

Skills Pay Bills: Linguistic Capital and the Neoliberal Market in Bilingual Malta

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Abstract: This article examines the disproportionate demand for language instruction at Blue Door Education (BDE), a Maltese non-governmental organisation (NGO) where displaced and marginalised adult learners overwhelmingly prioritise English over Maltese, despite the country's official bilingual status and Maltese being the national popular language. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theories of "linguistic market" and "symbolic violence", the author argues that this preference is a rational reaction to a neoliberal economic climate that positions English as the language required for market-driven economic survival and essential for employment, while Maltese, despite being the mother tongue, is commonly seen by outsiders as having a narrow practical reach beyond national identity in a small state, and therefore a "cultural bonus".

Through practitioner observation and lived-experience narratives, this essay highlights how migrants are discouraged from learning the Maltese language, be it by racialised gatekeeping in the public sphere, or institutionalised censorship in the workplace. By critiquing the "deficit model" of integration, which blames the learner for systematic failures, this essay advocates for a shift from functional "lifelong learning" to a more transformative educational framework via Freire's (2000) approach, making migrant voices pivotal to dismantling structural barriers to true social belonging in Malta.

Keywords: Linguistic market, symbolic violence, neoliberalism, Bourdieu, Malta, Freire, "*I Belong*" programme, deficit model of integration, NGO paradox.

Introduction: The Paradox of Choice

Malta's linguistic landscape is complex, and the act of learning one of its official languages is neither neutral nor a simple educational pastime, but rather a highly political intersection of power, identity and survival. Since its founding in 2013, Blue Door Education (BDE), a Maltese NGO and voluntary organisation offering free literacy, language and life skill classes for adult refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in crisis, has provided support for over 2,500 learners. During the 13 years of its operation, a striking disparity has emerged which challenges conventional thinking regarding integration in the Maltese context: the demand for English language classes is overwhelming, while requests for Maltese can be counted on one hand. Rather than being labelled as disregard for the Maltese language and culture, this is a profound reflection of Bourdieu's (1991) "linguistic market" where English functions as primary "human capital" required for immediate economic survival, and Maltese is relegated to a form of subaltern "cultural capital" with limited value for a non-citizen. This article argues that this preference for the English language over Maltese is a rational response to a neoliberal climate that prioritises labour market flexibility over genuine social justice, ultimately exercising a form of "symbolic violence" against the migrant learner.

The Economy of Linguistic Exchanges

In order to assess why over 2,500 learners wish to systematically bypass the national language of their host country, it is necessary to apply Bourdieu's (1991) analysis of how language functions as a form of linguistic capital, providing the speaker with a competitive advantage in the social market. Bourdieu (1991) states that language is not simply a tool for communication, and that it is impossible to separate what is said from the social standing of the person saying it: the power is therefore not in the words spoken, but rather in the person's right to speak them. In any given linguistic market, the "price" of a language is determined by its "exchange rate" in the dominant institutions, for example the school, the workplace, and the state, and this power dynamic is explained through the concept of distinction:

The utterances are not only... signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also signs of wealth intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and signs of authority intended to be believed and obeyed. (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 37)

In Malta the market is forked. English is a colonial legacy and has become upgraded to the language of the globalised economy and high tier services such as iGaming, financial services, law, tech consulting and academia, in turn allowing the migrant who has learned it to be perceived as a professional participant in the economy and therefore of high value. Maltese, on the other hand, is largely only accessible for the Indigenous population and not regarded as a functional necessity for the migrant worker, and therefore “closed capital”. This preference is further solidified by “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, 1991), a process whereby the dominated group unknowingly consents to the dominance of the hegemon.

Shadows of Colonialism

The current “forked market” in Malta is not merely a byproduct of 21st century globalisation, but is deeply rooted in a colonial “habitus” established during the British period (1800-1964). As Frendo (1991) illustrates, the British administration positioned English as the language of the state, the law, and the social elite in order to supplant Italian that previously had this status. Maltese was relegated to the vernacular of the private, domestic sphere. Brincat (2011) traces this linguistic stratification, noting how it created an early Bourdieusian (2000) hierarchy, where English was established as the primary “legitimate currency” for anyone seeking upward social mobility or professional recognition.

