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L. Gómez Chova, A. López Martínez, I. Candel Torres
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FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY & CERTIFICATION - AN EVALUATION

M. Pace

University of Malta (MALTA)

Abstract

More than a year has passed since the introduction, in Malta, of the Language Proficiency Assessment (LPA) national programme, which has as its main scope to increase the number of students studying foreign languages during compulsory schooling while at the same time encouraging others already studying these languages to further improve their proficiency. This home-grown alternative assessment programme, based on subject proficiency at levels 1, 2 and 3 of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF), seeks to provide a clear description of what individuals 'can do' with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context. The programme presents 3 levels of proficiency and describes what an individual can and cannot do with language at each level, regardless of where, when, or how the language is acquired.

This programme, which is in its second stage of piloting and which, as from September 2016, will eventually be offered on a national basis to all students, was initially targeting students who normally would be at great risk of not obtaining a level-rated certification at the end of compulsory schooling. The intention was to offer these students the possibility of obtaining proficiency qualifications and certificates as an alternative route concurrent with that of Secondary Education Certificate (SEC). Form 3 students (Year 9) were offered this programme on the basis of their demonstrated performance in the subject. Students were asked to choose between SEC and LPA in consultation with their parents and teachers. Those students who opted for LPA started a Level 1 programme of studies in the particular language and at the end of the scholastic year they sat for the LPA national exam, consisting of four different papers, one for each basic language skill, namely Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. Each paper received a separate mark and students obtained a certificate indicating the marks and the Level obtained for each of the language skills passed. The project aimed to render the teaching & learning process more personal and relevant to the students' needs with particular attention targeted at the level, motivation and ability of acquisition of students taking LPA.

Following a thorough evaluation process with all the stakeholders, including the students themselves, the teachers, the Heads of school and the parents, it transpires that the results obtained by the students in the final exams exceeded our expectations, the students' overall motivation was very high and the innovative aspects of the programme were not only highly appreciated by all but many suggested that they should be introduced even to other subjects being taught at school. The scope of the paper will therefore be to discuss with language teachers, language experts and language promoters these results and delve into considerations of what a language project of high quality implies and how to reach an increased dissemination of the method, language course or product. The focus of this paper will therefore be on success factors whilst at the same time analysing existing difficulties in the hope of improving further language programmes for our students.

Keywords: Foreign language proficiency, language programmes, motivation, language skills.

1 INTRODUCTION

The European Parliament considers languages not just an important priority for the EU but an integral part of its identity and the most direct expression of culture. In Europe, the ability to communicate in several languages has become a must for individuals, organisations and companies alike.

The EU language policy regards foreign language competence as one of the basic skills that all EU citizens need to acquire in order to improve their educational and employment opportunities within the European learning society. This explains why the European Commission fosters multilingualism and language learning and its set goal is to have a Europe where everyone is taught at least two languages in addition to their own mother tongue from a very early age. The 'mother-tongue +2' objective was set by EU heads of state and government at the Barcelona Summit in March 2002. Furthermore, the 'Education and Training 2020' strategic framework identifies language learning as a

priority and considers communication in foreign languages as one of eight key competences needed to improve the quality and efficiency of education and training.

It is a known fact that countries in the world have, over the past two decades, become more and more interdependent, and new technologies have erased many existing borders. Consequently, this has led to a situation where foreign language instruction has become more necessary than ever for linking with the rest of the world and for producing an enlightened citizenship able to function in today's ever-shrinking world. Pace (2015: 99) argues that "in today's world there is an ever-increasing need for good communication skills in foreign languages. Parents around the five continents strive to ensure that their children achieve a good command in a number of foreign languages" and that consequently, a large number of opportunities to learn languages have been provided in many different ways such as through formal instruction, travel, study abroad, as well as through the media and the internet. This, has brought in turn, according to Vandergrift and Goh (2012) new challenges that learners have to face in the classroom and beyond, especially as they try to improve their ability in specific language skills.

