

Studies on the teaching of German as a foreign language in Maltese schools: a survey

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The scope of this article is to present a short *Forschungsbericht* or research report on some of the contributions towards the improvement of the teaching of German in Maltese schools made by students in their dissertations as part of their B.Educ. (Hons.) course. Due to the prevailing conditions, little or no research in this field was published in other form. The available studies can however reflect to some extent the work which is being done and might help to identify areas which require further investigation, especially in view of ongoing changes and the challenges accompanying them.

German was first introduced as a subject in Maltese secondary schools on a trial basis at Maria Regina (Blata l-Bajda) and the Lyceum (Hamrun) in 1970 after it had been on offer for some time to adult learners in evening classes. The number of students opting for German increased quickly every year and in 1974 the government of the Federal Republic of Germany began to support the promotion of the language by donating teaching material and technical equipment and by making available teacher training seminars and scholarships. An offer for the setting-up of a German department at University was not taken up in 1976, and it was only in 1981 that German, somewhat accidentally, was included in the list of subjects for the B.Ed. course. Ten years ago, Maria Stella Dalmas, the first B.Ed. student who could choose German as a main study area for her course presented a first overview of the role of German in Maltese schools in her dissertation entitled "German in Maltese Education. A Survey of Developments and Current Trends" (1985).¹ By that time, German had firmly been established as an alternative modern language option besides Italian, French and Arabic. Statistics for scholastic year 1982/83 give the number of students taking German at secondary schools in Malta as 655 or 3.0% of all students.²

The most recent statistics³ show that this year, i.e. scholastic year 1995/96, German is taught in 22 Junior Lyceums/Secondary Schools and in six private schools. There are 31 teachers of German in state

schools, and some 2,300 students are learning German there. This would indicate a healthy interest in the German language in Malta, but the number of students opting for German has actually gone down over the last years and this trend is likely to continue, partly as a consequence of recent changes in the local examination system where German is not offered at MATSEC intermediate level. This seems to confirm a remark by Prof. Dietrich⁴ ten years ago about Malta's "anticyclical" behaviour with regard to German. When the demand for German was on the decline world-wide in the late seventies and early eighties, more and more students in Malta chose German. And whilst there has been a dramatic increase in the demand for learning German in many European countries, especially in Eastern Europe, in the wake of German reunification and its political and economic implications, the number of students opting for German in Malta appears to be dropping.

This is not the place to discuss the importance of the German language today in Malta, in Europe or world-wide nor to examine the motives which determine a student's choice of a second or third foreign language. There can however be no doubt that with the unavoidable enlargement of the EU, the teaching of foreign languages in our schools will become even more important and that a country like Malta, if it wants to remain competitive, needs people in all walks of life who are competent in the languages of its neighbouring countries and trading partners. The inclusion of Spanish and Russian amongst the modern language options offered in our schools shows that the authorities felt this need and realized the importance of reaching students at an early age instead of relying on private or commercial institutions for adult learners to meet the demand.

The history of the teaching of *Deutsch als Fremdsprache/DaF* (German as a Foreign Language) in Malta and of research into the specific aspects and requirements of teaching the subject in Maltese secondary schools is linked to the development of the subject and its methodology and didactics in the

German-speaking countries and its establishment as an academic discipline. One must keep in mind that *DaF* is a relatively young subject and has been taught for only about three decades in a limited number of German Universities where representatives of the traditional *Germanistik* with its main branches of *Deutsche Philologie* and *Neuere deutsche Literaturwissenschaft* tended to look down on the new discipline as an upstart without proper academic credentials.⁵ It is symptomatic in many ways for the situation prevailing in the seventies and the eighties that *Vorwärts*, the course book for the teaching of German in Maltese schools, although it was made available by the German government, had been developed in the early 1970s in Great Britain by the Nuffield Foundation and the Schools Council as part of a large-scale modern language teaching project.

One of the major problems faced by teachers and students of German in Malta for a very long time was in fact the dependence on a course book and audio-visual teaching concept which was already becoming outdated when it first reached these shores. It should certainly not have been in use any longer after 1980, gift horse or not. Naturally our B.Ed. students, who had themselves learnt the language via this course – or in spite of it, thanks to their teachers' dedication and resourcefulness – were keen on investigating the weaknesses of the teaching methods and of the course book and coming up and experimenting with remedies which were usually put to the test during their teaching practice periods. So the rationale behind most of the dissertations presented by the students of German is a critical analysis, either in the form of a comprehensive *Lehrwerkskritik* or concentrating on specific aspects, of the didactic principles and teaching materials and methods used in our schools, always with a view of offering constructive criticism and investigating alternatives for better, more effective teaching based on an evaluation of the theoretical and practical research results of modern language teaching in general, and of *DaF* in particular, as far as these were available.