This colonial legacy has been effectively upgraded rather than dismantled, and in the modern neoliberal climate, the prestige once reserved for colonial administrators has been transferred to the globalised workforce of iGaming, financial and legal services, and tech consulting. For the migrant learner at BDE, this means navigating a linguistic landscape where the price of English remains high because it is the language of power and international capital. Conversely, Maltese remains a form of “closed capital”, protected by the Indigenous/autochthonous population as a marker of national identity, and popular working class and culture, in a post-colonial state.

The “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 2000) observed today, where the market devalues the use of Maltese by migrants, is a continuation of this historical stratification, and just as the colonial system used English to distinguish the “ruler” from the “ruled”, the modern market uses the “politics of proficiency” to distinguish the “high-value” economic participant from the “marginalised” manual labourer. As Caruana (2007) argues, this contemporary linguistic

situation remains an echo of that colonial past, explaining why the preference for English is a rational response; the migrant is simply identifying the language that the structures of power in Malta have favoured for over two centuries.

The Neoliberal Climate and the “Deficit Model”

The disproportionate demand observed at BDE is even further rooted in the neoliberal shift in education. As English and Mayo (2021) contend, the global transition from a humanist based “lifelong education” framework to one of capitalist “lifelong learning” reduces the adult learner to a *homo economicus*, where sets of skills are upgraded purely for the purpose of the labour market. This results in migrant learners in Malta having their linguistic journey pre-determined for them. Such a neoliberal approach often adopts a “deficit model” of integration, as Mayo (2007) argues, placing the entire burden of adaptation on the learner. It ignores the structural barriers identified by Borg and Mayo (2006), such as the “politics of proficiency”, which dictates whose voice is heard and valued and whose is not.

The structural barriers identified by Borg and Mayo (2006) are quantified in BDE’s recent study *#NoForUsWithoutUs* (2025), which reveals that while 92.8% of students report feeling safe in the learning environment, only 64.2% found that “access to class is easy” due to the volatility of seasonal work and cultural events such as Ramadan. Furthermore, with 82% of learners relying solely on mobile devices, the digital divide has also become a tool of exclusion.

Since I began volunteering at BDE in 2018, I have witnessed a recurring Bourdieusian (1991) theme: individuals from a wide range of countries from South Sudan to Ukraine to Colombia make a lengthy bus journey in terrible traffic and inclement weather in order to secure a place in an English language class. One specific example involved a young man from Sudan, a qualified electrician in his country of origin, who was working in dire conditions in the construction industry in Malta: 12 hours per day, six days a week lugging blocks of limestone in the blazing sun for a meagre €4 cash in hand per hour and no written contract. When asked if he would prefer English or Maltese language classes, he stared back at me and said, “Skills pay bills! English for my rent, Maltese for my heart”. This statement is a perfect articulation of Norton’s (2013) Theory of Investment. This student’s refusal of Maltese was not a lack of “motivation”, a term often used in “deficit models” of education,

but a rational decision to invest his limited “time-capital” into a language that the Maltese labour market does not demand of him.

A fine example of “linguistic market” in its rawest form, for this learner, English was a legitimate currency, allowing him to navigate everyday life and all its bureaucracy (renting accommodation, visiting the doctor, applying for social services and support) in addition to meeting the demands of his employer. For him, Maltese was a luxury he was simply unable to afford.

The Hidden Curriculum and the NGO Paradox

The lopsidedness of the linguistic market at BDE does not exist in a vacuum, but is subtly reinforced by the “hidden curriculum” (Jackson, 1968), which describes the unofficial norms and behaviours such as punctuality or respect for authority, conveyed through school routines and social interactions. While BDE’s formal mission is to enable migrants to achieve social and linguistic agency with dignity, equity and confidence, it is boxed into a paradox: by responding to the overwhelming demand for English language classes and prioritising it in order to help a learner survive the market, it is inadvertently validating the utilitarian “lifelong learning” framework. In turn this creates an institutionalised loop where educational providers unintentionally validate the “deficit model”.

