching (Brincat 2004). An issue of concern for many educators and language enthusiasts is the fact that Maltese children raised speaking in this way may encounter difficulties in becoming fully proficient in either of the two languages as a result of exposure to a fragmentary way of speaking. For instance, while Sciriha and Vassallo (2003: 27) argue that code-switching is considered as a quasi-positive attribute in many subcultures in Malta, they are preoccupied by the fact that “young mothers use code-switching in their misconceived attempts to educate their children bilingually”.

As for language competence, one needs to distinguish between active and passive bilingualism. Bilinguals who actively speak and write in both languages, possess a productive competence, while those who mainly use their receptive abilities in the
language, namely oral and reading comprehension, are receptive bilinguals who may encounter difficulties in the productive skills, such as when expressing themselves orally or in writing. Another dimension to consider is language use, which focuses on use of the languages in different domains, such as at home, work, school and when using communication media. Interestingly, an individual may be quite selective in using different languages for different purposes.

Bilingualism also involves the issue of proficiency, that is, the ability of the speaker to function in the four main skills, namely: reading, listening, speaking and writing. The ideal scenario is to achieve balanced bilingualism where the speaker is equally proficient in both languages. However, most bilinguals often have a dominant language which they use more than the other. An important factor to consider is the age at which the language or languages were acquired. Simultaneous bilingualism occurs if a child learns the two languages from birth. However, bilingualism develops sequentially or consecutively if a child acquires a second language after developing the first one. This is often the case for Maltese children and young people, for whom Maltese is the mother tongue and English is learned at school or used in other social contexts. If one has not achieved balanced bilingualism, they may be either an incipient or an ascendant bilingual (Baker & Wright 2017). The former refers to a situation whereby one of the languages is well developed while the acquisition of the other is still relatively weak; whereas the latter refers to an individual who is progressing relatively well in the acquisition of a second language.

Students attending MCAST have varying levels of language skills since MCAST is a unique institution that operates as a post-secondary school, a vocational college and a higher educational institution offering degree courses. Therefore, course requirements and entry points are diverse. A qualification in the English language is required for particular courses usually pegged at MQF level 4 or higher. Thus, it is interesting to analyse whether the students’ level of English has an impact on their vocational learning and academic performance. The Maltese context is of particular interest since lecturers tend to use English or Maltese or variable code-switching to communicate orally with the learners, yet the English language is used almost exclusively to present written work.

**Language in Vocational Education**

Many of the courses offered in a VET setting, such as MCAST, are of a scientific and technical nature. Vocational education requires more than just the students’ effort to understand scientific and technical concepts relevant to their area of study. It involves the need to understand the technical and non-technical language through which such concepts are presented. Scientific language does not only comprise technical jargon. In fact, as Lemke (2001) explains, one can omit heavy scientific terminology when discussing a technical topic and still manage to generate knowledge, thinking, reasoning and even creativity. The problem arises if the audience, in this case students, fails to fully comprehend the basic language in which the discussion or teaching is taking place. This complex combination of scientific concepts and technical language is very appropriately defined as (Lemke 2004: 34):

> “a unique hybrid: natural language as linguists define it, extended by the meaning repertoire of mathematics, contextualized by visual representations of many sorts, and embedded in a language (or more properly a ‘semiotic’) of meaningful specialized actions afforded by the technological environments in which science is done.”
Wellington and Osborne (2001) review the literature to examine the importance of language and literacy in science education, and also discuss what can be done for students to learn more effectively. There is extensive literature which recognises the implications of language on science education and academic performance (Ventura 2016; Wellington & Osborne 2001; Yore et al. 2003). However, specific reference to the relationship between language and vocational education is rather limited, as is the literature on language and student assessment in a bilingual context such as Malta. Given the limited availability of literature on the importance of language skills in vocational education, studies focussing on the role of language in science education were considered as relevant for the purpose of the present review since most courses offered at MCAST have scientific foundations. For instance, maritime, electrical, electronics, and mechanical engineering courses have a significant physics component. Hairdressing, sports, health and social care, health sciences and agribusiness courses all include biology, and courses related to applied sciences and art cover chemistry concepts.