Ruth Mifsud, in her dissertation⁶ presented a *Lehrwerksanalyse* of two beginners' course books, *Vorwärts K 1* and *Deutsch konkret 17* and examined the differences in their didactic approach, methodological principles and thematic contents. She came to the conclusion that the former book, based on an audio-visual approach developed in the sixties, no longer qualified as a suitable text-book, whilst in the latter, which appeared some nine years later, the development of the communicative competence is the guiding principle followed throughout the book.

In their dissertation on reading texts in German⁸, Marlene Bonnici and Jennifer Camilleri investigated the problems of reading in a foreign language and *Textarbeit* in class as well as the needs of learners in Maltese schools in terms of reading material (not available to them). They also compiled their own *Lesebuch*, a colourful and extensive mosaic of 94 carefully selected and adapted inspiring reading texts grouped under 14 different headings and ready annotated for the use of teachers. It is a pity that this anthology was never published separately and edited in a professional manner since it would certainly have proved a great help and a source of motivation to learners of German in our schools.

Carmen Magri dealt with an often forgotten or neglected aspect of teaching modern languages in her dissertation on language games.⁹ She examined the psychological and pedagogical implications of the concept of play and the important role which language games can play in an enjoyable and motivating teaching/learning process and included a series of language games she devised as well as songs to complement the *K1* and *K2* coursebooks in order to make them more appealing to pupils. The effectiveness of games as an (inter)active form of language work which encourages creativity and spontaneous communication can hardly be underestimated.

In her dissertation on the *Landeskunde* aspect in the teaching of German¹⁰, Maria Stella Mallia examined the importance and role of what had already been an obligatory element of the syllabus for Italian (*cultura*) at a time when the introduction of an extra lesson per week dedicated to information about the country, its people and culture, was being considered for all modern languages. This has to be an essential element of every phase of language teaching, since it does not only stimulate a keener interest in the foreign language, but creates a greater awareness and better understanding of both the target culture and the student's own cultural background, leading to more tolerant and unprejudiced view of others which must be a goal of all education. A critical assessment of the coursebook showed that it was not topical, not multi-perspective, lacking a motivating presentation and giving a one-sided picture of Germany. Teachers were referred to more recent textbooks such as *Deutsch konkret* and *Zickzack* for more meaningful exercises within a *Landeskunde* context.

Angela Grima ventured into uncharted territory with her very original dissertation¹¹ which at first glance might look an odd man out when seen against the rationale mentioned above. Her main concern is

however identical with that of her fellow students: to investigate ways and means of making language learning (here for more advanced students and through literature) a more appealing and satisfying experience. She studies the concepts of critical education and critical pedagogy inspired by the critical theory of society of the *Frankfurter Schule* and proposes a critical pedagogical framework for teaching German literature at Junior College level through a combination of critical content and pedagogy. She then applies this approach to two late nineteenth century social novels of German realism by Theodor Fontane, highlighting their critical potential value as both an aesthetic experience and as a social referent and involving students in critical social reflection.

Audrey Penza's dissertation¹² contains a detailed study and analysis of 150 Form 4 (4th year German) annual examination scripts. The author discusses the extent of grammatical correctness needed to produce acceptable utterances within the framework of communicative language teaching and examines the significance of errors as a part of the learners' interlanguage in the process of foreign language acquisition and the consequences for the classroom situation.

Daniela Abela in her dissertation¹³ tackled one of the major problems teachers of German still have to face up to this day: how to coax spoken German from pupils, i.e. how to induce them to actively use the language as a means of communication during their German lessons. Only a drastic change from the old fashioned grammar-translation method (and the examinations based on it) to an interactive and communicative approach using pictures, stories and drama (with an oral test as an integral part of examinations) will give our students the communicative competence in foreign languages required in the greater Europe of tomorrow.

The development of writing skills in German, especially free and creative writing, is the subject of Alice Micallef's dissertation¹⁴. She shows that writing should not always be a teacher-directed activity, but – if the teacher can facilitate creativity through motivation – initiated by the learners themselves who will then experience how the words come alive and meaningful for them and how their grasp on the language widens and deepens.

