

Research paper

Comparative Analysis of Language Policies in Malta and the European Schools Language Policy

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how national language policies and the European Schools Language Policy support the inclusion of multiple languages in early and primary education in Malta. It focuses on Maltese policy documents such as the Language Policy for the Early Years, the Junior Years Policy, and the National Literacy Strategy and compares them with the European Schools Language Policy. Using a comparative content analysis framework, the research evaluates how these policies conceptualise multilingualism, support linguistic diversity, and accommodate students' full language repertoires. Findings reveal that while Maltese policies promote bilingualism in Maltese and English, they often adopt a monoglossic orientation that marginalises students' first language/s (L1). In contrast, the European Schools Language Policy operationalises plurilingualism through L1 maintenance, additional language pathways, and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), positioning linguistic diversity as both a right and a pedagogical resource. The analysis highlights clear divergences in policy measurability, implementation mechanisms, and children's participation, alongside the persistence of a colonial legacy, specifically the historical British influence on English dominance in education. The study concludes that Malta's education system would benefit from moving beyond declarative bilingualism towards an inclusive, rights-based plurilingual policy framework aligned with EU and UNESCO multilingual agendas, embedding structured pathways for L1 maintenance, teacher education, and learner voice.

Keywords: multilingualism, comparative analysis, plurilingualism, language policy, early and primary education

The concept of multilingualism has gained significant attention in educational policy and practice, particularly in Europe where linguistic diversity is increasing due to migration, mobility, and globalisation (UNESCO, 2024; United Nations General Assembly, 2015; Vlahoutsou et al., 2016). The European Union (EU) frames multilingualism as a core educational value, promoting inclusivity, intercultural communication, and social cohesion (Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity [NPLD], 2015). This agenda supports the goal that all EU citizens should be proficient in at least two languages in addition to their first language/s (L1), fostering a plurilingual and linguistically responsive society (NPLD, 2015).

While these EU-level frameworks function as non-binding 'soft laws', providing strategic guidance and recommendations to Member States, they significantly influence national agendas by setting the standard for inclusive education. Conversely, the European Schools Language Policy serves as a binding regulatory model for

its specific institutional network, offering a concrete example of how these broader EU principles are mandated in practice.

In the literature, a distinction is made between multilingualism, referring to the coexistence of multiple languages within a social or institutional context, and plurilingualism, referring to an individual's ability to draw upon and navigate multiple languages across various domains (Piccardo, 2016). In the context of this study, 'linguistic diversity' refers to both the societal presence of multiple languages and the range of language repertoires among individuals and groups. Given that current research often overlaps these concepts, the terms 'multilingualism' and 'linguistic diversity' are used interchangeably throughout this paper, with their specific meaning determined by sociocultural and policy context.

Malta provides a rich context for exploring language education policy. As a bilingual country where Maltese and English are both official languages, its education system has long reflected its colonial legacy, with British administration establishing the current structural dominance of English, still evident in instructional language choices, curriculum design, and textbook selection. Both Maltese and English are used as media of instruction and taught alongside each other, although written English often dominates (Panzavecchia, 2024b) supported by language policies that promote bilingual and multilingual development. However, demographic changes, including rising migration and the increasing diversity of L1s, have created new challenges for language policy, especially in early and primary settings (Caruana et al., 2014; Camilleri Grima, 2021).

Although research on multilingual education has increased across Europe, there is a lack of comparative analyses assessing how policies in small states like Malta align with broader European frameworks (Camenzuli et al., 2023; Camilleri Grima, 2021; Caruana et al., 2014; Panzavecchia, 2020; Rickert, 2023). In particular, few studies evaluate how early and primary language policies accommodate children's full linguistic repertoires, including L1s or consider language learning as both a pedagogical and rights-based issue.

This study addresses this gap by examining the extent to which current language policies in Malta and across the EU support the inclusion of multiple languages in early and primary education. It explores how these policies can be strengthened to foster a more inclusive, effective, and rights-based approach to multilingual education. A comparative policy content analysis is used to evaluate Maltese and European language policies, focusing on their structure, aims, and implementation measures.

The following research questions guide the study:

1. To what extent do current language policies in Malta and within EU and Council of Europe frameworks support the inclusion of multiple languages in early and primary educational settings?
2. How can these language policies be improved to promote a more inclusive and effective multilingual education system in the early and primary years?

In doing so, the study contributes to international debates on how language policies can better respond to the linguistic diversity found in today's classrooms and offers insights into how small states like Malta can align more closely with global educational goals, including those of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.5) and UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda (United Nations General Assembly, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multilingualism in education

Multilingualism has become increasingly relevant in educational contexts as global migration intensifies linguistic diversity in classrooms (Halpern et al., 2025; Gonzales & Machado, 2022; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2016). This review examines how multilingualism and bilingualism intersect with early and primary education, with a particular focus on language policy, rights-based approaches, and the dynamic between L1s in linguistically diverse settings.