It was for these reasons that the European Commission launched the first European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC), the first survey of its kind, in order to collect information about the foreign language proficiency of students in the last year of lower secondary education or the second year of upper secondary education in 16 participating countries or country communities. As stated in the introduction of survey's report, "The ESLC sets out to assess students' ability to use language purposefully, in order to understand spoken or written texts, or to express themselves in writing". Unfortunately it transpires that language competencies provided by educational systems still need to be significantly improved and that there is an overall low level of competences in both first and second foreign languages amongst students in all participating states. Pace argues that this is a clear indication that despite a growing recognition that proficiency in at least one other language is advantageous in today's world, efforts to make widespread foreign language proficiency an achievable goal lag behind acknowledgement of its necessity and importance.

2 THE LPA PROJECT

This is exactly the case for Malta. Although aware of the fact that multilingualism is a major asset, especially when one considers the efforts and investment currently being made in Europe to enhance language competences in European schools, the number of school leavers in the island who have no accredited certification in foreign language skills is quite high. (Fig. 1) This indicates clearly that many are not aware of the importance of foreign language learning with the result that a large number of youngsters complete their studies at Secondary Level without obtaining any form of certification in foreign languages. This notwithstanding the fact that they have studied one or more foreign languages (*besides English and Maltese*) for a number of years, both at Primary as well as at Secondary level. As a matter of fact, in the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examinations session of May 2015, which enable successful students to move on to Post-Secondary education (Sixth Form) and which in turn leads to access to University, 34.6% of the 1999 cohort of students (the cohort that turned sixteen in 2015) failed to register for any foreign language at SEC level (Fig. 2). Besides these students, one must also take into account another 12-15% of students who either register but fail to turn up for the examinations or fail to make the grade.

"Fig.1": % of 16 year olds who obtained certification in a foreign language.

<i>% of 16 year-olds who finished with certification in a Foreign Language at the end of their compulsory schooling</i>				
	2012	2013	2014	2015
	% of cohort	% of cohort	% of cohort	% of cohort
French	22.8%	22.2%	21.8%	22.2%
German	3.9%	4.2%	5.0%	4.5%
Italian	26.3%	30.5%	26.7%	30.8%
Spanish	2.8%	4.6%	3.4%	5.1%

Source: *MATSEC Examiners' Reports*

This means that more than half of the students aged 16 fail to obtain any kind of certification in at least one foreign language, in addition to English or Maltese which are both official languages in Malta.

“Fig.2”: % of students in Malta who failed to sit for end of compulsory schooling in a foreign language

	% of cohort of youngsters who turned 16 and failed to sit for any Foreign Language exam at the end of compulsory schooling
2011	33.5
2012	39.1
2013	38.5
2014	35.6
2015	34.6

This situation has led to the creation of the Foreign Language Proficiency Assessment programme (LPA), launched towards the end of May 2014. The main scope of the programme, earmarked for students who normally risk not obtaining any certification in foreign languages at the end of compulsory schooling, is to increase the number of students studying foreign languages during compulsory schooling while at the same time encouraging others already studying these languages to further improve their proficiency.

This home-grown alternative assessment programme, based on subject proficiency at levels 1, 2 and 3 of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) (Fig. 3), seeks to provide a clear description of what individuals 'can do' with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context. The programme presents 3 levels of proficiency and describes what an individual can and cannot do with language at each level, regardless of where, when, or how the language is acquired.

“Fig. 3”: Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF). Source: www.ncfhe.org.mt

8	Doctoral Degree		8
7	Master's Degree Postgraduate Diploma Postgraduate Certificate		7
6	Bachelor's Degree		6
5	Undergraduate Diploma Undergraduate Certificate	VET Higher Diploma	5
4	Matriculation Level Advanced Level Intermediate Level	VET Diploma	4
3	General Education Level 3 SEC grade 1-5	VET Level 3	3
2	General Education Level 2 SEC grade 6-7 School Leaving Certificate	VET Level 2	2
1	General Education Level 1 School Leaving Certificate	VET Level 1	1

This programme, which will, as from September 2016 be offered on a national basis, targets these students who normally would be at great risk of not obtaining a level-rated certification in the

language/s at the end of compulsory schooling. The intention is to offer these students the possibility of obtaining proficiency qualifications and certificates as an alternative route concurrent with that of SEC. This home-grown curricular programme was initially piloted with the Italian language in two different schools with a total of 76 students. Form 3 students (year 9) in these two schools were offered a special programme of studies for Italian at Level 1 (MQF). It was decided to start with the Italian language for 2 main reasons: because Italian is the most popular of the foreign languages taught at school and for logistical purposes. As from September 2015 the pilot includes even French and German and has been extended to 4 State schools and 6 Church Schools for a total of 310 students (Fig. 4). It is envisaged that in September 2016 there will be a purposeful national roll out which will include also Spanish.