This institutionalised loop is exacerbated by what Incite! (2017) describes as the “Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” where the radical potential of education is neutralised by the requirements of the state and private donors. Within this framework, BDE is pressured to adopt a service-provider identity rather than a movement-building one and the reliance on tangible outcomes for funding, such as employment statistics, means that pedagogical success is increasingly defined by the learner’s ability to assimilate into the neoliberal workforce. Consequently, even well-meaning educators may find themselves prioritising “survival English” over more critical, reflective forms of literacy, effectively acting as a funnel into the low-wage labour market. This shift reflects a move away from the humanist roots of adult education toward a more technocratic approach that views the migrant as a commodity to be up-skilled for immediate consumption by the host economy.

This paradox is further complicated by the precarious nature of NGO project funding, where the metrics of success are imposed by donors who require tangible outcomes, which are typically measured by the number of learners who enter the workforce. Because the Maltese labour market demands English for immediate productivity, BDE is forced to align its curriculum with these

market needs to remain a legitimate (and funded) service provider. Consequently, the educator becomes an unwitting agent of the market, reinforcing the idea that a migrant's value is tied to their immediate economic utility rather than their potential for long-term cultural belonging.

Institutionalised Censorship and the “*I Belong*” Programme

Bourdieu (1991) defines “linguistic censorship” as a structural mechanism where social and economic forces dictate what is “legitimate” to say in a specific context, and notes that the state plays a fundamental role in this struggle by imposing an “official language” as the only valid currency for its citizens. This provides a sharp lens through which to critique Malta’s official “*I Belong*” integration programme, with its ironically English title, where the state declares Maltese as the legitimate language for long term residency and citizenship, despite the fact that the neoliberal market demands English.

This disparity between official policy and economic reality is visible in the service sector. I recall a conversation at BDE with a Colombian national employed in a high-end boutique hotel in Valletta, who expressed interest in learning Maltese to “feel less like a tourist”, and yet her firm preference was English. She explained that staff had been instructed by the supervisor to only speak English with colleagues and providers, demonstrating a lived experience of Bourdieu's (1991) invisible “censorship”. Here the learner anticipated her “profit” would be reduced if she deviated from the official language of her workplace, and the hotel management was prioritising global standards and efficiency over the local language. The discrepancy between the state “*I Belong*” programme’s curriculum and the neoliberal workplace therefore represents a profound systemic disconnection, where the market punishes the use of Maltese by prioritising economic efficiency over local cultural integration.

The “*I Belong*” programme further illustrates this systemic disconnect by employing what Freire (2000) labels the “banking model” of education, where the Maltese language is deposited into the learner as a static collection of facts and rules required for residency, failing to account for the “politics of proficiency” in the actual workplace, where migrants’ attempts to use this state-mandated language are often met with institutionalised censorship. The result is a double-bind: the state demands Maltese for legal belonging, yet the neoliberal market, exemplified by the hotel supervisor in Valletta, demands English for economic utility, creating a fractured integration experience where

the migrant must navigate two conflicting sets of linguistic expectations, both of which treat the learner's own cultural and linguistic background as a deficit to be overcome rather than an asset to be synthesised. Consequently, the programme risks becoming a form of "symbolic violence" that demands a linguistic investment which the market then actively devalues. This systemic exclusion moves beyond the workplace and into the public sphere, where the unique pressures of a Small Island State transform the national language into a tool of social gatekeeping.

In the context of a Small Island State like Malta, the national language becomes a proxy for the borders that globalisation has otherwise rendered porous. While capital, tourism, and labor move freely across the island's physical boundaries, the Maltese language remains a sovereign inner sanctum that cannot be easily commodified or entered by the outsider. Consequently, the protection of Maltese through social gatekeeping is not merely about communication; it is a defensive exertion of "distinction" (Bourdieu, 1991) in a hyper-globalised landscape where native residents may feel their cultural space is shrinking. In this environment, the "linguistic wall" serves as the final, invisible frontier of national sovereignty.