Multilingualism typically refers to the use of multiple languages in society, while bilingualism and plurilingualism involve proficiency in two or more languages respectively (García & Sylvan, 2011). When fostered in early childhood, bilingualism offers cognitive advantages and supports socio-cultural empathy (Gonzales & Machado, 2022). In Malta, a postcolonial context, national language policy has traditionally prioritised bilingualism in Maltese and English; however, the rise in migration challenges this model, necessitating policy responses that account for broader linguistic diversity (European Migration Network, 2023; NPLD, 2015). Critically, this study views multilingualism not merely as a cognitive asset but as a site of power dynamics where 'monoglossic' ideologies often delegitimise fluid linguistic practices, such as translanguaging, in favour of rigid national standards. Schmor and Piccardo (2024) argue that plurilingual pedagogies draw on long-standing multilingual traditions grounded in human rights and democratic education. They highlight practices such as L1 mediation, crosslinguistic comparison, translanguaging, and affirmation of diverse linguistic and cultural identities.

A rights-based approach to language education further stresses the importance of linguistic inclusion. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), children have the right to

express themselves and participate in decisions that affect them, including the language of instruction. In practice, this entails pedagogical strategies that actively legitimise children's use of L1s and allow them to shape their learning environment. García and Sylvan (2011) assert that multilingual learners must be allowed to use their full linguistic repertoires. For example, when children are able to use their L1s during classroom discussions or group work, they are more likely to express preferences, co-construct knowledge, and exercise agency in decision-making. This operationalises linguistic rights in classroom practice (Cummins, 2021; Horsley, 2021; UNESCO, 2024).

Language policy: Definitions, theoretical perspectives, and language planning

Language policies are understood as the explicit or implicit decisions, principles, and practices that shape language use and status in society (Shohamy, 2006). They intersect with language planning and ideological orientations—monoglossic or plurilingual—that determine whether multilingualism is viewed as an asset or a challenge. Monoglossic orientations typically privilege L1s, while plurilingual approaches promote flexible, additive use of multiple languages (Little & Kirwan, 2020; López Gándara & Pahl, 2024). The interplay between L1s and dominant school languages plays a central role in language acquisition and success in multilingual settings (Li, 2006). L1s act as a scaffold for learning additional languages and are critical in early education.

The European Schools Language Policy represents a structured example of an additive plurilingual model. It maintains the learner's L1s throughout schooling, introduces two additional languages progressively, and embeds CLIL-based learning (Content and Language Integrated Learning, an educational approach where subjects are taught through a foreign or second language, integrating both content and language learning) across the curriculum (Coyle, 2008; Schola Europaea, 2019). Teachers are expected to validate all students' linguistic repertoires, positioning language diversity as a pedagogical resource rather than a barrier. Kumaravadivelu (2016) further advocates for the simultaneous nurturing of dominant and minority languages to build inclusive classroom cultures.

In addition to existing EU and national policy frameworks, the Council of Europe provides important reference tools such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2018), the Language Education Policy Profile for Malta (Council of Europe, 2015), and a range of practical resources from the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) (European Centre for Modern Languages, n.d.), which offer concrete guidance for language policy planning and implementation in multilingual education contexts.

The language situation in Malta

Malta provides a rich sociolinguistic context for exploring language education policy. As a country with Maltese, English and Maltese Sign Language as official languages, its education system continues to reflect colonial legacies, particularly the prioritisation of English in formal schooling (Caruana, 2011; Panzavecchia, 2024b). The Maltese education system reportedly has its basis in the immersion pedagogical method where children learn subject content in Maltese and English from an early age (Council of Europe, 2015). Both languages are used as media of instruction, but English often dominates, especially in written communication and subject teaching (Panzavecchia, 2020).

Demographic shifts and increased migration have further diversified classroom language repertoires (Camilleri Grima, 2021; Caruana et al., 2014). Statistics by the Malta National Statistics Office (NSO, 2025) found that 17.4% of students in formal education in Malta are foreign-born, a 7.7% increase in just eight years (NSO, 2018). This sudden growth requires education systems to act quickly to provide migrant students their right to education, often leaving teachers to meet the needs of multilingual classrooms without the required preparation (UNESCO, 2018).

The National Policy for the Teaching of Maltese as a Foreign Language (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019) was introduced to support non-native speakers. However, its implementation has resulted in a predominantly assimilationist model that prioritises rapid acquisition of Maltese while marginalising L1s. The absence of heritage language programmes in schools means that many learners gradually lose their L1s as they adapt to English-dominant environments (Panzavecchia, 2024a). This creates a situation of subtractive multilingualism, whereby the dominant language gradually replaces the learner's L1s. Supporting L1s is particularly important for multilingual and migrant learners (Gundarina & Simpson, 2022; López Gándara & Pahl, 2024). Plurilingual approaches that value the entirety of a student's linguistic repertoire are therefore essential for equitable education (Rantanen, 2024). Camenzuli et al. (2023) emphasise the need for comprehensive teacher training to promote effective, inclusive language use in classrooms. A shift toward a plurilingual framework supports social inclusion, academic achievement, and identity development, enabling students to thrive in multilingual societies (Council of Europe, 2022; García & Kleifgen, 2020).