**Theories of Bilingualism**

Approaches to bilingualism have sought to explain bilingualism in terms of cognition. Initial research into bilingualism as well as cognitive functioning of bilingualism and educational attainment often regarded bilinguals as inferior to monolinguals (Baker & Wright 2017). This assumption is closely linked to the naive theory of bilingualism which depicts the two languages as existing together in balance. This theory is portrayed rather like weighing scales, with the second language increasing at the expense of the first language. Another illustration to exemplify this theory consisted of two half-filled balloons inside the head represented the two languages. As the second language balloon is inflated (e.g. English for a Maltese native speaker), the first language balloon (e.g. Maltese) diminishes in size as less space is available, leading to confusion, frustration and failure (Baker & Wright 2017). Such theory was based on the belief that the more one learns and uses a second language, the less skill the person will have in their first language (Cummins 1981). While early studies into the cognitive effects of bilingualism concluded that there was a negative impact on cognitive progress and school achievement, more recent research had more positive findings. To resolve these conflicting results Cummins (1979: 229) established the threshold hypothesis (TH), which posits that there may be threshold levels of language proficiency which a bilingual child needs to reach for the benefit of their cognitive and academic attainment: “those aspects of bilingualism which might positively influence cognitive growth are unlikely to come into effect until the child has attained a certain minimum or threshold level of competence in a second language” (Cummins 1979: 229). According to the threshold hypothesis, students with low levels of ability in both languages (‘partial’ bilinguals) tend to have ‘impoverished’ interaction with their educational environments ‘both in terms of input and output’ (Cummins 1979: 230) and therefore have a more negative experience at school. Bilinguals who are proficient in one of the languages (‘dominant’ bilinguals) do not experience such difficulties, whereas those who are proficient in both languages (‘additive’ or ‘balanced’ bilinguals) generally experience cognitive progress and perform well at school while enjoying the support of their abilities in their first language.

**International Studies On the Importance of Language in Higher Education**

Following Cummins' pioneering research, several studies have attempted to investigate the relationship between English language proficiency, and students' performance.
Aina, Ogundele and Olanipekun (2013) explored this correlation in science and technical education in Nigeria, where English is the language of instruction and the language found in textbooks. Their results demonstrate that the greater the students’ abilities in the English language, the higher their grades in other subject areas. Kong et al. (2012) investigated the usefulness of English language test scores to predict students’ future academic performance. The researchers maintain that low proficiency in English increases the challenge for students at post-secondary level to learn and succeed academically. They conclude English learners should be given language support services to reach the language level required for positive outcomes in academic tests. Adequate proficiency in English facilitates academic reading and writing, two skills that are essential for academic success (Garcia-Vazquez et al. 1997).

Another study focusing on students’ ability in English as one of the key factors affecting academic performance was conducted at a UAE University. The participants, all of whom spoke English as a second language, expressed their discomfort when reading texts and composing reports in English which might be a result of their weak language skills (Yousef 2017). Additionally, the participants found difficulty understanding technical words, examination questions and assignment tasks in English, thus supporting Yousef’s (2017) hypothesis that English language and communication have an impact on the academic performance of business students. Earlier research by Harb and El-Shaarawi (2007) also discovered a correlation between competency in English as a medium of instruction and the academic performance of UAE business students. Similar findings were obtained by Lebcir et al. (2008) through a study of the performance of international students in project management courses at a British university. Ability in English was among the determining factors affecting academic performance. The students also regarded the availability of course material on the university website as crucial for their studies possibly to compensate for their weaknesses in the English language (Lebcir et al. 2008). Students who have to overcome language hurdles also tend to be less willing to communicate in the classroom and even this may have a negative effect on their achievement. Tan, Yough and Wang (2018) investigated several factors that might have an effect on students’ willingness to communicate in the classroom. From their interviews with international students from various disciplines attending a university in the USA, whose level of English ranged from intermediate to somewhat advanced, the researchers (Tan et al. 2018) conclude that confidence and motivation were the most determining factors. Even highly proficient participants in the study who had spent years learning English, pointed to confidence as a key factor affecting their communication.

Studies in the Local Context

Ventura (2016) reviews a number of studies which have tried to establish whether Maltese students’ language ability has an impact on their performance in science texts and examinations. He concludes that the results emerging from the studies under review support the hypothesis that such a correlation exists, with students doing better if they were proficient in English. One of the earliest research studies conducted by Falzon and Sammut (1976, cited in Ventura, 2016) analysed the results achieved in end-of-year examinations by students attending secondary schools. Form 1 and Form 2 girls consistently did better than their male counterparts in several subjects, most notably in science. The researchers hypothesised that the girls’ better performance could be attributed to their greater verbal ability. Cuschieri (1982, cited in Ventura, 2016) considered local and international research studies to investigate boys’ and girls’ achievement in science. Since girls tended to perform better in the English language, Cuschieri concluded that this provided them with an added tool to compete with boys.
in subjects traditionally preferred by males. Another interesting study was conducted by Borg (2010) whereby the majority of the Form 5 students participating in the research reported little difficulty with understanding questions in a Physics test, and over 70% stated that it was challenging for them to provide their answers in English, indicating that students might spend a considerable amount of time formulating their answers rather than attempting to give correct answers to the problems they were presented with.

