

Opinions and Attitudes of Trainee Teachers Towards Plurilingualism: The ‘Hidden’ Role of Language Repertoires ^(Note 1)

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Abstract

Teachers’ opinions and attitudes are crucial in shaping educational practices, though their analysis remains complex due to internal and external influences, such as training and socio-biographical background. Recent large-scale European studies identified significant gaps in teacher preparation regarding plurilingualism and related classroom practices. In order to delve deeper into this issue, the current research investigates trainee teachers’ opinions and attitudes on these topics in Malta, a dynamic plurilingual setting shaped by a strong English influence and rising levels of migration. Using data collected by means of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, we explored variations in opinions and attitudes between trainee teachers specialising in languages and others from different, non-language related, areas of studies. The subjects’ language competences, specifically their fluency in two languages or more were also taken into consideration and findings, somewhat unexpectedly, revealed that these competences were more pivotal when considering opinions and attitudes towards plurilingual education than their area of specialisation. A further insight emerging from the study is the mismatch between awareness and practices, highlighting the need to address this discrepancy. Furthermore, the specificity of the sociolinguistic landscape appears to decisively shape trainee teachers’ pedagogical choices, reinforcing the urgency of sustained and context-sensitive teacher training strategies.

Keywords: Attitudes, Beliefs, Educational practices, Language repertoires, Multilingualism, Plurilingualism, Teacher training

1. Introduction

1.1 The “Paradigm Shift” in Plurilingual Education: When Theory and Practice Do Not Align

The starting point of this study is the observation that a significant gap exists between the efforts made by various bodies in Europe to promote plurilingualism and pluralistic teaching practices, and results achieved in practice. As highlighted in recent, large-scale investigations in the field (see e.g., Cortés Velásquez *et al.*, 2025, *infra* § 1.2), it emerges that despite numerous recommendations, official documents, projects, and materials produced by the European Union and the Council of Europe on multi-/plurilingualism, there remains a discrepancy between teachers’ awareness of these themes and their effective and meaningful implementation in teaching practices: the much encouraged and longed-for “paradigm shift” (Dendrinou, 2018), or “multilingual turn” (Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2013; Melo-Pfeifer, 2018) in language education appears to exist mainly in a theoretical dimension, since it has so far seen limited implementation in most classrooms, often as a result of initiatives taken by individual schools and/or educators. First and foremost, this shift would mean giving space to all language skills (CEFR, 2001, 2018), starting from acknowledging the individual – often plurilingual – repertoires (Note 2) of students, that is the set of dynamic communicative resources (languages, language varieties, registers, communicative practices) possessed by speakers and in constant interaction with one another. Building on this, on a broader level, would involve applying the principles underlying the pluralistic approaches described in CARAP (Candelier *et al.*, 2007), as well as other approaches like translanguaging (e.g. Garcia & Wei, 2014). Teachers’ difficulties in translating “good intentions” into actual teaching practice stem from the interplay of multiple factors, some associated with teachers’ dynamic cognitive features – teachers’ thoughts, knowledge and beliefs and their relationship to classroom practices (Borg, 2015). It must also be said that teacher education courses often struggle to address multilingual realities as the monolingual situation within the context of many such preparation programs enables “a default to a monolingually oriented approach to teacher preparation” (de Jong & Gao, 2022: 472).

1.2 Bridging the Knowledge-Action Divide: The Role of Teachers’ Opinions and Attitudes

Among the factors that significantly influence teaching practices, teachers’ opinions and attitudes appear to occupy a position of primary importance, as emphasized over the past decades in numerous studies (Borg, 2015, 2019; Burns, 1992; De Angelis, 2011; Nespor, 1987; Phipps & Borg, 2007) within the well-established field of teacher cognition (TC), in which this research is positioned. TC has been defined in various ways, including “the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe and think” (Borg, 2003, pp. 81), and also, more recently and broadly, as “the complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs that language teachers draw on in their work” (Borg, 2015, p. 321). The importance of the cognitive and emotional dimensions in teaching is widely recognised in language education (Borg, 2011, 2015; Caruana, 2007; Caruana *et al.*, 2013; Daloiso & Genduso, 2023; Farges, 2020; Grassi, 2022; Melo-Pfeifer, 2019; Serena, 2019). Opinions and attitudes (O&A) play a

key role in shaping teaching practices within these dimensions (Baker, 1992; Chircop, 2022; De Angelis, 2011; Garrett, 2010; Lasagabaster & Huguet, 2007; Mariani, 2000, 2013; Pajares, 1992; Sordella, 2015, 2019). However, the analysis of O&A is highly complex, because they are implicit mental constructs and are influenced by numerous internal and external factors related to teachers, such as their training (Serena, 2019; Sordella, 2015; Borg, 2011; Peacock, 2001), linguistic repertoires (Knudsen *et al.*, 2020), teaching experiences, and affective dimensions (Borg, 2012; Mercer, 2011; Werbińska, 2011). Sociolinguistic contexts and language policies (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003) are also influential features. In this regard, recent research on TC has specifically focused on exploring the relationship between the various components that make up this multifaceted reality, providing a more dynamic and fluctuating point of view, as highlighted by Barcelos & Kalaja (2011):

“If the focus in the mid-1980s was on understanding what students and teachers believed about the language learning process, now (...) the focus seems to be on how beliefs develop, fluctuate and interact with actions, emotions, identities or affordances and how they are constructed within the micro- and macro-political contexts of learning and teaching languages” (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011, p. 282).

