The acquisition of verbal tense and aspect in Maltese by adult migrants: Implications for pedagogical grammar

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Abstract

This article considers the relevance of second language acquisition research for the development of pedagogical grammar. As an example it looks at the acquisition of verbal tense and aspect by intermediate-to-advanced level learners of Maltese, and more specifically the extent to which the perfett and imperfett verb forms are used by the learners when compared with L1 users of Maltese. Sixteen adult migrant learners, and 15 L1 Maltese users, took part in the study. All but one of the 16 migrant learners knew at least two other languages. Two of the participants had Arabic as their L1, and three others had learned Arabic as an L2, while the remaining learners spoke a variety of first languages. On a picture interpretation task, L1 speakers of Arabic performed very much like Maltese L1 speakers, predominantly using the perfett, perfective aspect in the past. All the other migrant learners, including those who had learned Arabic well as an L2, used the imperfett, imperfective/unrestricted habitual aspect. This evidence has important implications for the formulation of pedagogical grammar for foreign learners of Maltese. It also sheds light on the relevance of language typology in foreign language acquisition.

Keywords: Maltese; Arabic; tense; aspect; adult learners; pedagogical grammar.

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Acquisition of verbal tense and aspect in Maltese

1 Introduction

Ever since the question about the relevance of linguistic research to language teaching was raised by Allen (1974), it has remained a pertinent one, albeit not very frequently discussed in the theoretical literature about second language acquisition (SLA). This is probably not an issue for teachers of major languages like English, French, Spanish, Chinese and so on, because the production of teaching material has, by and large, caught up with the very many applied studies in those languages. However, for languages like Maltese, spoken by less than half a million people, and yet much in demand by hundreds of migrant learners, the issue of developing appropriate teaching materials and pedagogical grammars is crucial. Allen (1974) made a distinction between formal grammars on the one hand, and pedagogical grammars on the other. While formal grammars are concerned with a specification of the formal properties of language, with the code rather than the ‘use of the code’ (p. 59), a pedagogical grammar aims to provide the learner with material that is not only scientifically sound, but also the most effective to facilitate learning, and use, of the language.

Knowledge about how a learner acquires a new language provides valuable insights for language education. As Cook (1991:3) put it, ‘all successful teaching depends upon learning.’ Knowledge about learning can therefore guide teaching, including the sequence of grammar items in a language course, the construction of teaching materials, and the design and execution of teaching techniques. It is clear that in teaching and learning, however intensive the input, it is not a guarantee for output/acquisition because multiple factors intervene (Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan, 2008). Furthermore, in the case of less studied languages like Maltese, very often the linguistic structures presented in class are reproduced from formal grammars without the availability of SLA research to inform pedagogical decisions. This article explores the relevance of SLA research to pedagogical grammar, taking the acquisition of verbal tense and aspect in Maltese by adult migrant learners as an example.

We anticipate that this might inform textbook authors, syllabus writers and teachers. Educators need to bear in mind the specific needs of adult migrant learners, who are motivated to learn the language in order to put it into practice in their daily working life. Therefore, as applied linguists, we strive to discover the most efficient way of teaching the language in alignment with how it is best learned, by a group of learners in a particular context.

2 SLA theories and language teaching

One theory that sought to bring together SLA research and language teaching is Pienemann’s (1984) Teachability Hypothesis, which is an aspect of
Processability Theory. It is a theory-practice interface, whose aim is to predict the stages of SLA which cannot be skipped in the teaching-learning process. Processability Theory views language acquisition as a gradual and cumulative developmental process, ‘involving the automation of information exchange procedures, as a mechanism that drives learning through the hierarchy of acquisition stages’ (Mansouri and Duffy, 2005:82). The Teachability Hypothesis was taken a step further by Long (1988) who suggested that ‘formal intervention will promote acquisition if it occurs at a time when the learner is developmentally ready for the taught form’ (Pienemann and Kessler, 2012:241). The same line of thought is presented by Mansouri and Duffy (2005) who claim that when learners are taught the target language (TL) grammar in an order that’s calibrated to learner readiness, the overall rate of grammatical accuracy will improve, and the long-term learnability of the structures will be enhanced. This means, therefore, that we need to identify the stages of learner readiness in order to be able to determine what is teachable, when and how.