Studies of a higher educational context were carried out by Farrell (1996, cited in Ventura, 2016) who discovered that Maltese students’ proficiency in the English language had an impact on their GCE Advanced Level Physics results. In a later study Farrell (2011) compared post-secondary students’ performance in Maltese, English, Mathematics and Physics to explore whether Cummins’ (1981) threshold hypothesis applies to the Maltese educational context and the findings generally affirmed the hypothesis, indicating a high probability of positive results for students proficient in both Maltese and English, and lower grades for students having a low level in both languages.

The results of the studies reviewed are consistent since they show a positive relationship between the students’ level of English and their performance in tests and other forms of assessment. This warrants the importance of providing English language support to students to help them improve their communication skills and overcome language barriers. Textbooks also should be carefully selected to facilitate comprehension, and tutors need to pay attention to the presentation of technical information and assessment design. In vocational education this particularly applies to students who have good levels of technical skills but may encounter challenges with comprehension and expression when using the English language.

![Figure 1: Literature Map outlining studies analysing the impact of English language skills on students' academic performance](image-url)
Research Methodology

The present study seeks to probe into students’ perspectives on the importance of the English language and its influence on their performance in other subjects included in their MCAST course. Thus, the objective is to discover whether there is any correlation between MCAST students’ level of ability in the English language and their performance in vocational subjects.

To reach this objective the following research questions are applied:

• Do students perceive the importance of an adequate level of English to perform well in vocational subjects?
• Does students’ ability in the English Language have a positive influence on student performance in a Vocational Education and Training (VET) setting?
• How does language competence affect student performance?

While keeping the research objective in mind, research is viewed as a journey of discovery that requires the design of a suitable research plan. This commences from one's research philosophy, paradigm or epistemology and proceeds towards the selection of a research approach and the development of a related research instrument for valid and reliable data collection. Apart from the researcher's philosophy, the selection of the research model and instrument is also influenced by the nature of the research question, the researcher's personal experience, and the target audience (Creswell 2014).

Given that extensive quantitative research has already been conducted to explore the influence of English language skills on students' performance in scientific and technical subjects, the present study aims to delve deeper into the subject matter and unveil important data for academic study. This can be achieved by adopting a qualitative approach which is in consonance with the researcher's constructivist worldview. Constructivism allows the researcher to explore the complexity that arises from individuals who give meaning to their experiences based on their personal, social, cultural and historical experiences. Although this involves a considerable element of subjectivity, Guba's (1990: 25) claim that for constructivists, “reality exists only in the context of a mental framework” is somewhat extreme. The present research capitalises on this element of subjectivity and professional bias for more effective data collection and interpretation without allowing it to influence or alter the results and the emerging theoretical model. Social constructivism recognises the importance of social structures and social constructions while examining individual perceptions. This enables the researcher to analyse complex views rather than the correlations between a limited set of categories or variables. Instead of starting from theories, constructivists study a situation by using open-ended questions to gather as much data as possible, which is then interpreted by the researcher to eventually construct meaning or develop theory (Creswell 2014). Actions and meanings are given an interpretation drawn from personal, social, cultural and historical experiences.

One's research philosophy often influences the choice of research methodology; however, the three main methodological approaches, namely quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods, were given due consideration. Eventually, grounded theory was chosen due to being an inductive/abductive method of inquiry that allows the reconstruction of data. Grounded theory is a flexible yet structured methodology, open-ended and unrestricted but at the same time directed (Charmaz 2014). Qualitative interviewing lends itself well to data collection since it possesses similar qualities. Despite being time-consuming, in-person interviewing offers many advantages for valid data collection. Open-ended
questions or prompts are used to allow the participants to freely express their views and to invite detailed discussion, thus permitting an in-depth exploration of the topic. The physical presence of the interviewer enhances interviewer-respondent rapport and also allows for observation of nonverbal cues that may indicate confusion or hesitation on the part of the respondent (Oishi 2003). In such circumstances, the interviewer’s role achieves further importance in enhancing respondent participation by guiding questioning, prompting, answering the respondent’s questions, and clarifying the meanings of responses. However, to retain scientific objectivity, the researcher refrains from participating substantively in conversation with respondents so as not to influence the results (Oishi 2002). In addition to focussing on the information provided, tone of voice, gestures, body language and any additional remarks are considered as crucial elements in constructing meaning.