TC is therefore a multidimensional concept, encompassing additional dimensions and factors that are often interrelated. Among these, as previously mentioned, teachers’ attitudes and opinions are fully legitimate components. Being mental constructs, their definitions are subject to differing interpretations, often in accordance with underlying different theoretical frameworks. Their cognitive nature also implies that they are not directly observable neither entirely consciously accessible, which further contributes to the difficulty of their analysis. Notwithstanding this complexity, some definitional criteria are commonly acknowledged within the scientific community, as stated by McKenzie and McNeil (2023) regarding the concept of “attitude”:

“Attitudes are often formed when the individual is at a young age and, crucially, (...) evaluation is the key tenet of the attitude construct. (...) Their *valence* (positive or negative evaluations) and *intensity* (the vehemence with which an individual holds an attitude) remain important attributes for many attitude researchers” (McKenzie & McNeil, 2023, pp. 15-16).

In the present study, teachers’ attitudes refer to a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a given entity with a certain degree of favour or disfavour and, most importantly, predisposes the individual to act accordingly. With respect to teachers’ opinions, they refer to mental representations about the functioning or nature of an entity. In the former, therefore, the evaluative aspect is more prominent than in the latter, as is a more direct link to action.

The relationship between past experiences, teaching practices (including future ones, in the case of trainee teachers), and the cognitive-affective dimension should be investigated and valued from the moment when individuals are (still) students (Yuan *et al.* 2022, in Hosseini, 2025; Garrett, 2010, cited in Bier & Lasagabaster 2024: 4348; Ross *et al.*, 1991). More than thirty years ago, studies as those described in Holt Reynolds (1992) already showed that teachers’ experiences as learners may shape their beliefs (Note 3) about teaching and learning,

and that these beliefs tend to continue influencing their professional practice throughout their careers. Clearly, the same applies to the phase in which students are undergoing training to become teachers. Studies cited in Borg (2011) emphasise that “programmes which ignore trainee teachers’ prior beliefs may be less effective at influencing these” (e.g. Kettle & Sellars, 1996; Weinstein, 1990). At this stage, their O&A may also have a bidirectional impact on the internship they undertake in the classroom, if such a component is addressed in their training programme. Two issues seem to clearly emerge at this point: the first is that the early years of training for future teachers seem to be part of a kind of “optimal period” (to borrow a familiar concept from studies on SLA) for the formation of those mental representations that will later guide teaching practices; the second is that, again during the training of future teachers, it would be necessary to know what they already think, believe and feel about certain issues, such as plurilingualism, before attempting to convey new information and try to shape their opinions and attitudes.

1.3 Plurilingualism in Society and Education: An Asset or a Challenge? The Point of View of Teachers

This section explores the perceptions and attitudes of both teachers in training and those already in service in relation to multi-/plurilingualism in society and education. Studies regarding in service teachers (Alisaari *et al.*, 2019; Andorno, 2022; Burner & Carlsen, 2023; Camenzuli *et al.*, 2023; Chircop, 2022; Cognigni, 2019; Cortés Velásquez *et al.*, 2025; Dockrell *et al.*, 2021; Fohr-Prigent *et al.*, 2025; Gerwers *et al.*, 2022; Haukås, 2016; Knudsen *et al.*, 2020; Lundberg 2019; Nitti, 2021; Sordella, 2015) reveal the following main issues:

- (a) a discrepancy between theory and practice: there is a good theoretical knowledge of multi-/plurilingualism among teachers, but there is great difficulty in translating “good opinions” into “good practices”, so much so that when teaching, one often falls back onto ‘monolingual’ beliefs;
- (b) understanding that opinions may be multilayered and divergent: for example, having positive opinions about plurilingualism does not necessarily correspond to having positive opinions about plurilingual practices (Camenzuli *et al.*, 2023);
- (c) a lack of systematic and widespread training: there is no shortage of projects and workshops, but these initiatives are often contingent upon the virtuous actions of individual educators, schools or organisations (Bonvino, 2022);
- (d) limited access to resources: the term ‘resources’ means both a lack of time and a lack of specific materials (including those to assess plurilingual competences).

In a study conducted on Maltese teachers by Camenzuli *et al.* (2023), a lack of agency has also been reported, revealing that sometimes it might be the limits set by the school’s policy and/or the fear of repercussions that drive the teachers’ decision to adopt or avoid a perspective that values linguistic and cultural diversity.