In Malta, where migration continues to reshape the educational landscape, there is an urgent need to align national language policies with inclusive European frameworks so that the visibility, support, and development of all students' diverse linguistic identities are strengthened in everyday school practice. Building on this identified

need for stronger policy-practice alignment, the following section examines how existing policy texts construct, enable, or constrain such inclusive multilingual practices in Maltese schools.

METHODOLOGY

This desk study uses comparative policy content analysis to examine how national and European policies inform the development and implementation of educational practices that embrace multilingualism in schools. Specifically, this study explores the extent to which these policies address linguistic diversity, provide guidance for teacher training, and support the inclusion of multilingual learners.

The material analysed in this study consists of national policy documents and official EU policy texts obtained from European institutional websites. These sources provide the foundation for a comparative analysis of language policies that influence multilingual education at both national and supra-national levels. For the purposes of this study, early years and primary education are distinguished in line with Maltese policy frameworks; however, they are analysed jointly where policies adopt a continuous perspective on language development across these stages.

This study forms part of a larger-scale research project that will also collect data from educators in early and primary schooling in Malta through surveys and interviews. While the present analysis is based on desk research and did not collect new empirical data, its findings are complemented by existing research on teachers' beliefs about multilingualism in Maltese schools (Camenzuli et al., 2023). This study provides valuable insights into how teachers conceptualise and enact multilingualism in classroom practice, revealing both supportive orientations and areas of uncertainty regarding the integration of students' linguistic repertoires. This evidence helps to contextualise the policy gaps identified in the present analysis.

Initially, seven policies were selected for comparison. Four national policies (focused on language and literacy in the Maltese education system) and three European policies (providing a broader policy framework at the EU level):

- (1) A Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016)
- (2) A Language Policy for the Junior Years in Malta and Gozo (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2022)
- (3) A National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo 2021-2030 (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2021)
- (4) The National Policy for the Teaching of Maltese as a Foreign Language in the Framework of Bilingualism and Plurilingualism (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019)
- (5) European Parliament Language Policy (European Parliament, 2024)
- (6) Council of Europe Language Education Policy (Council of Europe, n.d.)
- (7) Language Policy of the European Schools (Schola Europaea, 2019)

These seven documents were selected because they constitute the comprehensive legal and strategic framework currently governing language and literacy in Maltese early and primary education. By including both high-level administrative guidelines and school-level operational policies, the selection allows for an analysis of how broad European mandates are interpreted and implemented at the national level.

Selection Criteria for Policies

The selection of national policies (published between 2016 and 2022) is based on their relevance to the evolving educational landscape in Malta. These policies reflect national efforts to respond to increasing linguistic diversity and to establish frameworks for bilingual and multilingual education. **Table 1** below explains the criteria used for the selection of the five chosen policies.

Table 1

Selection criteria for the national and European policies

Selection Criteria	National Policies	European Policy
Geographical relevance	National scope	EU and Council of Europe scope
Target audience	Early and primary education	Member states, including Malta
Recency	Post-2012, following the National Curriculum Framework and increased migration	Updated within the last ten years
Interconnectedness	Policies reference and build on each other	Policies build on each other

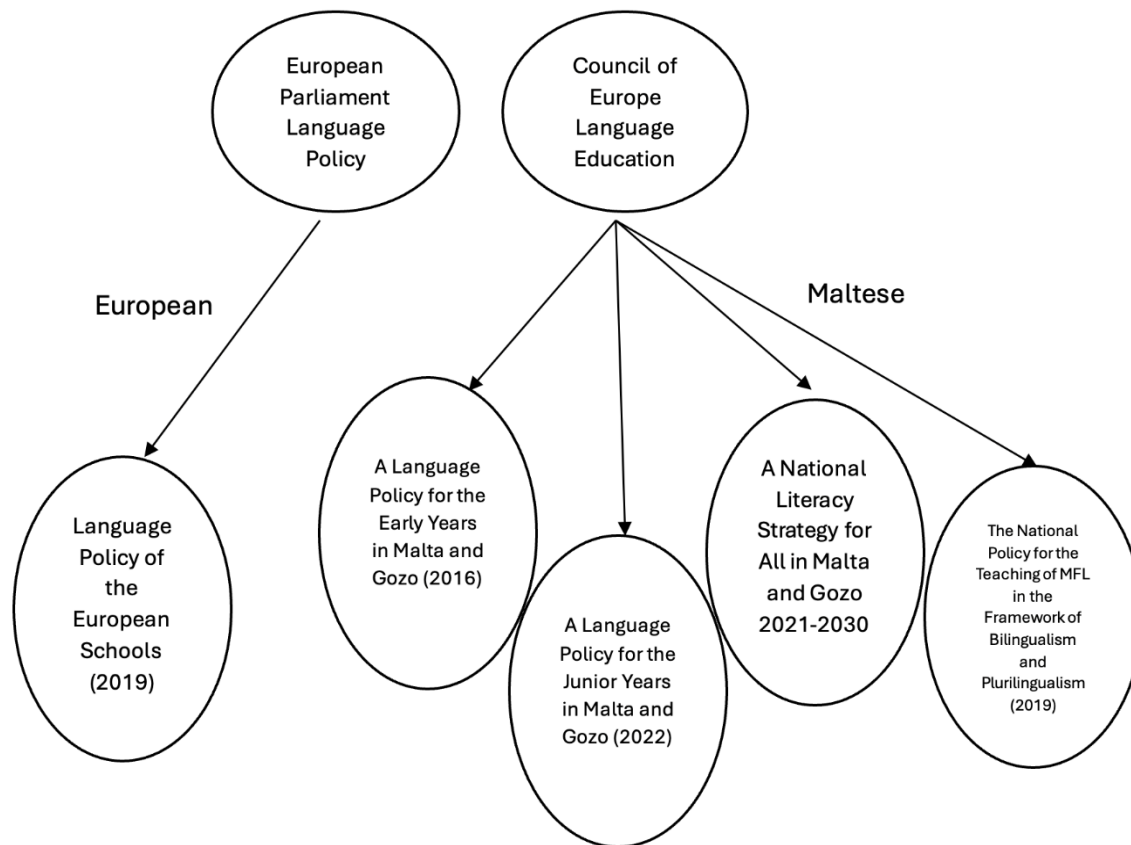
Initially, three European policies were chosen to provide a broader, supra-national perspective on multilingual education. These were selected because they represent the primary channels through which EU language goals are communicated to Member States and operationalised in classroom settings.