For the present study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with four students following full-time courses at the MCAST Gozo Campus. Convenience and purposeful sampling were used to select interviewees who had been attending MCAST for a minimum of three years to share their experience and perspectives. The students selected are active participants who can discuss whether their English language competence has had any effect on their performance in a VET setting. With the approval of the institute director, a cover letter and consent form were distributed to the interviewees to obtain their informed consent. Student participants were given a choice to conduct the interview in either Maltese or English so as to facilitate discussion.

**Research Findings and Data Analysis**

During the interviews, in addition to prompts used to delve further into the topic, statements served to check understanding and encourage further explanations or discussion. The transcription process ensured an accurate and fair representation of the interviewees’ perspectives, and for effective analysis of the raw data the seven step sequence recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2012) was followed. After a word-for-word written rendition of the digitally recorded interviews, the key points were selected to prepare a separate summary where memos based on the researcher’s ideas could be added. The transcribed interviews were then coded by defining, selecting and marking extracts from the text featuring concepts, themes, examples and events. Excerpts with the same code were grouped to eventually establish categories and sub-categories. A cyclical process of constant comparative analysis ensued as this procedure was repeated after each interview, enabling comparison and construction of data at each stage of the analysis, a method which is one of the tenets of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). This method is central to the formation of categories since it “generates successively more abstract concepts and theories through inductive processes of comparing data with data, data with category, category with category, and category with concept” (Charmaz 2006: 187). Constant comparison helps “to reach higher levels of abstraction and advance with the conceptualization” (Gregory 2010).
Through the application of grounded theory methodology, data generated and collected from the interviews went through a process of microanalysis to establish categories, subcategories and themes which emerged directly from the data. In this process a careful balance was sought between theoretical sensitivity and objectivity so as to represent the participants’ views as accurately and fairly as possible. The ‘Conditional/Consequential Matrix’ proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) was adopted to group the subcategories and properties into three main categories, namely the contextual conditions determining level of competence or skill in the English language, the actions and interactions occurring within or arising from these contextual conditions, and the consequences and outcomes resulting from these actions and reactions. The implementation of the matrix for the axial coding process provides an effective visual representation of the interactions and inter-relationships between the concepts or transactions identified (Charmaz 2006). The high and medium level concepts emanating from the data during the analysis process are illustrated in Figure 2 through categories and subcategories.

Figure 3 then presents a more detailed analysis through the inclusion of properties and dimensions, representing more layers within each category to highlight the complexity of each conceptual idea (Charmaz 2006). The multi-faceted nature of each concept in accordance with the participants’ different perspectives is highlighted in an attempt to explore how these emerging concepts are related and interrelated. Although Figure 3 shows that one category may affect another, it is important to note that the relationship between conditions and consequences and the related actions/interactions seldom follow a linear path; a particular condition does not always lead to an action/interaction and then to a consequence in a direct manner (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Such an explanation would be too simplistic in relation to the way events occur in real life. More accurately, an action/reaction could be a response to multiple conditions, including past, present and anticipated ones. In the present analysis the Conditional/Consequential Matrix helps to illustrate the interplay between the contextual conditions, the reactions of the participants and the resulting consequences and to “capture some of the complexity and richness of life expressed in data” (Strauss & Corbin 1998: 199).
In the present study, grounded theory research has provided some important insights into students' perspectives on the significance of the English language and its influence on their communication during their studies as well as in the workplace. The set of conditions emerging from the interviews which had an influence on the students' level of competence in the English language include the students' exposure to the English language, their willingness to learn the language, the value students place on the English key skills study units within their course at MCAST, as well as the assistance they receive from teachers and lecturers over the years. These contextual conditions have led to actions and reactions towards the English language, such as the acknowledgement of the importance of English in daily life, the recognition of the importance of English language skills for pursuing vocational studies, and the student's awareness of their own weaknesses. Positive impact on academic performance includes clearer answers, improved grades, improved performance, and improved retention rates. Skills essential for the workplace/future career include email communication and communicating in a multi-cultural environment. Continuous effort to further improve one's language skills includes improved confidence and understanding of one's ability to learn and develop one's skills.