Research on future teachers (e.g. Bier & Lasagabaster, 2024; Lasagabaster & Huguet, 2007) highlights shortcomings in training, amongst which the fact that positive opinions of

prospective teachers towards multilingualism must not be taken for granted:

“There seems to exist general agreement among authors on the fact that prospective teachers’ beliefs about multilingualism tend to be positive, even if deep-seated monolingual beliefs are often detected as well” (Bier & Lasagabaster 2024, p. 4349).

Caruana *et al.* (2019, p. 340) repeatedly pointed out that, even within the specific Maltese context where attention to these issues is particularly significant due to the ever-increasing “superdiversity” (Vertovec, 2007) of the social context, teachers’ awareness does not appear to align with the effective and actual implementation of plurilingual principles in educational practice. It is precisely this discrepancy – and the belief that mere awareness is insufficient – that led us to explore more internal factors related to trainee teachers, as their opinions and attitudes, including understanding plurilingualism and approaches towards it, will impact the state of affairs in a country as Malta, where high levels of immigration have a profound impact on many aspects of language education. We also aim to provide reflections that will be relevant beyond the Maltese reality, as its current multilingual situation finds many parallels in other contexts too. These could be taken into consideration from a comparative perspective, as done some years ago by Lasagabaster & Huguet (2007).

1.4 Plurilingual Education in the Maltese “Microcosm”: The Study on Becoming Teachers’ Cognition

The Maltese educational context is a setting often referred to as a “microcosm” due to the island’s unique linguistic landscape, shaped by a blend of native bilingualism (Maltese and English) and strong international influences. The present investigation aims to examine how plurilingual education policies and practices are perceived, interpreted, and enacted in this particular environment. The Maltese context offers valuable insights into both the challenges and opportunities that arise when implementing pluralistic language education in a society where multilingualism is a lived reality. This specific setting was selected not only for its diversity, but also because, from an educational point of view, its teacher education degree (Master in Teaching & Learning) involves trainee teachers collaborating closely with schools and, on completion, entitles them to a permanent warrant into the profession. Nevertheless, as reported by Chircop (2022) language barriers constitute one of the main obstacles of inclusion for migrant learners with recent studies highlighting the ever-increasing hegemony of English, at the expense of the rest of the variety of languages present in society (Caruana, 2011; Caruana *et al.*, 2019, Caruana *et al.*, 2013; Facciol *et al.*, 2015; Panzavecchia, 2024; Vassallo Gauci, 2017). To address the management of migrant students, schools “are mostly left to their own devices” (Chircop, 2022, p.149).

Considering the gaps in multilingual dynamics in education (§1.1) and their relationship with teachers’ cognitive dimensions (§1.2), we conducted a survey to collect data on the O&A of future teachers of language (L) and non-language (NL) subjects on multi-/plurilingualism in society and education in Malta. The decision to survey awareness and knowledge of key concepts and teaching practices related to these areas stems from the need to identify future teachers’ training needs and calibrate training programs to the real demands of society.

2. Method and Objectives

The research is based on a questionnaire distributed among university students enrolled in a Master's in Teaching and Learning (MTL) degree program at the University of Malta. Completion of this program leads to qualified teacher status, subject to a two-year probationary teaching experience in local schools. At the time of the questionnaire distribution in March-May 2025, 297 trainee teachers were actively registered on the course, which encompasses both primary and secondary education tracks. Of these, 62 (20.9%) validly completed questionnaires were received. Only five of these questionnaires were completed by trainee teachers from the primary track. Consequently, these five responses were excluded from the study due to the low response rate from this specific track.

Therefore, the 57 trainee teachers (42 females and 15 males; 36 aged between 18-24, 15 between 25-34, and the remaining 6 over 35) considered for the study were specialising in secondary education. Each one of them is a prospective teacher of a specific curricular area of study, including local and foreign languages taught in Malta (Maltese, English, Italian, Spanish, French, or German) or non-language areas such as the Creative Arts, Sciences, Business Education, Ethics, Social Studies, History, Geography, Religion or technical subjects.

Subjects are Maltese nationals, with two exceptions: one Bulgarian and one Italian. Thirty-five respondents indicate Maltese as their first language, while sixteen state that Maltese and English are both their mother tongue. Two subjects affirm that English is their first language, while another two indicate respectively Maltese and Arabic, and Maltese and Italian as being so. The two non-Maltese nationals, as expected, state that their first language is the that of their birthplace: Bulgarian and Italian.

The questionnaire draws from two main sources (Cortés Velázquez *et al.*, 2025; Mifsud & Petrova, 2017) (Note 4) and is structured as follows: an opening generic question through which respondents were asked whether EU citizens should study one or more foreign languages (in addition to Maltese and English), or no additional foreign languages at all; a section on language policies and plurilingualism in society including seven statements, on which respondents were asked to express their opinion via a six-point Likert scale; another section on plurilingualism in education, based on the same scale. This included ten positive statements and four negative statements. A further two sections included questions to obtain socio-biographic information as well as data related to respondents' education, language competences and use.