Susan Sciberras in her dissertation¹⁵ examined the difficulties of objectively assessing oral performance in German. With the introduction of the new Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) for German

Ordinary Level as from May 1994, the need was felt to begin an investigation of the principles on which oral performance, which had at last become a (yet minor) component of this new examination, might be tested and assessed in a reliable manner. The students would have to be well prepared through continuous monitoring of the speaking ability through carefully graded exercises and tests in the classroom before presenting themselves for a summative assessment. Here is a great need for a thorough discussion of the contents and format of oral tests for all stages of teaching and of examination and for the development of valid and reliable scoring systems.

Nadine Vella's dissertation¹⁶ considers the importance of intercultural communication in language teaching and provides additional material about Maltese culture to supplement/substitute the predominantly British background of the new coursebook for German used in Forms 1 and 2 of our schools. She also examines a number of extra-curricular activities for promoting intercultural communication.

When one looks at the listening comprehension performance of students in recent SEC examinations, one cannot help wondering how, in spite of the extensive material supplied with the new course book for training this particular skill, candidates fare so poorly. Nathalie Bugeja and Graziella Cortis in their dissertation¹⁷ therefore set out to analyse the multiplicity of skills involved in this most elementary language skill and went on to a critical evaluation of the listening activities in the new German coursebook *Zickzack 1* and *2*, also producing a very useful compilation of supplementary listening material (texts and cassettes) for use together with the new coursebook.

A short reference to work in progress regarding dissertations, which might perhaps lead to some interdisciplinary contacts, shall round off this necessarily sketchy picture. At present students are working on a model for an interactive approach to the teaching of German grammar in schools and on a re-evaluation of the role and function of German literature as part of the sixth form curriculum.

Nearly all the dissertations presented above are obviously practice oriented. This is first of all in the nature of the subject, but can also be explained by the need to help our teachers cope with their work and with changing conditions which determine the priority of a pragmatic approach over theoretical pretensions. The fact that the "unit for the teaching of German" at University, which has consisted until very recently

of part-time lecturers only, might of course have something to do with this, as might the lack of resources and adequate working and research facilities for the subject.

There is surely a wide field of research waiting to be ploughed as a consequence of the particular situation in which foreign language learners and teachers find themselves in Malta. Students here have to cope first of all with the two official languages of the country, Maltese and English, which have little in common. Their co-existence at a certain level of education should not blind us to the fact that Malta's second language is taught and learned here as a foreign language. At secondary school level at least one (other) foreign language is added, sometimes two, and the learning conditions can vary considerably, in particular the intensity of exposure to the different languages. Naturally there will be a wide range of interferences which one would expect to become stronger the later a foreign language is added to the repertoire. Since German is often the second or third foreign language tackled, there is a lot of interesting work to be done by way of research into second or third foreign language acquisition/learning and L1 influence. It is hoped, amongst other things, that the studies undertaken so far under rather adverse circumstances might eventually serve as prolegomena to the development of a course for the teaching of German "made in Malta" and "made for Malta", which is perhaps the greatest desideratum at present. None of the many monolingual courses developed in Germany for teaching *DaF* through every-day situations in German-speaking countries, nor similar books specially written for vaguely-defined international learners outside German-speaking areas,¹⁸ nor the German language course books for speakers with English as their mother tongue, are optimal for our students, especially when one considers the particular demands which the teaching of mixed ability groups, which are the rule rather than the exception, makes on the teachers. Ever since the publication of the trailblazer *Yao lernt Deutsch*¹⁹ the discussion about "regionalized" German language courses has never stopped and has lately led to a new interdisciplinary *Hermeneutik der Fremde* (hermeneutics of foreign cultures)²⁰ and has rekindled the discussion of the conditions for contrastive and intercultural language learning²¹. Locally produced SEC and MATSEC examinations in German have already begun (in 1994 and in 1996 respectively) to replace the former Ordinary and Advanced Level examinations set by British examining boards, and one of the reasons for this, though not the decisive one, was that they were considered unsuitable for our students. Catering for the particular requirements of local

learners on the basis of thorough analyses, at all levels of teaching and examining, of the specific conditions and problems of learning German as second or third foreign language in Malta will therefore continue to be one of the main tasks for the next years. Some of the spadework has already been done, and no small amount of it in the dissertations reviewed above.