Figure 3: Detailed Analysis of Emerging Categories, Sub-categories and Properties

- Contextual Conditions
  - Exposure to the English language
  - Student willingness to learn
  - The value of English Key Skills units at MCAST
  - Assistance provided by teachers and lecturers

- Actions and Reactions
  - Acknowledging the importance of English in daily life
  - Recognising the importance of English language skills for pursuing vocational studies
  - Student's awareness of their own weaknesses

- Consequences and Outcomes
  - Positive impact on academic performance
  - Skills essential for the workplace/future career
  - Continuous effort to further improve one's language skills
importance of English in daily life both at college and in the workplace, the recognition of
the need for language competency when pursuing vocational studies and the students’
awareness of their own areas of weakness. The contextual conditions together with the
actions and reactions resulted in various consequences and outcomes including the
improvement of one’s language competency through the development of various skills,
the positive impact on the students’ achievements and the increased effort to further
improve one’s language skills.

Student Awareness of the Significance of English Language
Skills and The Effectiveness of English Key Skills lectures

Research findings demonstrate that all students interviewed agreed on the importance
of having at least an adequate level of competency in the English language. An interesting
concept is their acknowledgement of the importance of being proficient in English not
only to assist with their vocational studies but also to communicate effectively in the
workplace. In the words of one of the interviewees:

“It is important because if you are going to further your studies and perhaps read
for an Advanced Diploma, Degree or similar, one needs a good level of English. It
is also necessary in one’s career to be able to deal with emails, properly structure
and write a report, and rather than using everyday or colloquial English, one uses
academic English that would be suitable for such scenario.”

All four respondents demonstrated their long-term thinking as they believe that well-
developed language skills will be essential to perform daily tasks, such as dealing with
emails, and communicating effectively.

In addition, the interviewees demonstrated awareness of the reasons for the inclusion of
English Key Skills units in addition to the technical and vocational subjects forming part
of the MCAST course they are enrolled in. They stressed the importance of such lectures
from which they have reaped direct benefits, so much so that one of the students claimed:

“Without lectures in English I wouldn’t be at this level. They are beneficial and they
help me quite a lot. For example, if another lecturer uses technical words in relation
to the topic or refers to a ‘research paper’ but does not actually explain what it is
or how you need to write or structure one, with the help of the English lecturer we
get a detailed explanation of what a research paper is, how it is structured, what
it includes and so on.”

In fact, all the students interviewed mentioned that English lectures at MCAST have
played an important role in helping them to further develop their language skills and
enhance their confidence when communicating in English, an aspect which seems to
have been missing before their enrolment on their vocational course. This means that the
decision to pursue vocational education may have been a turning point in the students’
life, including in their motivation to develop their language competencies. In fact, the
students referred to their progress in language skills particularly over the past few years.
Indeed, referring to his achievement, one of the students proudly noted:

“Speaking about myself, when I first enrolled on a course at MCAST my level of
English was rather weak, in other words, I have improved since I have been studying
at MCAST... because after I enrolled at MCAST I also sat for the English O’ level exam
and I did much better than I had done before... It helped me a lot.”
Another student further elaborated on the answer and made reference to his speaking and writing skills:

“I still have some weaknesses in particular areas but when compared to my level when I first enrolled at MCAST I have seen an improvement ... for instance I have seen that I have progressed over the years even when it comes to working on assignments in English. I feel that I have improved because then you sort of remember certain concepts we have covered during the lectures and they somehow leave an impact on you... When I sit for an oral exam, I feel very confident when expressing myself in English. As regards writing, I personally believe I am a bit weak. However, it is much better than when I started [attending MCAST].”

On a very positive note, all four interviewees spoke about their progress in English through their improvement in various skills, including reading, listening, speaking and writing. In addition to recognising the benefit of English lectures included as part of their MCAST course, the students interviewed also attributed their success to their lecturers/educators, whose role was regarded as crucial to their learning progress. Participants spoke about lecturers with a sense of gratitude for the support they received in their learning as well as the motivation provided to help them improve their skills. Yet they also acknowledged the necessity of taking responsibility for their own learning by making an effort to further develop their English language competency. One of the students remarked:

“Obviously one needs to read regularly and work hard to always improve their level in the language and reading does help to communicate well even in the workplace.”