In the subsequent section, the results of the responses to the questionnaire are presented. The primary objectives of the analyses are threefold: (1) to determine the O&A of trainee teachers on plurilingualism in Malta's dynamic linguistic setting. We hypothesise that these are positive, considering the social context characterised by migration and multilingualism; (2) to ascertain whether trainee teachers specialising in languages exhibit more favourable opinions and demonstrate superior attitudes towards plurilingualism compared to their counterparts who are specialising in other (non-language) areas. We expect a strong connection between these variables, namely that specialisation plays a significant role in shaping the respondents'

answers as trainee teachers of languages are competent in this field, having completed undergraduate studies and initiated a post-graduate course in their language subject area; and (3) to determine whether trainee teachers who state that they are fluent in more than two languages express more positive opinions and demonstrate enhanced attitudes towards plurilingualism than their counterparts whose language competence is restricted to two languages, namely Maltese and English for local respondents. With regard to the relationship between these latter variables, we hypothesise that the configuration of the repertoire plays an important, albeit lesser role compared to specialisation, as it is mainly a result of personal experience as opposed to a choice of pursuing tertiary studies.

To gain deeper insights into our informants' perspectives, we conducted two semi-structured interviews via online focus group sessions with students who had expressed interest in further contributing to the research. Out of the seven students who participated in the discussions (two male and five female, mean age: 28.7), five specialise in languages and two in other areas. During the semi-structured interviews, we posed five prompting questions to explore students' personal experiences of (a) multi-/plurilingualism and (b) plurilingual practices, as well as their opinions on (c) the advantages and challenges of having allophone students in the classroom, (d) the opportunity to value, use, and learn the languages of migrant learners, and (e) training received to teach in their plurilingual context.

3. Results

The results obtained from the 57 questionnaires are discussed here, initially by presenting descriptive statistics, regarding both the predictors and the independent variables (§ 3.1), and then by considering the relationships between these variables (§ 3.2), formulated via a one-way ANOVA computed on IBM SPSS version 29. Since the data obtained is not normally distributed, the Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric statistical test is used to determine statistically significant differences between groups. Due to space constraints, only some key insights from the focus group sessions are integrated here.

3.1 Descriptive Overview of Questionnaire Responses: Opinions and Attitudes on Plurilingualism in Society and Education

The study considered two predictors: the trainee teachers' specialisation area and their language competences. Out of 57 respondents, 25 (43.9%) specialise in languages, while 32 (56.1%) specialise in other areas. 27 (47.4%) are competent in two languages, 17 (29.8%) in three, and 13 (22.8%) in four or more. Participants specialising in languages claim to know more languages than those in the 'non-languages' group, but this difference is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.97$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.325$). Therefore, confounding between the two predictors is excluded.

The introductory question was a generic one, wherein we asked respondents whether one, two or no additional foreign languages should be learned, in addition to Maltese and English. The response provided indicates favourable opinions towards learning additional languages, an outcome that is confirmed also in the Likert scale ratings that will be documented subsequently. Specifically, 37 respondents (64.9%) favoured learning one additional language,

and 18 (31.6%) supported learning at least two. Only two respondents (3.5%) stated that no additional foreign languages were necessary.

In Table 1 below we present the means obtained for the ten positive statements on plurilingualism in education, ranked in descending order. Means are calculated on a 0-5 scale, with zero being the lowest point (strongly disagree) and five the highest (strongly agree):

Table 1. Plurilingualism in education (positive statements)

	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Children should be encouraged to learn different languages	4.54	.73
2. Teachers should have an understanding of the sociocultural background and circumstances of the children in their class	4.33	.95
3. Teachers should emphasise how different languages may have common structures and shared words	4.05	.97
4. Being plurilingual is an advantage for learning at school	3.82	1.02
5. It is often said that the more languages one knows, the easier it is to learn new ones	3.77	1.07
6. Migrant children's previous language knowledge is important when learning a new language	3.70	1.09
7. Schools should teach in two or more languages	3.56	1.25
8. Proficiency in mastering foreign languages is important to face global challenges	3.53	.95
9. Every European citizen should master at least two other languages in addition to their first language	3.33	1.16
10. Children who know several languages will achieve better results across disciplines	3.23	1.27

The results reported in Table 1 indicate that the respondents have overall positive attitudes and opinions towards all the items regarding plurilingualism in education. The trainee teachers who completed the questionnaire show a notable degree of awareness in relation to the advantages of plurilingualism and also appreciate the importance of making connections between languages. The item *“Teachers should emphasise how different languages may have common structures and shared words”*, for example, ranks highly. The statements which express positive evaluations, also through the use of intensifying terms (see McKenzie & McNeil, 2023, in Section 1.2), thereby indicating good attitude constructs, rank well: take, for example, *“Children should be **encouraged** to learn different languages”*, *“Being plurilingual is an **advantage** for learning at school”* and *“It is often said that the more languages one knows, the **easier** it is to learn new ones”*. Positive evaluations towards plurilingualism emerged also in the focus groups, where participants stated that foreign students enrich classrooms when their diverse cultures and perspectives are included in daily practices.