From a similar perspective in terms of viewing foreign language learning as developing in stages, Ringbom (2016) indicates that there are four stages. According to Ringbom, learning starts with item learning for comprehension followed by item learning for production, through system learning for comprehension followed by system learning for production. The last one represents the final stage in which learners manage to express similar meanings by using different linguistic means. Although Ringbom (2016) was mainly referring to lexis, we believe that this staged approach could potentially be extended to structure.

On the other hand, much research has been conducted specifically in trying to establish the potential positive and negative influence of the L1 on the L2, referred to as transfer and/or crosslinguistic influence (Odlin and Yu, 2016). Considering the mobility of the world’s population in recent years, and the realisation that most people are plurilingual speakers, attention is increasingly given to L3/Ln (any additional language) acquisition beyond the L2. Some scholars, such as Slabakova (2017) and Westergaard (2019), argue that the acquisition of linguistic structures in L3/Ln is similar to that in L2, at least in the initial stages. Slabakova (2017) developed the scalpel model, while Westergaard (2019) based her predictions on the linguistic proximity model. Both of these are linguistic models dependent on the linguistic similarity between languages.

However, others, like Cook (2016), Jessner, Megens and Graus (2016) and Ortega (2008), take a wider perspective of language learning and claim that it is important to differentiate between L2 and L3/Ln learners, since the latter are experienced foreign language learners and are likely to present specific characteristics, and have a different type of competence from those who would
have learned only one language prior to the L2. Jessner et al. (2016) prefer the Dynamic System and Complexity Theory, also known as Chaos/Complexity Theory, and they believe that SLA must take into account the added complexity of a repertoire of languages, learnt and used to varying degrees by the learner. Jessner et al. (2016:194) contend that a ‘multilingual system is in constant change, as are the components of the system.’ L3/Ln users are thus considered as plurilingual speakers. From a Chaos/Complexity Theory perspective, the learners’ plurilingual development is complex, nonlinear, changes over time, and it can result in language attrition or loss.

For our project all aspects mentioned above were relevant, i.e., the issue of learning a foreign language through stages, Chaos/Complexity Theory and language typology (i.e., linguistic proximity). The study of 16 students reported here was extracted from a larger investigation based on a longitudinal study of 35 learners. The larger study produced evidence to illustrate the suitability of Chaos/Complexity Theory in SLA. The learning curves of 35 adult migrant learners of Maltese were identified over a period of 14 months, and although the curves were nonlinear, overall they showed exponential growth (Żammit, 2019b). Furthermore, as explained below, while linguistic typology is particularly relevant in Ln acquisition, the L1 and not the L2 was a significant factor in positive transfer, even when both the L1 of some learners and the L2 of other learners were typologically similar to the Ln. The result also calls for a reflection on and further probing into the question of staged teaching and learning.

3 The study

The study reported here was triggered by the result of a small-scale exploratory project about the acquisition of verbal tense and aspect by adult foreign learners of Maltese (Camilleri Grima, 2015). The main finding of that study was that on production tasks, the most commonly used tense/aspect by foreign learners was the *imperfett* (unrestricted habitual aspect), which L1 Maltese users used only half as frequently as the advanced Ln speakers of Maltese, on the same set of production tasks. This finding is considered to have important implications for the teaching of Maltese as an Ln. The teaching of Maltese as an Ln at present follows the descriptive accounts of Maltese whereby the *perfett* aspect/past tense is taken as the basic structure, and is therefore given much attention in teaching from the start. Given that in Camilleri Grima’s study advanced users of Maltese as an Ln with analysed knowledge of the structures under investigation failed to transfer their knowledge to a communicative situation highlights the need to look more closely at this phenomenon.