LPA programme	
Scholastic Year 2014/15	Scholastic Year 2015/16
Pilot Project Phase I	Pilot Project Phase II
- 2 State Schools	- 4 State Schools - 6 Church Schools
LPA subjects being taught in schools	
Level 1 - Italian	Level 1 -- Italian -- French -- German
	Level 2 -- Italian -- German
Number of participating students (voluntary)	
76	310

"Fig. 4": LPA Pilot Programme

3 INNOVATIVE ASPECTS

The programme presents a number of innovative aspects (Fig. 4) with regards to language teaching in Malta, the most important being its focus on communicative competence. Unfortunately, to date, most language courses in compulsory education give utmost importance to reading and writing skills and less importance to speaking and listening skills. The LPA project gives equal importance and weighting to the four basic language skills, not simply in the number of lessons in class but also when it comes to assessment and certification. It sees the introduction of the notion of assessment for learning, with continuous assessment methods being used to gauge a student's progress over a period of time in various language learning contexts. This means that at the end of the programme of studies at any particular level, 20% of the final mark for each of the 4 skills will be awarded on the basis of the student's performance throughout the programme. In this way, by using a combination of testing instruments the assessment process becomes more valid and reliable, whilst, at the same time, helps promote positive student involvement. Assessment for learning is incorporated fully into instruction: there is no time lost on assessment since every learning experience, activity, student's action is considered as evidence and therefore gives the opportunity to both teacher and learner to act upon it. This also implies that the traditional "Half Yearly" exams are removed and replaced by self-assessment and, as already stated, continuous assessment. The notion of self-assessment is also new to the Maltese educational context. Each level of the LPA programme is divided in a number of topics, each of which is based on a number of learning outcomes (LOs). At the end of each topic, every student in class is asked to fill in a self-assessment sheet (Fig. 5) by ticking, for every LO, whether s/he feels s/he can master it, if s/he still has difficulties or whether s/he feels that s/he didn't master it. Following the student's self-assessment, the teacher will then tick accordingly indicating his/her opinion/ agreement with the student's self-assessment on the basis of the tasks performed by each student in class for each language skill.

☺ = Yes, I can ☹ = I still have difficulties ☹ = No, I cannot

UNIT 2.6 Part one: *Cibo e Bevande* – Food and drink

NAME: _____ CLASS: _____ At the end of this unit, I can:	Student			Teacher		
	☺	☹	☹	☺	☹	☹
attract the waiter's attention using and I can order food and drink in a café or restaurant.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
ask for food and drink items in a supermarket/grocery/takeaway etc using vocabulary related to quantities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
read, understand and talk about typical food and drink items associated with special occasions and compare Maltese and Italian traditions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
understand a simple Italian recipe and its ingredients.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
read and understand dialogue and texts on topics related to food and drink.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
identify, read and talk about jobs and professions related to food outlets.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
ask, understand and answer questions in simple phrases using the past tense (<i>Passato Prossimo</i>).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

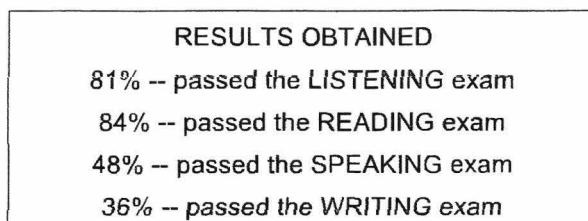
“Fig. 5”: Self-Assessment sheet used after each topic in the LPA programme.

Another important innovative aspect in the LPA programme is the elimination of a set textbook, substituted by the use of technology, ICT and tailor-made teaching materials prepared by the teachers, according to the level and the needs of the students in class. The idea is to move towards an individualised, personalised form of teaching and learning, having the student as the focus of the learning experience. This can be achieved following another change brought about by the project. In fact, the number of students in class was reduced to a maximum of 15 students. The idea is to give the teacher the opportunity to be able to reach each and every student's needs besides allowing enough time for each student to practice, in class, all the four language skills, namely reading, writing, listening and speaking.