Small State Dynamics and Language Gatekeeping

Malta's status as a Small Island State adds a unique layer to these power dynamics, where the niche native language often serves as a defense mechanism to maintain power by distinguishing "us" from "them". Borg and Mayo (2006) argue that social difference is frequently used to maintain this boundary, manifesting itself in Malta as a "linguistic wall", occurring when a migrant attempts to speak Maltese in public and is met with borderline rude silence, head-scratching, amusement and/or an immediate switch to English by the native speaker. This signals to the migrant that they lack the "habitus" or what Bourdieu (1991) describes as "socially recognised authority" required to enter the inner circle of the Maltese-speaking community.

The impact of such gatekeeping is profoundly evident among BDE learners. An example of this is a visibly deflated BDE student from Somalia, who told us he spent months practising Maltese phrases to use at his local grocery store, but the shopkeeper took one look at his skin colour and replied in English: a clear manifestation of "accent snobbery" and racialised gatekeeping. By relegating Maltese to a form of "closed capital", the host society ensures that migrants remain on the social periphery. As Bourdieu (1991) notes this leads to

“linguistic censorship”, where the learners are denied the opportunity to practice Maltese in public, confirming their suspicion that they will always be viewed as a *barrani* (outsider) regardless of their linguistic efforts. This exclusion demonstrates that the “linguistic market” is never purely linguistic; it is deeply embodied. For the migrant learner, the “right to speak” is often preemptively revoked based on what Bourdieu (1991) terms “bodily habitus”, as in the physical manifestations of social standing, including race, dress, and posture. In the case of the Somali student, even the correct use of Maltese grammar could not overcome the “symbolic violence” of a racialised gaze that had already categorised them as a perpetual outsider, and this interaction illustrates that the “linguistic wall” is a mechanism of social closure that functions to protect the “distinction” of the native population. When shopkeepers respond in English, they are not merely being helpful; they are reinforcing a hierarchy where the migrant is denied access to the “legitimate currency” of the local community, thereby ensuring that Maltese remains a “closed capital” reserved for the indigenous elite. This then forces them to retreat to using English, not out of preference, but because it is the only language where their identity as a “foreigner” is socially accepted and permitted, and thus the “deficit model” of integration is reinforced: the learner stops trying to learn native language and the host country fails to recognise its own systemic exclusion but subsequently blames the migrant for “lack of effort”.

Towards a Transformative Educational Framework

The situation in Malta reflects the broader global inequalities of our time. The overwhelming preference for English over Maltese among BDE learners is not a rejection of local culture, but a calculated survival strategy in a market rigged against the newcomer, and by labelling English classes as linguistic first aid at BDE, we are acknowledging that the current system treats migrants as temporary economic units rather than permanent social participants.

Freire’s (2000) approach would replace the “banking model” of education where migrants are passive recipients of English “skills”, with “culture circles” that prioritise the lived experiences of the learners. BDE has taken its first step with its *#NoForUsWithoutUs* (BDE 2025) approach, meeting learners exactly where they are; a necessary step toward transforming the classroom from a site of skill-acquisition into a space of genuine “cultural synthesis”. Rather than teaching Maltese or English as isolated tools for “employability”, these circles would encourage learners to use their multi-lingual repertoires to analyse the structural barriers they face, such as the volatility of seasonal work or the

digital divide. By fostering a dialogue where learners analyse the “politics of proficiency” themselves, migrants will move from being objects of state policy to active subjects in their own integration and true belonging. In practice, a shift toward “culture circles” would involve a radical restructuring of the BDE classroom from a site of passive skill-acquisition to one of active “conscientisation”.

In addition, for Malta as a state, the struggle to learn Maltese should not be framed as a “deficit”, but as a collective problem-solving exercise to navigate structural “symbolic violence” which must adopt a transformative educational framework. In turn, this will recognise linguistic rights as human rights, in other words a shift from neoliberal employability to a Freirean (2000) model of shared dialogue and “cultural synthesis” where mastering the Maltese language would become less of a performative hurdle, thus ensuring that the choice to learn Maltese is no longer a market-driven necessity but a self-determined act of social reclamation.

By decoding the “hidden curriculum” of the Maltese labour market together, students, educators, and the state can transform classrooms into sites of collective resistance against “symbolic violence”. In this framework, language acquisition is no longer a performative act for the state or the employer, but a transformative process that allows the migrant to claim their right to speak as a central subject of the Maltese social fabric.

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