Considering that only 3 learners and 3 L1 speakers had participated in the Camilleri Grima (2015) study, a longitudinal study was subsequently carried
out by Żammit (2019a) with 35 intermediate learners of Maltese as an Ln. Longitudinal studies have the advantage of recording acquisition through performance over time, and if a linguistic feature appears systematically, it can be said to have been acquired by the learner (Meisel, Clahsen and Pienemann, 1981). The longitudinal study sought to answer three research questions:

(i) Can a pattern be observed over time in the acquisition of verbal tense/aspect by adult Ln users of Maltese?
(ii) Do adult Ln users of Maltese at an intermediate level produce the *perfett* and *imperfett* at the same frequency as adult L1 users of Maltese?
(iii) What kinds of difficulties are encountered by adult Ln learners when acquiring Maltese and especially Maltese verbs?

In this article we focus on the answer to the second research question, which confirmed the earlier finding, i.e., that Ln learners of Maltese used the *imperfett* (unrestricted habitual aspect), unlike the L1 Maltese users who used the *perfett* (past tense/perfective aspect), on the same production task, unless their L1 was Arabic. This finding has relevance to the teaching of Maltese, and to syllabus and material development, because it indicates that the learning path taken by Ln learners is different depending on whether their L1 is Arabic, at least with regard to this structure.

3.1 Maltese verbs

The Maltese language can be described as one of mixed origins due to the influence from the Semitic, Romance and English languages over at least 1,000 years. Mifsud (1995) represents the linguistic stratigraphy of Maltese in terms of a Semitic stratum, a Romance super-stratum and an English ad-stratum. The Semitic stratum consists of an Arabic element that forms the basis of the phonology, morphology and to a lesser extent the syntax of Maltese. The Romance super-stratum consists of a Sicilian and an Italian element that contributed almost half of the lexicon of modern Maltese, and had an impact on its syntactic, phonological and morphological structures. The English ad-stratum consists mainly of lexical material incorporated into Maltese in the last century.

An important feature of the grammatical system of Maltese which is particularly relevant to this study is its Arabic verbal structure, namely how tense and aspect are expressed in the two verb forms that combine tense and aspect characteristics: the *perfett* and the *imperfett* (Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997). The *perfett* in Maltese corresponds in part to what are called perfective forms in other languages, such as the past, perfect and pluperfect in Germanic languages (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). The *perfett* in Maltese is generally associated with past events (tense) and shows a completed and finished action, an aspectual characteristic (Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997).
The *perfett* inflects for person, number and gender using a set of suffixes and internal rearrangement of the basic form, which is referred to as *mamma*, and which denotes the third person, masculine, singular. According to Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander (1997), the *imperfett* in general realises timelessness and durativity. Comrie (1976:24) emphasises that the general characterisation of imperfectivity is ‘namely, explicit reference to the internal temporal structure of a situation.’ The *imperfett* in Maltese expresses habituality, and it is preceded by a number of particles to express other aspects. The *imperfett* is conjugated by using suffixes for the plural and prefixes for personal pronouns. The following are a few examples.

*Maltese verbs of Arabic origin*

| Verb root (*għerq*) | Basic form (*mamma*) | Perfett | Imperfett |
|---------------------|----------------------|---------|-----------|
| s-w-q               | saq (he drove)       | soqt (I drove) | nsuq (I drive) |
|                     |                      | soqt (you drove) | ssuq (you drive) |
|                     |                      | saq (he drove) | isuq (he drives) |
|                     |                      | saqet (she drove) | ssuq (she drives) |
|                     |                      | soqna (we drove) | nsuqu (we drive) |
|                     |                      | soqtu (you drove) | ssuqu (you drive) |
|                     |                      | saqu (they drove) | isuq (they drive) |

*Maltese verbs of Romance origin*

| Stem (*zokk morfemiku*) | Basic form (*mamma*) | Perfett | Imperfett |
|-------------------------|----------------------|---------|-----------|
| skappa                  | skappa (he escaped)  | skappajt (I escaped) | niskappa (I escape) |
|                         |                      | skappajt (you escaped) | tiskappa (you escape) |
|                         |                      | skappa (he escaped) | jiskappa (he escapes) |
|                         |                      | skappat (she escaped) | tiskappa (she escapes) |
|                         |                      | skappajna (we escaped) | niskappaw (we escape) |
|                         |                      | skappajtu (you escaped) | tiskappaw (you escape) |
|                         |                      | skappaw (they escaped) | jiskappaw (they escape) |