The seven policies (see Figure 1 below) were analysed in terms of their policy decision, problem, goals, and measures (explained in more detail in the Methodology). The European Parliament Language Policy (2024) and Council of Europe Language Education Policy (n.d.) were excluded from detailed comparison, as they provide broad administrative frameworks without direct school-level implementation mechanisms.

The Language Policy of the European Schools (Schola Europaea, 2019) was the only one retained because it: a) is the only European policy operating directly at the school level; and b) offers a structured model of how plurilingual principles can be implemented. Although this policy applies to a limited network of schools, its value lies in demonstrating a concrete operationalisation of EU language education principles.

Figure 1

Seven policies initially analysed across European and national (Maltese) levels. The five policies displayed in the bottom row were selected for the comparative analysis in this study.



Framework for comparing policy content

To systematically compare the selected five language policies, this study adopts the analytical framework developed by Kristianssen et al. (2018).

The comparative policy content analysis framework consists of four key components:

- (1) *Policy Decision*: identifies key actors and levels of governance.
- (2) *Policy Problem*: clarifies the issues addressed and their causes.
- (3) *Policy Goals*: examines objectives for clarity, feasibility, and measurability.
- (4) *Policy Measures*: differentiates between direct ('hard') and indirect ('soft') measures.

This framework allows for the systematic categorisation of policy content, facilitating the identification of key components and enabling effective comparison. To ensure a structured and comprehensive analysis, the policies were examined in terms of their decision rationale, underlying problems, objectives, and proposed measures. Initially, seven policies were reviewed using these criteria. This process also guided the selection of five policies deemed most relevant for further analysis, as previously outlined.

In addition to the four key analytical components, the analysis also identified six overarching themes that emerged inductively during the comparative policy content analysis process. These themes were not predetermined but derived through iterative coding of policy texts. This ensured that the themes reflected the content and priorities of the policies themselves rather than being imposed externally.

The inductive thematic analysis followed a multi-step procedure to ensure methodological rigour. First, the researchers engaged in multiple readings of the policy documents to achieve immersion in the data. Second, initial

codes were generated based on recurring concepts that fell outside the Kristianssen et al. (2018) framework (e.g., specific mentions of teacher training or student voice). Third, these codes were collated into potential themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed against the original policy texts to ensure they accurately represented the data across both Maltese and European contexts. Finally, the themes were refined and named to capture the core essence of the policy-to-practice gaps identified during the comparative analysis.

RESULTS

This section presents a structured analysis of the five language policies, grounded in the four key components of policy decision, problem, goals, and measures, as outlined by Kristianssen et al. (2018). While the policies analysed distinguish between early years and primary education, the analysis considers these stages both separately and jointly, reflecting the continuity of language development and policy implementation across these phases. This initial analysis serves as the foundational step for the subsequent synthesised comparative policy content analysis, which is presented in the Discussion.

Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo (2016)

This was the first of the language policies to be developed in an attempt to address the growing linguistic diversity in Maltese schools (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016). At the time of its development, the increase in migrant learners was already being felt by schools. This policy attempted to respond to concerns about early language development and bilingual foundations in this context of increased migration.

Since the beginning of formal education in Malta in the nineteenth century, the education system has been bilingual and, at times trilingual (Camilleri Grima, 2013). Therefore, children living and learning in Malta have always been exposed to more than one language from a very young age. The use of bilingualism in schools was later formalised in the National Minimum Curriculum (1999) and later consolidated in the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012). However, there remained the need to provide more direct and formal guidelines as to how bilingual language learning was to take place in practice, especially in the early years. The *Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo* (2016) was developed with the goal of promoting bilingualism in Maltese and English, fostering positive attitudes towards both languages, and supporting oral language development as a foundation for literacy.