On the other hand, items regarding opinions on actions that schools and institutions could take, rank lower (e.g. *“Schools should teach in two or more languages”*; *“Every European*

citizen should master at least two other languages in addition to their first language”). This suggests a general mismatch between the value of pluri-/multilingualism and what can be done in the classrooms. It also emerged from the focus groups, where participants mentioned the scarcity and inconsistency of multilingual practices.

The item that ranks lowest regards achievement in different disciplines and its relation to plurilingualism. This is possibly also due to the influence of English in Malta, as the medium of instruction for many secondary subjects. It is generally acknowledged that a good competence specifically in this language, and not in others, leads to better scholastic and academic achievement (Gatt *et al.*, 2024, Khabbazzbashi *et al.*, 2017, Ventura, 2016). Nevertheless, such an acknowledgement might not preclude critical stances toward the dominance of English. As stated by one participant of the focus groups: *“we are being really, really ran over by a lot of media in English, by a lot of programs in English. (...) So sometimes it’s very hard to maintain all languages, especially the L1”*.

In Table 2, also on plurilingualism in education, the negative statements are ranked. These require a reverse computation with respect to the data presented in Table 1, with five being the lowest mean point (strongly agree) and zero the highest (strongly disagree):

Table 2. Pluri-/multilingualism in education (negative statements)

	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Being plurilingual is a disadvantage for relationships with peers	.84	1.07
2. Teaching children who know 3 languages (or more) is more challenging than teaching children who know one or two languages	1.07	1.27
3. Schools should teach in only one language	1.18	1.31
4. Teaching children in both the target language and their first language will result in confusion	1.75	1.41

These findings largely complement the observations made in relation to Table 1, indicating that respondents exhibit positive attitudes and opinions towards plurilingualism. Two of the three statements which include negative evaluations, are clearly disfavoured by respondents: *“Being plurilingual is a **disadvantage** for relationships with peers”* and *“Teaching children who know 3 languages (or more) is more **challenging** than teaching children who know one or two languages”*. This outcome shows that the trainee teachers are developing a positive attitude construct towards plurilingualism. On the other hand, they adopt a more cautious approach when using target and first languages simultaneously, acknowledging the potential confusion this may cause. This outcome is somewhat concerning, as the trainee teachers will eventually be teaching in the Maltese multilingual context, characterised by language contact. It suggests that practices such as translanguaging and mediation require greater understanding and dissemination, particularly in terms of their practical applications.

In Table 3 the results of another seven statements are presented. These concern opinions on plurilingualism in society, i.e. from a wider point of view than those listed in Table 2. Means are calculated on a 0-5 scale, with zero being the lowest point (strongly disagree) and five the highest (strongly agree):

Table 3. Plurilingualism (PL) in society

	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. PL contributes to dialogue between cultures	4.28	1.05
2. PL contributes to the promotion of linguistic diversity	4.18	1.18
3. PL allows access to other ways of thinking	4.00	1.12
4. PL contributes to the mobility of citizens	3.96	1.2
5. PL contributes to the internationalisation of education	3.91	1.18
6. PL contributes to the competitiveness of the EU economy	3.65	1.2
7. PL means having full proficiency (C1-C2 level of the CEFR) in at least two languages	3.02	1.19

The results reported in Table 3 align with the previous ones, also in terms of mean distribution. The contribution of plurilingualism for dialogue and promotion of linguistic diversity is ranked higher than competitiveness and internationalisation, indicating an awareness of the benefits of plurilingualism in today's social realities and the need to address them through reflection and engagement. Interestingly, the item that ranks lowest is “*PL means having full proficiency (C1-C2 level of the CEFR) in at least two languages*”. This shows that while some respondents are aware that one may indeed be plurilingual even though one's foreign language competences may not reach the highest CEFR proficiency levels, some others might not be familiar with the concept of partial competences (see CARAP, Candelier *et al.*, 2007).

3.2 Exploring the Role of Specialisation Area and Language Competence

To address the objectives described in Section 2, the data reported in this section are analysed against the two predictors, namely the area of specialisation of the trainee teachers and their reported language competences.