*Maltese verbs of English origin*

| Stem (*zokk morfemiku*) | Basic form (*mamma*) | Perfett | Imperfett |
|-------------------------|----------------------|---------|-----------|
| ċett                    | ċċettja (he chatted online) | ċċettjajt (I chatted) | niċċettja (I chat) |
|                         |                      | ċċettjajt (you chatted) | tiċċettja (you chat) |
|                         |                      | ċċettja (he chatted) | jiċċettja (he chats) |
|                         |                      | ċċettjat (she chatted) | tiċċettja (she chats) |
|                         |                      | ċċettjajna (we chatted) | niċċettjaw (we chat) |
|                         |                      | ċċettjajtu (you chatted) | tiċċettjaw (you chat) |
|                         |                      | ċċettjaw (they chatted) | tiċċettjaw (they chat) |
Other aspectual distinctions in Maltese are made through the use of particles and verbs and expressions within the verb phrase (Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997). For example, the present progressive/restricted habitual aspect is expressed by a construction made up of the particle ‘qed’ followed by a verb in the *imperfett*, as in ‘qed isuq’ (*he is driving*). The past progressive is expressed in the construction ‘qed isuq’ preceded by the verb ‘kien,’ as in ‘kien qed isuq’ (*he was driving*). Typically, a verb chain in Maltese consists of the first verb in the *perfett* followed by a verb in the *imperfett*, as in ‘komplejt nikteb’ (literally, I continued I write) meaning *I continued to write*.

3.2 The participants

Two sets of participants took part in the study reported here: 15 L1 Maltese users and 16 adult learners of Maltese as a foreign language. The 15 L1 Maltese adult participants were recruited on the basis of opportunistic sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). The criteria for inclusion in the study were that they had to be 18 years or older, that they had learned Maltese from birth and had continued to use Maltese regularly throughout their life, and that they lived in several different towns in Malta. By chance, their age range was from 21 to 75, and their employment varied widely (Table 1).

Table 1. The L1 Maltese participants

| Pseudonym | Age | Work        |
|-----------|-----|-------------|
| Alex      | 48  | secretary   |
| Alison    | 32  | teacher     |
| Amanda    | 75  | housewife   |
| Andrew    | 25  | manager     |
| David     | 39  | director    |
| Jeannette | 39  | notary      |
| Karen     | 46  | architect   |
| Manuel    | 32  | chef        |
| Mark      | 57  | lawyer      |
| Miriam    | 45  | hairdresser |
| Pauline   | 35  | accountant  |
| Rita      | 65  | housewife   |
| Sean      | 21  | student     |
| Suzanne   | 37  | hairdresser |
| Victor    | 53  | doctor      |
The migrant learners were a group of 16 volunteers from the only existing set of adult learners of Maltese ($n = 37$) attending three different Lifelong Learning Centres run by the Malta Ministry of Education (see Tables 2 and 5). They had passed the elementary and pre-intermediate exams – the A1 and A2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). They had been formally learning Maltese for two and a half years. Each year the course runs from October to June, and the learners attend a three-hour lesson once a week, for 32 weeks. At the start of the data collection the participants were attending the intermediate level lessons (level B1/B2 of the CEFR) and at the end of the study, 14 months later, they were in the level B2 course, which was the last level available. Each learner completed a profile questionnaire which required them to provide information about their native language and other languages they had learned, their reasons for learning Maltese and their experience of learning and using Maltese. As can be seen from Table 2, all participants, except for Jeremy, had learned several languages before Maltese. They were all fluent in English. At the start of the study, in March 2016, the learners were nearing the end of their third formal year of the course, and at the end of the data collection period, in May 2017, they were finishing their fourth year.