The policy outlines several measures for the main stakeholders in early childhood education, including educators, managers of early childhood settings, and early years teacher educators. These measures include emphasising the integration of Maltese and English in teaching and learning, encouraging educators to prioritise oral language in early childhood settings, integrating inclusive practices for migrant learners while respecting their linguistic heritage, creating bilingual environments and providing teacher training. On the other hand, there is no explicit guidance on how to support plurilingualism or heritage languages in the early years.

This early policy focus on bilingualism reflects a common first step in many national contexts, but contrasts with European guidance that frames early childhood as a key entry point for developing plurilingual repertoires (Beacco et al., 2016b; Council of the European Union, 2008).

Language policy for the junior years in Malta and Gozo (2022)

The development of the Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016) created a need to address language learning for the next age group, namely 7–11-year-olds (Junior Years). This policy too (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2022), was shaped by considerations related to the increase of migrant learners in Maltese primary schools which, by the time the policy was published, was being felt even more strongly.

Unlike children in the early years, this older cohort of students required a more formal approach to developing their bilingual proficiency. Therefore, the Language Policy for the Junior Years in Malta and Gozo (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2022) attempts to deepen proficiency in Maltese and English whilst also supporting the inclusion of multilingual learners. This policy also addresses the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders, as in that of the Early Years, namely teachers, members of the Senior Management Teams in schools and teacher educators. These measures encourage a focus on bilingual teaching, professional development, and the embedding of bilingualism in school development plans.

This emphasis on teacher capacity-building resonates with European language education principles, which underline the central role of teachers in developing students' academic language across the curriculum (Beacco et al., 2016a; Roth et al., 2010).

National literacy strategy for all in Malta and Gozo 2021-2030

In 2014, the first *National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo 2014-2019* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014) was published. This was the first time a national policy addressed literacy and language directly in the Maltese context. This older Strategy (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014) had been developed in a context where the new National Curriculum Framework (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012) had just been launched, and the increase of migrant learners in schools had still not been felt as strongly as in later years. The development of this strategy (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014) was driven by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in which Maltese students were scoring significantly below the international and European averages. As a result of this Strategy, several initiatives were launched to improve Maltese students' attainment in Maltese and English.

The *Strategy* was set for evaluation after a five-year period. This coincided with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic which introduced new obstacles to literacy and language learning. As a result, in 2021, a new *National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo* (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2021) was launched, this time intending to span a period of nine years. The aim is to build on the successful strategies and initiatives laid out by its predecessor, as well as to address the literacy gaps following the PIRLS and PISA assessment results together with pandemic-related setbacks.

The *Strategy* (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2021) attempts to advance literacy in Maltese, English and other languages through inclusive, evidence-informed measures, such as incorporating digital and multilingual literacy practices, providing resources and support for multilingual learners, and emphasising small-group interventions and translator access. Such literacy-focused measures align with the Council of the European Union's (2008) vision of multilingualism as a shared heritage, as well as Beacco et al.'s (2016a) call for language education to be embedded across the curriculum rather than confined to specific language lessons.

National policy for the teaching of Maltese as a foreign language in the framework of bilingualism and plurilingualism (2019)

This is yet another reaction to the Maltese socio-linguistic context which experienced a sudden and almost drastic change due to immigration, this time specifically targeting the use of the Maltese language within the Maltese bilingual, and increasingly multilingual, context. The addition of speakers of other languages to Maltese schools seems to have thrown Maltese-English bilingualism out of balance resulting in teachers feeling insecure and unsure about how to address language learning in their classrooms. Therefore, this policy was designed to integrate non-native speakers of Maltese into the existing bilingual education system, where Maltese and English are intended to be given the same importance.

The goal behind this policy for the *Teaching of Maltese as a Foreign Language* is to promote Maltese proficiency among foreign learners with the intention of supporting their full participation in school life which requires the competent use of Maltese as well as English. Measures outlined by the policy include a staged introduction to Maltese through oral proficiency first, followed by reading and writing, a framework for MFL teacher training, and an assimilationist orientation with limited plurilingual scaffolding.

By contrast, European guidance, such as Beacco et al.'s (2016b) *Guide for the Development and Implementation of Curricula for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education* illustrate how other small states (e.g., Luxembourg, Austria) operationalise plurilingualism in teacher education frameworks.

Language policy of the European schools (2019)

This policy was selected for analysis in order to provide a contrasting model to that of the Maltese context. It provides a European framework which operationalises EU language policy directly at school level (Schola Europaea, 2019). It also serves as an interesting implementation of multilingual and multicultural education within a school context, where students with different mother tongues are educated side-by-side without compromising their national and linguistic identity.

The *Language Policy of the European Schools* (2019) aims to promote plurilingualism, intercultural understanding, and structured language pathways. By doing so, it recognizes and supports the national languages of each Member State of the EU. The measures outlined by this policy focus on maintaining students' first languages whilst progressively introducing two additional language, using CLIL to embed language learning across the curriculum (Coyle, 2008), and emphasising plurilingualism as a right and not just as an aim. This approach directly reflects the Council of the European Union's (2008) Resolution on multilingualism, which frames linguistic diversity as both a right and a resource for social cohesion.