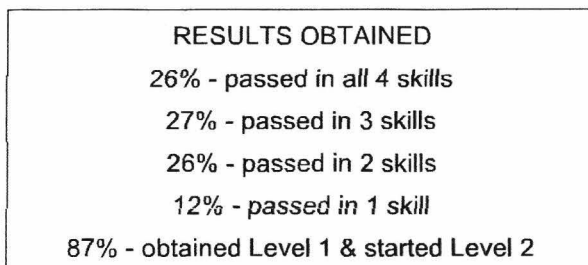
4 THE RESULTS

During scholastic year 2014-15, this home-grown curricular programme was piloted with the Italian language in two different State schools. A total of 77 Form 3 students participated in the programme and were offered a special programme of studies for Italian at Level 1 (MQF). At the end of the scholastic year these students sat for SPA Level 1 (MQF) National exam. The examination consisted of four different papers, one for each basic language skill, namely Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. Each paper received a separate mark giving the students the opportunity to obtain a certificate indicating the marks and the Level obtained for each of the skills for the language being studied. The results obtained by the students were very encouraging and exceeded expectations, especially when one takes into consideration the fact that the students participating in the project are the least motivated in foreign language learning and most, if not all, were on the verge of quitting studying the language at school. In fact, 26% of the students obtained certification in all the 4

language skills, 27% obtained certification in 3 skills, another 26% obtained certification in 2 skills and another 12 % obtained certification in 1 skill (Fig. 6 & 7).



"Fig. 6": Percentage of passes for each language skill.



"Fig. 7": Percentage of students who obtained one or more language skills.

5 AN EVALUATION

Throughout the scholastic year 2014-15, a total of 9 "official" evaluation meetings were held. For all of these meetings, the teachers involved in the project, the Italian Head of Department (HOD) of both Colleges where pilot was being implemented, the Director responsible for Curriculum Studies and myself were involved. For some of the meetings, the Education Officers for foreign languages and the HODs of German and French were also invited. Other evaluation meetings were held throughout the year with the Minister of Education and other high ranking officials within the Ministry. A good number of the latter meetings were organised as a result and on the advice of the teachers involved in the project and who participated in the evaluation meetings held throughout the year.

During the above mentioned meetings, all feedback presented and issues raised were taken into consideration and discussed further. Sometimes this led to changes in the planning, organisation and/or actual implementation of the LPA programme. Some of the most important changes that were implemented throughout the pilot stage, following the feedback received, one can mention:

- The format of the self evaluation sheets.
- The assessment procedures: In the final assessment linked to certification, we moved from a complete summative assessment to a 20% continuous assessment and 80% summative assessment.
- The contents of the programme itself. Following the considerations and insights of teachers, the number of topics for Level 1 and Level 2 were reduced from 9 topics to 8 topics so as to allow more time for individual attention, revision and consolidation of the basic language skills.
- Teachers were engaged on board right from the start of the project – in the compilation of the project; the writing of the course contents; the assessment procedures; etc.
- The learning outcomes for each topic were fine-tuned and at times rewritten to be more student friendly.

6 POSITIVE ASPECTS

The teachers noted that having the 4 skills assessed separately encourages the students to try harder as it makes the language more "reachable" and helps the students understand the "use" of the language. They argued that language teaching and learning must go well beyond formal schooling, which does not necessarily provide the best context to motivate students to learn languages. It stands

to reason that students are more willing to work hard at something when they see those connections outside the four walls of the classroom and when they realise that they are able to take what they learn in school and apply it to real life. Another positive aspect mentioned by the teachers is the removal of the half yearly exam which gave them some "breathing space" and helped them focus *more on the students' needs*. *Such a move allowed teachers to be less rigid and more flexible in their approach in class, helping the learners acquire and develop a communicative competence which allows for an effective and meaningful interaction in diversified social contexts.* Furthermore, the teachers insisted that one of the most positive aspects of the programme is its flexibility in the sense that if a teacher feels s/he should dedicate more lessons to a specific topic, s/he is free to do so and the fact that there are no traditional school based half yearly exams and the way the programme is developed/presented allows this.