Table 2. The learners of Maltese

| Pseudonym | First language         | Other languages learned before Maltese (not presented by the learners in any particular order) |
|-----------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Charif    | Palestinian Arabic     | English                                                                                         |
| Mohammed  | Libyan Arabic          | Italian, English                                                                                 |
| Alfonso   | Portuguese             | Spanish, French, Italian, English                                                               |
| Ahmed     | Sindhi                 | Arabic, English                                                                                  |
| Aksel     | Danish                 | German, English                                                                                  |
| Brunilda  | Albanian               | Italian, French, English                                                                         |
| Hilde     | German                 | Arabic, French, Italian, English                                                                 |
| Irina     | Russian                | English                                                                                         |
| Jane      | Greek                  | French, English                                                                                  |
| Jasmina   | Serbian                | Italian, English                                                                                  |
| Jeremy    | English                |                                                                                                 |
| Marika    | Italian                | Arabic, Spanish, English                                                                         |
| Nataliya  | Ukranian               | Russian, English                                                                                 |
| Sabal     | Malayalam              | English                                                                                         |
| Shai      | Tagalog                | English                                                                                         |
| Theo      | Swedish                | Norwegian, Danish, Finnish, German, English                                                      |
3.3 The picture interpretation task

Visual stimuli in the form of stationary or moving pictures are used in SLA research to collect data linked to a range of objectives. Slobin (1991) analysed narrations of a story by children shown in a picture book in order to examine how their L1s (English, German, Spanish, Hebrew) influenced their treatment of time and space in their L2. Bialystok, McBride-Chang and Luk (2005) used pictures to elicit data in order to compare phonological awareness and decoding among three groups of children (monolingual, bilingual and L2 learner). Joo (2003) used pictures and matching/nonmatching sentences to study how Korean learners of English as L2 develop knowledge of the English locative alternative.
The aim of the picture interpretation (PI) task in this study was to collect production data in order to investigate whether the learners of Maltese at intermediate-to-advanced level used the *perfett* and *imperfett* to the same extent as the L1 users of Maltese. The PI task consisted of two sets of pictures, Set A and Set B. Each set comprised two pages of drawings: the first page showed a sequence of eight pictures (see example in Figure 1, narrating a story of a man waking up and getting ready to leave home, with a clock showing the time of each action), while the second page showed only one situation (see example in Figure 2, showing a family having a picnic). The two sets were used alternatingly, so that the 16 learners of Maltese sat the PI task six times over 14 months. The L1 Maltese users were used as a control group and sat the PI interpretation task only once. Each participant was given about 30 seconds to look at the picture and then about 5 minutes to talk about it while being recorded. The recordings were subsequently transcribed and analysed.

![Figure 2. The picture on page 2 of Set A](image)

### 3.4 The results
Table 3 shows the total number of verb forms used by L1 Maltese users, and Table 4 shows the number of verbs used by the Ln Maltese users over all of the six PI tasks. All L1 Maltese users opted mostly for the *perfett* (81.4% of verb forms used), to the total exclusion of the *imperfett* (0%). Other verb forms used by L1 Maltese users were the past habitual (9.4%) and verb chains (9.2%). In the case of the learners of Maltese, the L1 Arabic users stand out because they did not use the *imperfett* at all. All the other 14 learners opted for the *imperfett*. The L1 Arabic users, Charif and Mohammed, also used the past habitual occasionally, like Maltese users and unlike the other learners.

In this case, we are not looking at errors, or negative transfer from previously learned languages, but at whether the Ln advanced learners’ performance matches that of L1 users. The data very robustly show how L1 Maltese users and L1 Arabic learners of Maltese performed almost identically, while all the
other learners of Maltese, including those who had learned Arabic to a high level as an L2, performed differently.