Cross-cutting analytical insight: Teacher education

A common thread across national policies (see [Table 2](#)) is the emphasis on bilingualism but a lack of structured measures to embed plurilingualism and heritage languages. In contrast, the European Schools policy operationalises multilingualism through systematic language pathways and teacher education frameworks.

European guidance documents, including Beacco et al.'s (2016a, 2016b) curriculum and teacher training handbooks, Roth et al.'s (2010) emphasis on academic language as a cross-curricular responsibility, and the Council of the European Union (2008) Resolution, collectively highlight that plurilingualism must be embedded structurally in teacher education to move beyond symbolic commitments. This calls for a more explicit link between policy, practice, and pre-service teacher education in Malta.

Table 2

Summary table of policy components

Policy	Policy Decision	Problem	Goals	Measures
Early Years Language Policy (Malta) (2016)	Promote bilingualism in 0–7 years	Early language foundation gaps; migration	Foster bilingualism, positive attitudes, integration	Integrate Maltese and English; oral focus; advisory guidance; limited heritage language measures
Junior Years Language Policy (Malta) (2022)	Deepen bilingualism in 7–11 years	Increased linguistic diversity	Inclusive bilingual education	CPD, bilingual teaching, collaboration, lacks explicit plurilingual structure
National Literacy Strategy (Malta) (2021)	Literacy in Maltese, English, other languages	Literacy gaps post-pandemic	Improve multilingual literacy and inclusion	Support groups, translators, multilingual resources, no clear plurilingual pedagogy
Maltese as a Foreign Language Policy (2019)	Structured MFL teaching	Access for non-native learners	Equitable access to Maltese learning	Induction courses, oral focus, teacher training; assimilationist orientation
European Schools Language Policy (2019)	Plurilingualism as guiding principle	Integration of multilingual student population	L1 maintenance + 2 additional languages; intercultural understanding	CLIL, language sections, right to L1, structured plurilingual progression

Based on the comparative findings presented above, six overarching themes were identified as critical points of divergence and convergence between the national and European policies: (1) policy goals and factors of content transfer; (2) the Maltese as a Foreign Language (MFL) issue; (3) the invisibility of other L1s; (4) the operationalisation of policies at different levels; (5) the prevalence of a monoglossic view of multilingualism; and (6) children's rights and participation. These themes represent the qualitative findings of the content analysis and serve as the organisational structure for the following discussion, which unpacks the pedagogical and systemic implications of these policy orientations.

DISCUSSION

Building on the comparative analysis presented in the previous section, this discussion unpacks how the five selected language policies conceptualise and operationalise multilingualism in early and primary education. While national policies primarily foreground bilingualism in Maltese and English, the European Schools Language Policy emphasises plurilingualism and intercultural competence, providing a more structured model.

The six overarching themes that emerged inductively during the comparative policy content analysis highlight the significance of multilingual education, teacher training, and resource development across diverse educational systems, each addressing distinct challenges related to multilingualism. However, a critical distinction must be made between policy as a written mandate and policy as a lived classroom reality. The following discussion highlights that without structured implementation mechanisms, these frameworks risk remaining purely symbolic, failing to bridge the gap between declarative goals and actual pedagogical practice.

Policy goals and factors of content transfer

The analysis of policy goals across the Maltese language policies and the European Schools Language Policy reveal a recurring theme: a collective commitment to fostering bilingual and multilingual competence in educational settings. For instance, both the *Language Policy for the Early Years* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016) and the *Junior Years Policy* (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2022) in Malta articulate the intention to promote positive attitudes towards Maltese, English, and other languages, and to enhance proficiency in these languages. While these aims are commendable, they are somewhat vague in their operationalisation; the policies do not specify how or when progress toward these goals will be assessed. This lack of measurable indicators limits their evaluability over time.

In contrast, the *National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo* (2021–2030) stands out by establishing tangible and time-bound objectives. It outlines a review period and clear performance expectations, making it easier to monitor progress and adapt accordingly. This distinction highlights the importance of precision and accountability in educational policy planning.

The European Schools Language Policy (Schola Europaea, 2019), however, goes beyond broad aims and integrates its policy goals with concrete implementation mechanisms. It explicitly guarantees learners the right to study in their L1s and to acquire at least two additional languages through a structured language pathway, anchored in CLIL and intercultural education.

Kristianssen et al. (2018) also discuss ‘content transfer,’ a concept used to understand how policy ideas migrate and adapt across different sectors or stages of implementation. They identify five influencing dimensions: motivational, contextual, methodological, policy design, and temporal factors. Motivational factors are evident in the development of the *National Literacy Strategy*, which builds on the earlier 2014 policy and incorporates stakeholder feedback (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). This continuity enables the alignment of literacy-focused goals with the broader bilingual aims articulated in both the Early and Junior Years policies.

Contextual factors further shape these documents. International assessments like PISA and PIRLS reveal concerning literacy outcomes for Maltese students, while increasing linguistic diversity due to migration and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the urgency for improved, inclusive strategies. As a result of the widespread adoption of technology and communication approaches, digital literacy integrates alongside more traditional language skills in both literacy and language policies.