The Impact of Linguistic Improvement On One’s Confidence and Success

Interestingly the data analysis process revealed that one’s level of confidence to express oneself was directly and repeatedly linked to one’s ability to communicate, with these two concepts being dependent on each other. In fact, all the students claimed that their self-confidence had increased over the past few years since they were equipped with the language skills required to put forward their viewpoints and ideas. Self-confidence has been regarded as one of the most influential factors affecting human behaviour (Bandura, 1986). Being competent in the English language may help students to repress any feelings of anxiety and be braver when forming their own interpretations of vocational concepts, making their contributions during lectures, and responding to questions or tasks when being assessed. These aspects, particularly the latter, could have an indirect impact on the students’ achievements and successes in vocational subjects. In fact, research has found that a higher level of confidence in one’s ability to learn, increases the individual’s motivation to work harder on a task (Fischer & Sliwka 2018), thus increasing their probability of succeeding. As Brown (2006: 155) states, self-confidence and language success are ‘interacting factors’ affecting each other, possibly taking the shape of a virtuous cycle that nurtures self-confidence and learning, as illustrated in Figure 4. The interrelationship between confidence and success has also emerged through research in the sports field which has demonstrated that success affects one’s level of confidence, and similarly, confidence can affect one’s success (Hays et al. 2009). When applied to the context of language learning, this suggests that lecturers and teachers can have a positive and influential role in encouraging the students’ linguistic performance while also promoting their emotional wellbeing (Brown 2006).
Correlation Between Linguistic Competence and Time Required to Complete Tasks

Another aspect which may be linked to the students' ability to communicate clearly and accurately in English, is the amount of time required to express an appropriate oral or written response to complete assigned tasks. This concept achieves greater significance in the context of a time-constrained assignment where every minute may be crucial. One of the interviewees referred to the added tension resulting from such a scenario:

“When I start writing or thinking about how to structure a particular sentence I find it difficult. I usually write long sentences to say everything I have to say but then when I go home, I would think I could have expressed myself by saying so and so in a more concise manner and finishing earlier to have more time to revise my work. But during an exam, either because of the tension or because I don't know the exact words to choose, it happens.”

Adequate language skills are required to comprehend instructions, answer questions and revise one's own work. These activities may take longer than usual if the student has weaker language skills due to the need to re-read questions, search for adequate vocabulary to express oneself accurately, and check one's grammar and syntax. This concept also emerged through a local study conducted by Borg (2010) who found that it was challenging for students to provide their answers to Physics questions in English; indicating that they might spend a considerable amount of time formulating their answers rather than trying to work out the problems. Oral communication may also take longer due to frequent hesitation to look for the right words to express oneself. As one of the students interviewed explained:
“When writing and speaking I feel I take longer than writing in Maltese. I don’t mind writing in Maltese but in English I take time to think about how to express myself clearly... Even [my] speaking skills, for example, when I speak English I tend to get confused and beat about the bush to express a particular idea instead of being straight to the point... it takes more time... For example, [some of my classmates] immediately know what words to use but I take ages sometimes.”

Self-confidence may also play a role here since a student who is insecure may spend an additional amount of time formulating or revising sentences to ensure a clear answer.

**Possible Reasons for Weaknesses in Linguistic Competence**

The coding process also revealed that the participants’ language weaknesses are not necessarily a result of lack of interest in the English language or perhaps, linguistic difficulties, but rather the consequence of lack of exposure to the language particularly during their childhood. One interviewee expressed her thoughts on this:

“In my view, my coursemates have a good level in the English language and they can speak well perhaps because they are younger than I am, and in their childhood years they used to watch television programmes in English rather than Italian TV channels. On the other hand, there is a particular student, who is older than me, who speaks Italian well too, because she used to watch cartoons on Italian TV as I did. We did not have English TV channels back then, but only Italian and Maltese ones. I feel that my other coursemates can express themselves well in English.”

This is not surprising in light of the statistics published following the latest census where, as expected, the overwhelming majority of the Maltese population (93.2%) claimed they could speak Maltese fluently, in comparison to less than two-thirds who stated they could speak English well (National Statistics Office, Malta, 2014). Commenting about the younger generation, another interviewee remarked:

“I think they are at an advantage. Even young children nowadays can speak better English than I do... They watch TV in English, they watch films, play games...”

Although the context seems to be changing due to the availability of various communication technologies and entertainment media where English is predominantly used, and possibly through the recent influx of migrants who have joined our social groups, there is still a generation of students who retain Maltese as their language of choice and competency.

Apart from acknowledging the importance of English language proficiency and recognising improvement in their language skills, participants also mentioned their areas of weakness. One student commented: “Well, my greatest difficulties are reading and writing, grammar I mean”, whereas another spoke about oral expression:

“I would want to express myself in English and I don’t have as much confidence as I have when I normally speak Maltese, for example. So, I tend to start getting confused, hesitating and saying one word instead of another.”