As shown in Table 2, the three Ln learners who had learned Arabic as a second language were: Ahmed, who had learned Arabic after Sindhi; Hilde, who had learned Arabic after German; and Marika, who had learned Arabic after Italian. These learners did not use the *perfett*. On the basis of a grammaticality judgement (GJ) test conducted to answer the first research question of the longitudinal study, we know that both L1 Arabic and L2 Arabic learners of Maltese had a very good grasp of the structures under investigation (Żammit, 2019a). They sat six times for 40 GJ sentence tests (set A and set B alternatingly), and they also sat six times for an exercise of 10 verb conjugation (VC) gap-filling sentences (another two sets of the test given alternatingly), over a period of 14 months. The five learners who knew Arabic, either as L1 or as L2, scored high on these tests. As shown in Table 5 which presents the results of the last sitting of the longitudinal study, Mohammed answered all items correctly on both tests, Charif and Ahmed achieved full scores on the GJ test, and Hilde and Marika scored 9 out of 10 correct on the VC test. High scores on the GJ and VC tests demonstrate that these Ln users of Maltese had learned the Maltese verbs successfully, because they judged grammatical accuracy without difficulty, and produced the correct forms in VC tasks. However, on free production tasks stimulated by pictures, L1 Arabic users opted for the *perfett* like Maltese L1 users, while L2 Arabic users opted for the *imperfett* like the other learners who had no knowledge of Arabic.

| Pseudonym | Total | Perfett | Past habitual | Verb chain | Imperfett | Present progressive | Future |
|-----------|-------|---------|---------------|------------|-----------|---------------------|--------|
| Alex      | 25    | 21      | 2             | 2          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Alison    | 27    | 21      | 1             | 5          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Amanda    | 31    | 25      | 0             | 6          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Andrew    | 36    | 29      | 3             | 4          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| David     | 24    | 18      | 6             | 0          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Jeanette  | 27    | 21      | 5             | 1          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Karen     | 28    | 17      | 7             | 5          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Manuel    | 30    | 26      | 2             | 2          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Mark      | 26    | 18      | 5             | 3          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Miriam    | 23    | 22      | 1             | 0          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Pauline   | 28    | 27      | 0             | 1          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Rita      | 32    | 25      | 2             | 5          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Sean      | 32    | 30      | 1             | 1          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Suzanne   | 37    | 32      | 5             | 0          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Victor    | 39    | 31      | 2             | 6          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
Table 4. The number of verb forms used by the learners of Maltese in the six PI tests

| Pseudonym | Total | Perfett | Past habitual | Verb chain | Imperfett | Present progressive | Future |
|-----------|-------|---------|---------------|------------|-----------|---------------------|--------|
| Charif    | 93    | 74      | 14            | 5          | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Mohammed  | 104   | 88      | 6             | 10         | 0         | 0                   | 0      |
| Ahmed     | 61    | 0       | 0             | 4          | 48        | 6                   | 3      |
| Hilde     | 78    | 0       | 0             | 4          | 31        | 41                  | 2      |
| Marika    | 102   | 0       | 0             | 6          | 69        | 25                  | 2      |
| Alfonso   | 60    | 0       | 0             | 3          | 46        | 9                   | 2      |
| Aksel     | 86    | 0       | 0             | 8          | 57        | 19                  | 2      |
| Brunilda  | 72    | 0       | 0             | 0          | 54        | 14                  | 4      |
| Irina     | 97    | 0       | 0             | 5          | 55        | 34                  | 3      |
| Jane      | 65    | 0       | 0             | 8          | 36        | 16                  | 5      |
| Jasmina   | 83    | 0       | 0             | 0          | 67        | 14                  | 2      |
| Jeremy    | 76    | 0       | 0             | 0          | 46        | 24                  | 6      |
| Nataliya  | 85    | 0       | 0             | 0          | 52        | 32                  | 1      |
| Sabal     | 69    | 0       | 0             | 1          | 51        | 12                  | 5      |
| Shai      | 88    | 0       | 0             | 6          | 45        | 31                  | 6      |
| Theo      | 57    | 0       | 0             | 0          | 28        | 21                  | 8      |

Table 5. Raw scores of five learners on a grammaticality judgement test and a verbal conjugation test, and the learning centre they attended

| GJ test Total 40 | VC test Total 10 | Learning centre |
|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Charif           | 40               | 9               | C                |
| Mohammed         | 40               | 10              | B                |
| Ahmed            | 40               | 6               | A                |
| Hilde            | 33               | 9               | A                |
| Marika           | 38               | 9               | C                |