Methodological and design elements reveal continuity between the Early and Junior Years policies, which mirror one another in goals and implementation strategies. Meanwhile, the *National Policy for the Teaching of Maltese as a Foreign Language* (2019) departs from this structure, offering instead a flexible framework for supporting migrant learners, reflecting policy responsiveness. Temporal factors also remain central, as reflected in the recent updates through Circular DCLE 20/2024, demonstrating the need for adaptive policy cycles that respond to Malta’s shifting linguistic landscape.

The Maltese as a foreign language (MFL) issue

Schools in Malta currently lack the structures to systematically support L1-based multilingual education. The National Policy for the Teaching of Maltese as a Foreign Language (2019) aims to support non-Maltese-speaking students to achieve balanced bilingualism and proficiency in both Maltese and English.

According to Circular DCLE 20/2024, migrant students are now required to follow the same Maltese lessons as their peers, with an induction course offered in some cases. As a result, MFL provision in primary is being phased out. On paper, this suggests an additive bilingualism pathway. In practice, however, English dominates, Maltese is peripheral, and other L1s remain unsupported, leading to subtractive multilingualism (Panzavecchia, 2020, 2024a). This gap is stark when contrasted with the European Schools Language Policy. The European Schools model integrates L1 maintenance, additional language pathways, and CLIL within a coherent system that frames linguistic diversity as both a right and a pedagogical resource.

A more deliberate and context-sensitive approach is needed to align practice with the vision of Malta’s National Education Strategy 2024–2030 (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2023), drawing on lessons from the European Schools model to move from policy intentions to structured plurilingual implementation.

The invisibility of other L1s

A critical issue emerging from the comparative analysis is the limited recognition of languages other than Maltese and English in national policies. While the Language Policy for the Early Years and Junior Years Policy focus on bilingualism, there is little mention of how students’ L1s should be supported.

Research highlights that maintaining students’ L1s is crucial for educational success (Camilleri Grima, 2021; Caruana et al., 2014; Panzavecchia, 2020). Pedagogies such as translanguaging have proven effective, but Maltese policies do not encourage them, and teachers often view them as inappropriate (Camenzuli et al., 2023; Panzavecchia, 2024a). This reflects a monolingual or dual-language bias, misaligned with SDG 4.5 and UNESCO frameworks (2020, 2024). L1 maintenance and structured plurilingual pathways are guaranteed in the European Schools model but absent in Maltese policy, creating structural inequities in how linguistic repertoires are valued and supported.

Policies at different levels

European-level policies (European Parliament 2024; Council of Europe n.d.) provide broad multilingualism goals, while the European Schools policy operationalises these aims at school level. Maltese policies remain

declarative and bilingual-focused, lacking structural mechanisms to implement plurilingualism. This school-level operationalisation bridges the gap between macro-level language ideals and classroom realities, something Maltese policy currently does not achieve.

The national policies could benefit from more alignment with European frameworks that advocate for plurilingualism and the support of all students' languages. Aligning more closely with such frameworks would not only enhance inclusion but also respond to Malta's obligations under international education rights instruments and global educational goals, such as those articulated in SDG 4 (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) and the UNESCO Education 2030 Agenda (2015, 2017). The absence of a comprehensive strategy for supporting multilingual learners' L1s in Malta's national policies contrasts with the European Schools' approach, which embraces plurilingualism as a central educational goal.

A monoglossic view of multilingualism?

One of the more concerning findings from this analysis is the monoglossic view of multilingualism reflected in the national policies. The monoglossic bias identified here functions as a form of symbolic violence that reinforces colonial hierarchies by positioning English and Maltese as the only legitimate academic languages, effectively rendering migrant students' L1s as educational deficits rather than rights-based resources. The focus on parallel proficiency in Maltese and English, without a significant emphasis on the role of students' L1s, suggests a somewhat rigid approach to bilingual education. A monoglossic perspective, which treats languages as separate, discrete entities, fails to acknowledge the dynamic, fluid nature of bilingual and multilingual language practices. In contrast, research in multilingual education suggests that languages should not be viewed in isolation but as part of a broader linguistic and cultural repertoire that includes L1s (Camilleri Grima, 2021; García & Sylvan, 2011).

This narrow view of multilingualism is especially problematic given the increasing number of migrant learners in Malta's schools. These learners bring their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds, yet the national policies primarily focus on developing proficiency in Maltese and English. The policies provide little support for maintaining students' L1s, which could otherwise serve as valuable tools for their academic success and social integration. This limited vision, entrenched in a monoglossic ideology, continues to sideline linguistic diversity and reinforces the colonial legacy of elevating English as the dominant language of schooling (Caruana, 2011; Panzavecchia, 2024b) within the new realities of Maltese multilingual early and primary settings. Challenging these legacies requires a conscious effort to decolonise language policy and embrace a plurilingual, inclusive framework that affirms all students' linguistic identities.