Notes

- ¹ It was unfortunately not possible to find a copy of this dissertation in any of the libraries at University or to obtain one from the author herself.
- ² The figures for other southern European countries are: Greece 0.2%, Italy 5.19%, Portugal 1.3%, Spain 0.01%, Turkey 11.0% and Cyprus 4.0%. Cf. Dietrich Sturm (ed.): *Deutsch als Fremdsprache weltweit. Situation und Tendenzen*. München 1987, p. 240.
- ³ Statistics drawn up by the German Resource Centre of the Education Department at Msida. This figure does not include students of German at the Junior College and at the University of Malta.
- ⁴ Prof. Dietrich from the University of Heidelberg was in Malta in 1985 as a visiting professor for two weeks.
- ⁵ Cf. Dietrich Eggers and Alois Palzer: *Von 'Deutsch für Ausländer' zu 'Deutsch als Fremdsprache'*. *Daten zur Geschichte eines Faches*, in: *Jahrbuch Deutsch als Fremdsprache 1/1975*. Heidelberg 1975, pp. 103-118. Dietrich Eggers: *Zur Geschichte des Faches Deutsch als Fremdsprache an den Universitäten und Hochschulen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, in: *Einführung in das Studium des Deutschen als Fremdsprache (Werkstattreihe Deutsch als Fremdsprache 1)*. Frankfurt 1982, pp. 12-28.
- ⁶ Ruth Mifsud: *Analysis of two beginners' course-books (Vorwärts K1/Deutsch konkret 1) for the teaching of German as a foreign language in schools in Malta (1988)*, An unpublished B.Ed. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta.
- ⁷ *Vorwärts International, Lehrbuch K 1 (=Kompaktfassung or compact version)*, a more condensed version of the earlier *Kurzfassung* or short version of the original extensive *Langfassung* or full-length version; E.J. Arnold & Son, Leeds/Gilde Buchhandlung Carl Kayser, Bonn 1974, 1980; G. Neuner et. al.: *Deutsch konkret, Lehrbuch 1, Arbeitsbuch (Langenscheidt) (1983)*.
- ⁸ Marlene Bonnici and Jennifer Camilleri: *A Compilation of Reading Texts in German (1988)*. An unpublished B.Ed. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta.
- ⁹ Carmen Magri: *Learning through Play. Language Games and their Role in the Teaching of German for Beginners (1989)*. An unpublished B.Ed. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta.

- 10 Maria Stella Mallia: *Landeskunde* in the Teaching of German as a Foreign Language (1989). An unpublished B.Ed. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta.
- 11 Angela Grima: German Literature and Education for Conscientization (1991). An unpublished B.Ed. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta.
- 12 Audrey Penza: An Analysis of Orthographical, Morphosyntactical and Lexical Errors Committed by 150 Maltese Students of German as a Foreign Language (1991). An unpublished B.Ed. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta.
- 13 Daniela Abela: Approaches towards the Developing of the Speaking Skills in the Teaching of German. An unpublished B.Ed. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta.
- 14 Alice Micallef: Developing Skills towards more Creative Writing Skills in the Teaching of German as a Foreign Language (1993). An unpublished B.Ed. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta.
- 15 Susan Sciberras: Assessing Oral Performance in German (1994). An unpublished B.Ed. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta.
- 16 Nadine Vella: Intercultural Communication in the Teaching of German in Malta (1994). An unpublished B.Ed. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta.
- 17 Nathalie Bugeja and Graziella Cortis: An Analysis and Evaluation of the Approach to Listening Comprehension in the new German Coursebook *Zickzack 1 and 2* (1995). An unpublished B.Ed. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta.
- 18 Mebus, Pauldrach, Rall, Rösler: *Sprachbrücke* (Klett, Stuttgart). Cf. especially: M. Rall: *Sprachbrücke 1. Handbuch für den Unterricht* (1990).
- 19 *Yao lernt Deutsch*. Méthode réalisée par M. Schroeder at R.-D. Reissner. Abidjan, Dakar (Nouvelles Editions Africaines) (1974).
- 20 D. Krusche, A. Wierlacher et al.
- 21 cf. for example: K. Vogel, S. Cormerate, Du Rôle de l'Autonomie et de l'Interculturalité dans l'Étude des Langues Étrangères, IRAL XXXIV/1 (1996), pp. 37-48.