4 Discussion

The results presented here indicate that spoken performance by Ln intermediate-to-advanced users is very likely to be linked to an underlying dependence on language typology. The evidence is triangulated by a number of factors, namely:
(i) Two of the three L2 Arabic learners had learned Maltese as well as L1 Arabic users. This can be seen from the GJ and VC task results, but their spoken data did not match that of L1 Arabic and L1 Maltese users;
(ii) These learners had attended three different learning centres, with three different teachers, and therefore the teacher and the teaching method do not seem to play a role in the result;
(iii) They were all adults, and motivated to learn Maltese because they had been working and living in Malta for at least 6 years, and planned to settle there.

Unfortunately, we could not evaluate factors mentioned by, for example, Falk, Lindqvist and Bardel (2015), like intelligence, metalinguistic awareness and memory. The L2 status and recency factors (e.g., Hammarberg, 2001), could have played a role considering that the three L2 Arabic learners had learnt Arabic before coming to Malta. According to the learners’ own self-assessment two of them had a very good knowledge of Arabic, because Ahmed claimed to have learnt Arabic up to B2–C1 level, Hilde up to C1–C2 level, and Marika up to A1–A2 level of the CEFR.

In line with Athanasopoulos and Bylund (2012), our results show that grammatical aspect is an important category in event construal in SLA, and the choice of event perspective depends to a large extent on the structure of grammatical tense and aspect in the L1 of the speaker. Similarly, Bylund and Jarvis (2011:58) conclude that ‘the way that a language is configured in relation to grammatical aspect tilts its speakers in a predictable direction with respect to preferred patterns of event construal.’ In accordance with Bylund and Jarvis (2011), our findings show that there is a relationship between grammatical aspect and event conceptualisation. Furthermore, as outlined by Schmiedtová (2013), it seems that conceptual restructuring is a very challenging domain in the acquisition of foreign languages and that the L1 grammar overrides any subsequent language knowledge in the construal of events. Our study is in line with Schmiedtová’s (2013) and Gruhn and Reshöft’s (2013) analyses in that even advanced L2 users, when construing different event types in the target language, rely on conceptual preferences from their L1.

In relation to linguistic typology, we hypothesise that the preference for the perfett over the imperfett depended in this case on whether the learner’s L1 was a tense or aspect language (Arosio, 2010; Bubenik, 2011). Our evidence indicates that since Maltese and Arabic are aspect languages, such speakers describe events depicted in a picture using the perfett tense/aspect. As for language transfer, Ringbom (1987) argued strongly for the centrality of positive transfer effects of the L1. Ortega (2008) concluded that syntactic transfer is exclusively L1-based, while lexical transfer can occur from a nonnative language. Puig-Mayenco, González Alonso and Rothman (2018) also contend that
while any of the previously learned languages may exert a larger amount of influence, we need to find out which factors are more influential than others. Thane (2018) argued that syntactic and semantic similarities between languages have an impact on the development of target-like use, and that empirical evidence suggests that similarity in aspect between L1 and L2 is more rapidly and accurately taken up by L2 learners than other structures. Furthermore, learners’ perceptions of similarity play a role, independently of the real state of affairs (Skehan, 2008).

Following Ringbom (2016), our data show that advanced learners of Maltese who do not have Arabic as an L1 might still need to reach the stage of managing to express meaning in spoken production through a variety of verbal structures. Also, as Pienemann (1984) and Mansouri and Duggy (2005) claim, it is necessary to identify stages of learner readiness in order to calibrate teaching with the hierarchy of acquisition stages. Bardovi-Harlig (2000) and Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan (2008) provide evidence to stress that the acquisition of grammatical forms takes place in stages. Furthermore, although the notion of ultimate attainment might be at odds with the view that SLA is a dynamic system (Birdsong and Paik, 2008), for pedagogical grammar it is useful to find out what type and degree of progress is typical and what kind and degree of progress is possible by plurilingual learners. As Birdsong and Paik (2008:425) assert, ‘comparisons with adult natives reveal convergences, divergences and shortcomings – findings that contribute to the overall picture of attainment in SLA.’