3.2.1 Area of Specialisation

As explained earlier, all our subjects were following the MTL course at university, which will lead them to qualified teacher status. Since they are all students following a secondary education track they specialise in a curricular area, specifically the school subject that they will eventually teach. For the purposes of our research these are divided as ‘language’ (L) and ‘non-language’ (NL) specialisation areas. When the relationship of these predictors was investigated for respondents' opinions and attitudes towards plurilingualism in education, a consistent trend is registered, indicating that trainee teachers who are specialising in languages (L) are more favourable towards plurilingualism in education than those who are not specialising in languages (NL). Nevertheless, despite this regular trend among all items

listed in Tables 1 & 2 above, statistically significant differences are registered only in the case of three positive statements. These are represented in Table 4 below:

Table 4. The relationship between trainee teachers' area of specialisation and attitudes and opinions on plurilingualism in education

		Mean	Std. Deviation
Proficiency in mastering foreign languages is important to face global challenges *	Language (L)	3.80	1
	Non-language (NL)	3.31	.86
Teachers should emphasise how different languages may have common structures and shared words *	Language (L)	4.36	.76
	Non-language (NL)	3.81	1.06
Being plurilingual is an advantage for learning at school *	Language (L)	4.16	.94
	Non-language (NL)	3.56	1.01

* significant at 0.05 level

Two of the above three items, namely *“Teachers should emphasise how different languages may have common structures and shared words”* and *“Being plurilingual is an advantage for learning at school”*, concern the school environment. The former, especially, may be the result of (L) respondents' awareness of underlying commonalities between languages and the consequent advantages of intercomprehension strategies, with which (NL) trainee teachers may not be so familiar. (L) respondents also outperform their (NL) counterparts in their opinion regarding mastering foreign languages and facing global challenges, thereby showing that they value these languages in relation to the role they could have in building bridges across cultures.

Although the same trend is present in relation to the items listed as plurilingualism in society (Table 3), with (L) subjects outperforming their (NL) counterparts, no statistically significant differences are registered. This indicates that while opinions and attitudes of trainee teachers specialising in languages (L) are more favourable than those of other areas (NL) in some items regarding plurilingualism in education, these differences do not emerge in the case of the more generic statements regarding plurilingualism in society.

3.2.2 Language Competences

The respondents' language competences were determined through information that they provided on the languages in which they can have a fluent conversation. A list of languages was provided via a drop-down menu. For statistical analysis purposes, these were then classified according to whether they could hold a conversation only in Maltese and English – the two national languages of Malta – or whether they stated that they could do so in additional languages too. As shown in Table 5 below, statistically significant differences were registered for several items on plurilingualism in education (positive statements). The list of all items is shown below, in the order presented in the questionnaire:

Table 5. The relationship between trainee teachers' language competences and attitudes and opinions on plurilingualism in education

		Mean	Std. Deviation
Schools should teach in two or more languages	2 languages	3.37	1.31
	3 languages or more	3.73	1.2
Children should be encouraged to learn different languages ***	2 languages	4.22	.85
	3 languages or more	4.83	.46
Every European citizen should master at least two other languages in addition to their first language ***	2 languages	2.81	1.04
	3 languages or more	3.80	1.06
Proficiency in mastering foreign languages is important to face global challenges **	2 languages	3.15	.86
	3 languages or more	3.87	.9
Teachers should emphasise how different languages may have common structures and shared words	2 languages	3.96	.85
	3 languages or more	4.13	1.07
Teachers should have an understanding of the sociocultural background and circumstances of the children in their class	2 languages	4.41	.8
	3 languages or more	4.27	1.08
It is often said that the more languages one knows, the easier it is to learn new ones	2 languages	3.56	1.19
	3 languages or more	3.97	.93
Children who know several languages will achieve better results across disciplines *	2 languages	2.78	1.4
	3 languages or more	3.63	1
Migrant children's previous language knowledge is important when learning a new language *	2 languages	3.33	1.2
	3 languages or more	4.03	.85
Being plurilingual is an advantage for learning at school *	2 languages	3.48	1.16
	3 languages or more	4.13	.78

*significant at 0.05 level

** significant at 0.01 level

*** significant at 0.001 level

There is a consistent trend, in the data reported in Table 5, which demonstrates that trainee teachers who declare that they can hold a fluent conversation in three languages or more languages are more favourable towards plurilingualism in education than those who declare that they are competent in two languages. Highly statistically significant differences are registered for the items *“Children should be encouraged to learn different languages”*; *“Every European citizen should master at least two other languages in addition to their first language”* and *“Proficiency in mastering foreign languages is important to face global challenges”*.

Statistically significant differences, always in favour of respondents’ who state that they can hold a conversation in more than three languages, is also reached for these items: *“Children who know several languages will achieve better results across disciplines”*; *“Migrant children’s previous language knowledge is important when learning a new language”* and *“Being plurilingual is an advantage for learning at school”*. This demonstrates that increased language competence fosters stronger opinions and better attitudes towards linguistic diversity, as well as more openness towards language acquisition and learning.

While statistical significance is not reached for the four negative statements (Table 2) and the items on plurilingualism in society (Table 3), confirming the pattern reported in section 3.2.1, respondents who can hold fluent conversations in multiple languages still outperform those who can only do so in two.