Such weaknesses do not seem to be hindering participants from working hard to overcome them, thus improving their ability to communicate effectively.
A Proactive Approach to Learning Arising from the Recognition of the Need to Improve One’s Language Skills for Future Success

All participants seem to be adopting a proactive role in their current studies to increase their competence in the English language. One of the students emphasised that, “one has to interest themselves in the subject and take the initiative” to learn independently. The students interviewed demonstrated a positive outlook through an expression of their continuous effort to overcome such weaknesses and strengthen their skills in the English language with the aim of being able to communicate more effectively in the future, particularly when furthering their studies or dealing with daily tasks in the workplace. One of the participants regards language as a means of broadening one’s horizons and increasing employment prospects:

“When I went on an Erasmus+ mobility experience in France...I communicated with my supervisor in English because he spoke the language but this does not apply only to my experience in France. Even in other work places I have used the English language quite a lot and I felt that the lectures where helpful in this aspect.”

All student participants believe that their level of English language competence has an impact on their achievement in vocational study units. An analysis of the data gathered suggests that this influence is not only on the grades students achieve but also on their ability to comprehend vocational concepts and communicate effectively, as one of the students noted:

“The better your [level of] English the better you do in other subjects when it comes to exams, academic work which would be of a better quality, clearer and easier to understand.”

Although lecturers in VET settings tend to employ pedagogies that are more practical, experiential and participatory – in contrast to academic settings where lecturing is more theoretical – the participants highlighted the fact that having an adequate level when it comes to English reading and listening skills, is necessary to comprehend technical concepts pertaining to vocational subjects presented by lecturers or found in study material when doing research. As one of the interviewees explained:

“For example, when I have to do research, [it] has to be conducted in English which means that if you don’t understand the language well, you will encounter difficulties.”

Competence in the English language achieves greater importance when it comes to assessment. Since most assessment tasks, both oral and written, are generally conducted in English, the students’ skill level in English, becomes even more crucial for effective and clear communication. This, in turn, may affect the outcome of their performance. Apart from linguistic skills, the interviewees mentioned various factors that may also have an effect on their academic achievement, such as one’s IQ, ability to comprehend and memorise technical information, time dedicated to studying and level of difficulty of the tasks assigned. Although the students’ level of competence in the language is not the only factor determining their grades, the students interviewed have experienced an improvement in assignment results over the years they have been enrolled in MCAST courses, progressing in tandem with their improvement in the English language.
Emerging Model Explaining the Correlation Between Language Competence and Student Academic Performance

The adoption of grounded theory for the present research methodology has enabled the development of a model that addresses the research questions set at the beginning of this study. This conceptual model emanates from a process of constant comparative analysis based on the data collected through the semi-structured interviews. As per Charmaz and Henwood's (2008: 242) description, this process involved “making comparisons at each level of analysis” with the aim of understanding the students’ perception of the English language and its impact on their performance in vocational subjects. The data generated from all the interviews was integrated to construct a fuller picture by combining the emerging concepts and themes. This necessitated a frequent review of the interviews against which the emerging ideas were tested. The model presented in Figure 5, with a design inspired by Birks and Mills (2015), provides an explanation of the importance of English language competency and seeks to explain the extent and impact of this on students who are furthering their studies at a VET setting. The key elements at the centre of this model are the students’ level of skill in the English language, its positive impact on their performance in vocational subjects and their increased level of confidence in their own skills and ability to learn and progress. These factors drive one another like cogs in a machine with the increasing force of one affecting the other. The students are influenced by the contextual conditions and the actions and reactions that take place during their learning experiences. These ultimately affect their academic performance and their preparedness for the workplace. Improvement of language skills leads learners to develop a positive self-concept and increase their belief in their abilities to learn and communicate more effectively, both during their vocational studies and in the workplace. 'Self-theories' presented by Dweck (2000) distinguish between individuals who view their attributes and abilities as fixed and unchanging, and those who believe in their potential to manage their learning. A static or fixed view of oneself acts as barrier to developing one’s capabilities and reaching one’s potential (Kolb & Kolb 2009). The students interviewed view themselves positively, in being able to develop their skills, knowledge and competencies in the English language. Although one’s level of skill in the English language is not the only factor determining student success at MCAST, it serves to enhance self-confidence and empower the student to comprehend vocational and technical concepts, obtain knowledge, express ideas effectively both orally and in a written manner, and in turn perform well when assessed with the possibility of achieving better marks. Being fully aware of these concepts, the students interviewed are more receptive to English language learning and skill development. This compels curriculum developers and decision-makers to ensure adequate support is being provided to enhance the students’ success rate.
Language is not only essential for mutual understanding and communication but it also contributes to “define worldviews and construct meaning” about oneself and one's understanding of the reality around them (Sciriha & Vassallo 2015: 133). The data collected from the interviews has demonstrated a general positive mindset among the students interviewed regarding the importance of being competent in the English language. This is harmonious with existing empirical evidence collected through previous research, as presented in the literature review. The present study has also highlighted a positive influence of students' level of competence in the English language on their performance in vocational and technical subjects. VET institutions, such as MCAST, are key players within the educational system in their support towards students helping them develop their key skills as well as their vocational and technical knowledge. It is clear that college administrators, curriculum developers and lecturers have an impact on the students' life. The emerging model may serve to establish a framework to further assist students in the development of their language skills through enhanced support provided by vocational and higher education institutions, such as MCAST, which host students at various entry levels. This support framework can serve to increase students' motivation to further their studies as they feel they can handle the more advanced technical content and practical skills. This in turn enhances their employment prospects and future success.