4.1 Implications for pedagogical grammar

Without a doubt, various social and cognitive factors need to be taken into account when planning a pedagogical grammar. In our case, use of the code in daily interaction is very relevant to adult migrant learners. Although our study did not uncover specific learning difficulties arising from crosslinguistic influence or multicompetence, we can still reflect on potentially better ways of teaching Maltese than what we are aware of at present. We postulate that:

(i) For L1 Arabic users, the same pedagogic grammar devised for L1 users would be equally suitable. This grammar presents the perfett as the base form. L1 Arabic users, like L1 Maltese users, would already be familiar with the perfett as the basic structure of the verb. They would already be familiar with the notion of the mamma (third person masculine singular of the perfett) and they would very easily understand the triliteral verbal root system, on which other parts of speech are built. Similarly, they are not expected to have any difficulty acquiring the imperfett, and verb chains.
(ii) It is more appropriate to first teach the *imperfett* to non-L1 Arabic users, because there is a clear indication that they learn to use it faster and with more ease than the *perfett*. Furthermore, the *imperfett* is required for expressing the future and the progressive, and thus, knowing the *imperfett* would allow them to express a range of meanings. This would serve to enhance their motivation, rather than lead them to feel discouraged when faced with the *perfett* too early on. The *perfett* is harder to learn because the conjugation of each verb has to be learned separately. On the other hand, there could be the danger that postponing the *perfett* to a much later stage would increase the likelihood of an over-use of the *imperfett*. More research is required to identify the best way to support the acquisition of verbal aspect by learners whose first language is a tense language.

(iii) It would help to introduce a substantial element of metalinguistic awareness in Maltese for Ln learners. White and Ranta (2010) found that metalinguistic instruction was associated with higher stages of development with respect to English grammar in oral production. In a pedagogical grammar this would involve form-focused analysis and discussion, for instance, comparing written and spoken texts in Maltese, and the use of tense and aspect in different spoken genres.

(iv) Pluralistic approaches work well with plurilingual learners. The *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches* (Candelier et al. 2012) makes ample suggestions in relation to grammatical structures that could be included in a pedagogical grammar from a pluralistic perspective. The following are some examples of objectives: ‘Knows that each language has its own, partly specific, way of perceiving/organising reality’ (p. 34); ‘Paying attention to the formal aspects of language in general/particular languages/cultures’ (p. 38); ‘Can analyse the relationship between form and interaction’ (p. 51). Our suggestion here is to invite learners to compare structures in the various languages they know.

(v) Introduce an element of *production awareness* in order to direct the learners to observe native choice of forms. It is useful for a pedagogical grammar to include reference to the fact that learners with different L1s may pay more or less attention to various elements in talking about an event, an action and so on. Raising learners’ awareness through observation of L1 language use in event and situation construal would raise the awareness of intermediate and advanced learners about their own production of native-like forms.
5 Conclusion

Further research into the various stages of acquisition of Maltese is required. The following are examples of research questions we would like to ask: Would L1 Arabic users be able to use the verbs originating from non-Semitic languages, and which are based on the stem rather than the consonantal roots, equally well as the verbs originating from Arabic like L1 Maltese users? At which stage would non-L1 Arabic learners of Maltese be ready to acquire the perfett to a level that would benefit them in their spontaneous communicative needs?

We hope to have demonstrated that even at an advanced stage of learning an Ln, there are differences in the way L1 and Ln users work with language. In the case of verbal tense and aspect of Maltese it is clear that L1 Arabic learners of Maltese perform like L1 Maltese users, and unlike all the other learners including those with L2 Arabic, with a very high performance on GJ and VC tasks. We attribute this finding to the distinction between tense and aspect languages, and recommend a number of innovations in pedagogical grammar. We hope to be able to evaluate these recommendations once we put them into practice.

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