Interestingly, the language competence variable reaches statistically significant differences even in the initial question of the questionnaire (§ 3.1), in which respondents were asked their opinion on additional languages. Results are illustrated in Table 6 below, formulated via cross-tabulations to investigate the association between two categorical variables:

Table 6. The relationship between trainee teachers’ language competences and their opinion on learning additional foreign languages

		At least one additional FL	At least two additional FLs	No additional FLs
Language competence	2 languages	21	4	2
		77.8%	14.8%	7.4%
	3 languages or more	16	14	0
		53.3%	46.7%	0.0%
Total		37	18	2
		64.9%	31.6%	3.5%

$$(\chi^2 = 8.096, \quad df = 2, p = 0.017)$$

Table 6 shows that nearly half of trainee teachers who claim to be fluent in three or more languages believe that at least two additional should be learned. However, this drops to 14.8% for those fluent in two languages. This indicates that language proficiency, as measured by self-declared fluency, significantly influences respondents’ views on learning additional languages.

3.2.3 Overall Conclusion of Results

The data collected in the present study show that the trainee teachers who responded to the questionnaire harbour positive opinions and attitudes towards plurilingualism. Their language competences are more influential than their area of specialisation, as the statistical analysis carried out shows that being fluent in three or more languages is especially instrumental in fostering positive opinions and attitudes towards plurilingualism in education. The items regarding plurilingualism in society, possibly because of their more generic nature (Table 3), do not yield significant differences. This also indicates that the items in the questionnaire which were directly related to the participants' field of expertise, namely education, led to more clear-cut responses on opinions and attitudes.

4. Discussion

The results of this study provide insights into the opinions and attitudes (O&A) of future trainee teachers in Malta towards plurilingualism, a context shaped by an intriguing blend of native bilingualism and increasing migration. The findings confirm some of the hypotheses, while reconsidering others in terms of the importance of their impact (§ 2), revealing the nuanced interplay between a teachers' academic training and their personal language repertoire.

Consistent with our initial assumption and existing literature, the trainee teachers in this study hold overall positive opinions and attitudes toward plurilingualism. They recognise the value of encouraging students to learn different languages and understand the importance of considering their sociocultural backgrounds. However, some discrepancies emerge between this positive awareness and the perceived practicality of plurilingual education, as already documented extensively in the literature (§ 1.3).

For instance, while respondents value the benefits of plurilingualism, they are more cautious about implementing specific pedagogical strategies, such as teaching in two or more languages simultaneously. This suggests that good intentions do not automatically translate into effective practices, a challenge that has been linked to various factors in the literature, including teachers' internal cognitive features. Limited familiarity with plurilingual practices, accompanied by the perception of a lack of adequate preparation to confront the complexities of plurilingualism – issues both highlighted in the focus groups – might have contributed to this outcome. This disconnect could possibly also be due to the persistent influence of the dominant role of English as the medium of instruction for many subjects, consistent with findings reported in studies on Italian migrants in Malta (§ 1.4): English, above all other languages (sometimes including their L1), is deemed fundamental both for social inclusion and to further one's academic and employment opportunities. The issue of the space 'occupied' by English was likewise addressed by focus group participants, confirming that it is unquestionably a topic of substantial scholarly interest requiring further investigation.

Most significantly, and in contrast to our expectations in terms of the impact of variables taken into consideration (§ 2), the results of this research demonstrate that trainee teachers' personal language repertoire is a more influential factor in shaping their opinions and

attitudes toward plurilingualism in education than their area of academic specialisation. This finding is a distinctive insight of the study, reinforcing the pivotal role that personal language knowledge plays (see also Caruana *et al.*, 2019). It is also directly associated with teachers' cognition and to how their knowledge and beliefs, sometimes subconsciously, are transposed into their classroom practices (Borg, 2015).

Language competence emerges as a key predictor because trainee teachers who reported being fluent in three or more languages were consistently and significantly more favourable towards plurilingualism in education than those fluent in two (Maltese and English). This is particularly evident in their views on encouraging children to learn different languages and the importance of foreign language proficiency to face global challenges. It indicates that direct, lived experience with plurilingualism fosters a more open and positive attitude towards linguistic diversity. This also aligns with existing research on teacher cognition that highlights the importance of teachers' own linguistic repertoires (Bier & Lasagabaster, 2024; Knudsen *et al.*, 2020).

While language specialisation shows a trend of more positive attitudes toward plurilingual education, these differences were statistically significant for only a few items. This suggests that academic background alone, without the direct experience of being plurilingual, may not be sufficient to fully shape trainee teachers' positive attitudes. This challenges our initial prediction that the language group would show greater openness due to their specific background. Instead, the data reveal that personal linguistic competence is the more powerful variable. This is why we used the term 'hidden' in the title: it refers to the role of the linguistic repertoire, which emerged as the main variable that shapes opinions and attitudes towards plurilingualism in this study, and it encompasses concealed knowledge and competences, the impact of which on teaching practices is often not fully understood both by future teachers themselves and by those involved in teacher training.