Recommendations

It is evident that MCAST considers it a priority to address language difficulties at all levels by incorporating English Key Skills study units into vocational courses from Level 1 to Level 5. Students also seem content with the support currently available, particularly at the lower levels of college education. However, there may be students who have progressed, yet are still experiencing difficulties at higher levels. In addition to adopting a proactive approach by enhancing the support available at Foundation level, one may also...
consider providing further support at higher levels (EQF Levels 4 - 6) not only to address literacy issues and areas of weakness but also to further promote the development of more advanced skills required at these levels, including analysis, evaluation and critical thinking, as established by Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom, 1956). As from this academic year, English Key Skills is a semester-based unit that is partly delivered in the second year of some degree courses. This has a two-fold benefit: To have a semester-based approach, thus enabling students to apply for an Erasmus+ mobility; and provide students with language practice in their second year of the degree course. Offering such extended language support is an effective approach to address the students’ language and communication needs, particularly within a vocational institution such as MCAST where a qualification or level of proficiency in the English language may not be among the entry requirements, or where students may have enrolled at lower levels and progressed over the course of their studies. This is especially important if students are expected to communicate clearly and accurately in English and present well written or well-articulated work. Such language support strategies may have a positive ripple effect, not only on the students’ achievement, but also on retention rates, their willingness to further their studies and their preparedness for the workplace. Since lecturers play an important role in assisting students with language development, continual professional development is recommended to adopt more effective and innovative pedagogies and modes of assessment that enhance student achievement. In addition to this, a holistic approach may help students increase their self-confidence, a crucial factor in determining student success. MCAST is commended on its participation in lifelong learning programmes through the availability of Skills Kits units for adults who may not have had the opportunity to develop their language skills earlier in their lives. This can be done by following the National Strategy to improve literacy in both Maltese and English. In fact, the National Literacy Agency is doing valuable work in this regard, managing various programmes to help young students, with which MCAST can collaborate. Collective efforts will contribute to students’ success in their education, and eventually in the workplace.

Limitations

Given the researcher’s constructivist philosophical stance, the present study sought to interpret the interviewees’ perspectives and meanings of the importance of English language skills and their effects on their performance in vocational subjects, rather than to seek generalisability of the findings. Although an element of subjectivity may have been present during the interviews as well as in the interpretation of the findings, the adoption of a grounded theory approach enabled rigour and a systematic collection and analysis of the data. The researcher distanced herself from the data to ensure that the voices and views of the participants were represented as fairly and authentically as possible. As recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998), a delicate balance was sought between objectivity and theoretical sensitivity. Given the limited number of interviews, theoretical saturation was not reached, thus it was not possible to propose a theory although an interesting model did emerge. The research would benefit from more interviews that would enhance the richness of the data and contribute to the emergence of new themes and sub-categories. When the study is extended to include more interviews, theoretical sampling can be employed since this is an essential characteristic of grounded theory that contributes to the analytical process (Birks & Mills 2015).
Areas for Further Research

This project is intended to promote further research on the topic. New themes may emerge from an added number of interviews. The possibility of transferring the research findings to other contexts and a wider audience will help to determine the quality of the emergent model (Guba 1981). In fact, transferability is listed together with credibility, dependability and confirmability, as the key criteria commonly used to assess the trustworthiness, transparency and quality of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The generalisability of the research findings is reiterated in Rubin and Rubin (2012). Further interviewing and comparisons to VET settings overseas, will provide the possibility to enhance the emerging model and develop a theory that conceptualises the emerging phenomena. From a statistical viewpoint, further research may attempt to compare the grades students achieve in their English Key Skills units to the grades obtained in other technical and vocational subjects to determine any correlation between the two. It would also be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to measure the success rate of students starting at Foundation level (MQF Levels 1 and 2), who eventually progress and possibly enrol in one of the degree courses offered at MCAST. The effectiveness of the English language programmes delivered during the academic year, can be analysed through the use of initial assessment tests, followed up by similar end-of-year assessment tests to gauge the students’ progress.

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