Children's rights and participation

The issue of children's rights is another area that warrants attention. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), children have the right to express their views and have their voices heard in matters affecting them. Yet, despite several consultative meetings involving stakeholders, students themselves were not consulted during the development of the national policies. This is a significant oversight, as students—especially multilingual learners—are the primary beneficiaries of these policies (UNESCO, 2024). Their perspectives and experiences with language learning are essential for creating policies that genuinely meet their needs.

The National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2021) is one of the few policies that acknowledges the importance of multilingual literacy and aims to provide resources in multiple languages. It highlights the need for inclusive practices and calls for the involvement of families and communities in the educational process. However, the policy still places a strong emphasis on Maltese and English, with only limited recognition of other languages.

The absence of children's participation in Maltese language policy-making is particularly striking when contrasted with the European Schools Language Policy, which positions learners as active participants in shaping their educational pathways. European Schools explicitly guarantee the right to education in one's L1s and the gradual acquisition of additional languages through structured pathways, and this is accompanied by mechanisms for student voice and feedback in school governance. In this model, language rights are not only protected through policy but enacted through participatory processes that recognise learners as stakeholders.

The comparative analysis of these five language policies reveals a complex and evolving landscape of multilingual education. While national policies in Malta focus on bilingualism in Maltese and English, there is a clear need to expand these frameworks to better accommodate the diverse linguistic needs of students. The European policy, with its emphasis on plurilingualism, provides a valuable model for integrating multiple languages into education systems. Moving forward, the policies should ensure that all students—regardless of their linguistic background—are supported in their language development, both in terms of academic achievement and social integration (United Nations General Assembly, 2015; UNESCO, 2020). Further research is needed to explore how

these policy frameworks are interpreted and implemented at the school level by educators, and to examine the perspectives of students and families navigating multilingual environments. This could inform more grounded, context-sensitive revisions of language policy in small states like Malta.

Limitations: The contextual specificity of the European schools model

While the European Schools Language Policy (2019) provides a robust framework for operationalising plurilingualism, it is important to acknowledge that this model functions within a unique and often privileged educational context. The demographic composition of European Schools, typically serving children of EU institutional staff, differs significantly from the diverse and often socioeconomically vulnerable migrant populations in Malta's state schools. Furthermore, the European Schools are highly resourced and selective, which facilitates the implementation of structured L1 maintenance and multi-language pathways that may be difficult to replicate in a national system with different budgetary and logistical constraints. Therefore, while this model offers significant pedagogical insights, its application to the Maltese context must be viewed as a benchmark for plurilingual principles rather than a direct blueprint for systemic reform, necessitating careful adaptation to national socioeconomic realities.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the extent to which language policies in Malta and at the European level support the inclusion of multiple languages in early and primary education. Focusing on key Maltese policies—including the *Language Policy for the Early Years* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016), the *Junior Years Policy* (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2022), and the *National Literacy Strategy* (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2021)—and comparing them with the *European Schools Language Policy* (Schola Europaea, 2019), the analysis shows that while Maltese policies promote bilingualism in Maltese and English, they provide limited structural support for the inclusion and development of learners' full linguistic repertoires, particularly L1s. In contrast, the European Schools Language Policy offers a more operationalised plurilingual model, embedding L1 maintenance, additional language pathways and CLIL within a coherent framework.

These findings highlight a gap between commitments to multilingualism in writing and the absence of concrete implementation mechanisms in the Maltese context. The persistence of a largely monoglossic orientation, combined with a lack of measurable goals and structured pathways, limits the extent to which current policies can respond effectively to increasing linguistic diversity in classrooms.

To address this gap, Maltese language policies should move towards a more explicit and operationalised plurilingual framework. This includes: (a) embedding L1 maintenance within policy provisions; (b) developing structured language pathways beyond Maltese and English; (c) integrating plurilingual pedagogies, including translanguaging, into teacher education and continuous professional development; and (d) establishing clear monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure accountability in implementation.

At the European level, stronger alignment between policy recommendations and national implementation is needed to support multilingual education across Member States. This could involve linking funding mechanisms and policy monitoring more directly to progress in multilingual and plurilingual education. While the European Schools model provides valuable insights, its transferability to the Maltese context requires careful adaptation to national socioeconomic and institutional conditions. As this study is based on desk-based policy analysis, future research should examine how these policy frameworks are enacted in classroom practice, particularly through studies incorporating teacher and learner perspectives.

Advancing from a predominantly bilingual to a genuinely plurilingual policy framework is essential for ensuring that linguistic diversity is recognised not only as a characteristic of Maltese classrooms, but as a pedagogical resource and a matter of educational equity. Ultimately, this shift requires moving beyond declarative policy toward a critical engagement with scholarship that views multilingualism as a site of social justice rather than a deficit to be managed.

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Ethical statement

This study, based solely on desk research, did not involve collecting data from human participants. A research ethics application was submitted to the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) at the University of Malta.

Competing interests

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Author contributions

All authors have contributed equally to all aspects of the paper (Research concept and design; Data collection; Data analysis; Article writing and revisions; Final approval)

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI disclosure

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence or AI-assisted technologies were used in the conception, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

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