Teachers also commented very positively on the self-assessment sheets which the students were asked to fill in at the end of each topic. They maintained that such an exercise helped the students *improve their self-esteem and become more self-confident, and that, following a first period in which the students seemed quite hesitant to fill the sheets, as the year progressed they started looking forward to them.* This is very important in the context of language learning since students with a low self-esteem may not only avoid taking the necessary risks to acquire communicative competence in the target language but, even worse, they may feel deeply insecure and even drop out of the class.

Another very important and positive aspect is the fact that the teachers involved in the project, notwithstanding the fact that they teach in different schools from different colleges, worked together and shared, where possible, the teaching material they prepared for their students. Networking as a teacher is today considered essential to one's professional development and social networks allowed the teachers not just to share their ideas with each other but also to compare notes on classroom teaching techniques and learning styles. This helped them enhance the learning experience in their classroom. And the teachers involved in this project emphasised the fact that working with teacher/s from other schools /colleges proved to be a very positive and enriching experience for them.

The teachers also underlined the fact that the students are enjoying this programme mainly because the number in class is limited and this has a twofold advantage: the teacher can tackle all four abilities during lessons and students can be given individual attention in class. Whilst individual attention in a small classroom is empirically proven to be better for student's development, research also shows that *a classroom size of around 15 is much more effective than a class size of around 22, resulting in the advancement equivalent of an extra three months of schooling over the course of four years.*

6.1 Difficulties

One of the major difficulties in the programme has to do with the self-assessment sheets. Although the use of these sheets is considered by teachers as being very positive and rewarding, on the other hand it is also very demanding, especially when considering the number of students each teacher is responsible for at school. Having to tick each and every LO for each student indicating his/her opinion/agreement with the student's self-assessment on the basis of the tasks performed by each student in class for each language skill is proving to be very time consuming and at times, stressful. In actual fact, when considering all the work a teacher is expected to perform, from planning and delivering lessons to a range of classes of different ages and abilities to marking work, giving appropriate feedback and maintaining records of pupils' progress and development, preparing and selecting and using a range of different learning resources and equipment, including podcasts and interactive whiteboards, going through each and every self-assessment sheet can be considered an added burden for the teacher.

Another aspect that might prove to be difficult in terms of logistics is to find a common weekly slot in the timetables for all teachers of a particular language in which they could meet personally or through the internet, *in order to discuss, plan and exchange lessons and resources in the best interest of their students, especially if they teach in different schools or in different colleges.* It is widely acknowledged that teachers still have to cope with organizational problems in schools that make them less willing to go out of their way to accommodate such meetings.

One of the innovations of the project is, as already mentioned, the elimination of a set textbook in class. This, too, although considered to be a step in the right direction, presents various difficulties for teachers. In fact teachers are expected to get the most out of the technological resources they have at hand but, at the same time, the tight timetables imposed do not permit teachers to explore innovative pedagogies and to share experiences and collaborate with other. Even though online networking tools

do exist and indeed provide platforms where resources can be shared, yet teachers need to have time allotted in their timetables for training to be able to make the most of it.

6.2 Conclusion

The introduction of the LPA project, the first of its kind in Malta, has proved to be very successful not only as far as end of level results are concerned but, above all, with regards to student motivation and engagement in class. It is a known fact that motivation in language-learning plays a vital role. It is motivation that produces effective second-language communicators by planting in them the seeds of self-confidence. The teachers involved in the project noted how most of the students who participated in the first stage of the pilot, who were chosen on the basis of their lack of motivation in learning the language and poor results obtained throughout the previous scholastic year, showed a considerable improvement in their attitude in class. They were very interested in the subject, were fully engaged and cooperative with the teacher's methods and enjoyed learning and practising the target language. Teachers also feel that most of the students are intrinsically motivated, at times they seem to be fascinated with the subject and understand its relevance to life and the world. Various factors within the programme have led to this, namely establishing learning goals that are challenging but not overwhelming; giving early feedback through course work and different forms of assessment; providing extra support for the weaker students; and making the content relevant to their everyday life as well as applicable to their routine. The LPA project succeeded in making learners positive about their own learning, creating the drive in them to acquire the targeted language, enjoy the learning process, and experience real communication.

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