Echoing what is known as "native-speakerism" (e.g. Dewaele *et al.* 2021; Ortega 2019), in our data, particularly when observing responses to item 7 in Table 3 ('PL means having full proficiency (C1-C2 level of the CEFR) in at least two languages'), we detect a phenomenon that we might refer to as "proficientism", a sort of ideology that privileges high-level linguistic proficiency, aligned with native-like competence, as a major criterion to recognise 'legitimate' plurilingualism, while marginalizing partial and emergent language competences. In other words, if the adjective "native" (in "native-speakerism") could be misleading and requires critical reflection, so should be the adjective "full" (in item 7) as individuals' repertoire is composed of partial competences. Responses indicate that awareness of this is limited, and, in terms of teacher training, this shows that there is still work to be done to illustrate and disseminate one of the core concepts of pluralistic approaches: the partial nature of any linguistic competence. This also entails acknowledging the importance of valuing even minimal levels of competence in any language. While it is certainly true that higher levels of proficiency across different languages tend to yield greater benefits (Berthele, 2021), lower proficiency does not equate to irrelevance – on the contrary, it can represent the foundation for further development and, if developed to a greater extent, meaningful interaction.

5. Conclusion

These findings have direct implications for teacher education programs, in Malta and beyond. Given that teachers' early training is an "optimal period" to form mental representations that will guide their practices, it is crucial for educational programs to address the theoretical aspects of plurilingualism and to actively engage future teachers in a critical reflection on their own linguistic repertoires and beliefs (see also Cavagnoli, 2020; Cognigni & Di Febo, 2023).

It is crucial to emphasise that merely reflecting on one's linguistic repertoire is insufficient. Expanding this repertoire is essential, as it is the direct experience of plurilingualism that truly makes a difference. This involves active practice and engagement in language learning and acquisition. Experiencing the benefits of plurilingualism firsthand can be far more persuasive than theoretical training, as it effectively bridges the gap between theory and practice. In fact, it is practice that shapes opinions and attitudes, and vice versa, in a bidirectional manner. Furthermore, cultivating teachers' plurilingual repertoires reinforces foundational values such as inclusion and diversity through practical, context-sensitive strategies.

Specifically within the Maltese context, our data indicate that proficiency in three or more languages holds significant importance. This is because any additional languages clearly signify an enhanced value within a context where bilingualism is structurally embedded. This added value not only contributes to further linguistic proficiency but also serves as a valuable gateway, facilitating the development of more positive attitudes and opinions towards plurilingualism.

A key limitation of this study is the cognitive nature of opinions and attitudes, which are not directly observable and can be difficult to fully access consciously. Future research could benefit from a qualitative component, such as more extensive semi-structured interviews, to delve deeper into the reasons behind these attitudes and understand the specific experiences that have shaped them. The study could also be expanded to compare the O&A of trainee teachers with those of in-service teachers to see how opinions evolve throughout a professional career. It would also certainly be of interest to compare teachers' opinions and attitudes with their actual practices adopted in the classroom.

Understanding the relationship between teachers' experiences, starting from when they are students, and their beliefs and attitudes towards plurilingualism is crucial, especially in contexts where immigration is a structural component (Caruana *et al.*, 2019, p. 339). Through well-designed pluralistic language education, foundational societal values such as democracy and inclusion can be reinforced (GISCEL, 1975). For this reason, it is worth reiterating that plurilingualism is never merely a linguistic issue, and it therefore concerns teachers of all subjects: any teacher holds significant decision-making power (Knudsen *et al.*, 2020; Menken & Garcia, 2010), which is conveyed also through the linguistic resources they employ (Note 5). For example, it is ultimately up to the teacher to decide how much time to devote to recognising the heritage languages of students. On the other hand, accepting Piccardo's view that "plurilingualism recognises variation of languages in a fractal configuration" (2017, p.

194), also acknowledges that managing plurilingualism in the classroom is a complex task, given its layered nature. This “multilingual challenge” (Jessner & Kramsch, 2015) requires appropriate and ongoing training to recognise, value, and fully harness the widespread rich linguistic and, more broadly, individual diversity.

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Notes

Note 1. The entire article is the result of a collaborative effort between both authors. For the purposes of attribution, sections 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 4, and 5 are credited to Elisa Fiorenza, while sections 2, 3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.2.1, 3.2.2, and 3.2.3 are credited to Sandro Caruana.

Note 2. For further insights into the concept of repertoire, see Berruto (1974), Busch (2017), Dal Negro & Guerini (2007), and Santipolo (2002), among others. In the specific field of plurilingual education, see, for example, Andorno & Sordella (2018), Bonvino & Garbarino (2022), Chini & Andorno (2018), Cognigni (2020), De Carlo & Anquetil (2019), Zanasi & Platzgummer (2018).

Note 3. For Pajares, *beliefs* are “an individual’s judgment(s) of the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgment that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend, and do” (1992, p. 316), but also “attitudes and values about teaching, students, and the educational process” (Pajares, 1993, cited in Borg, 2015, p. 41). O&A can be considered within the broader category of *beliefs*.

Note 4. Some questions have been modified to better suit the context, while others are presented in their original form.

Note 5. In this regard, some studies on EMI (e.g. Airey, 2012) are particularly insightful, especially concerning the role that teachers of non-language subjects attribute to the linguistic dimension of their teaching.

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