

SPEAKING THEIR LANGUAGE. REVIVING THE TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MALTA. THE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENT NATIONAL PROJECT

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Abstract

The number of school leavers in Malta who have no accredited certification in foreign language skills is on the increase. This notwithstanding the fact that they have studied these languages for a number of years, both at Primary as well as at Secondary level.

This is very sad, even more so, in view of the fact that Malta's economy is dependent on human resources and foreign trade, driven by financial services and tourism. Mastery in foreign languages is considered, in today's world, not just an excellent tool to bridge gaps between people coming from different countries and to create strong sentimental and professional relationships, but above all an instrument that enables workers to considerably improve their career prospects. Multilingualism is today considered to be one of the key elements for a modern Europe, given that learning foreign languages permits citizens to enrich their lives, to grasp new ideas and to benefit from the European cultural diversity.

A pertinent question worth posing and considering here is: why are so many students quitting languages at school? There may be various answers for this question. Among the most common are: (i) The perception that learning a language can be an important prerequisite for just a few; (ii) Students very often see very little connection between what is taught in class and real life situations; (iii) Students who in their first years of studying a language fail to grasp the basic concepts, find it very difficult, if not impossible, to keep the pace with the other students in their year group.

The Language Proficiency Assessment (LPA) programme introduced as from September 2014 keeps all this in mind and has the intent to set up a home-grown alternative assessment based on subject proficiency at levels 1, 2 and 3 of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF). It 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 will eventually be offered on a national basis, will initially target students who normally would be at great risk of not obtaining a level-rated certification 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 Secondary Education Certificate (SEC). Form 3 students are being offered this programme on the basis of their demonstrated performance in the subject. Students will choose between SEC and LPA in consultation with their parents and teachers. Although one track does not necessarily exclude the other, those students who opt for LPA will start a Level 1 programme of studies in the particular language and at the end of the scholastic year they will sit for SPA Level 1 (MQF) exams. The examinations, which will be set at the national level, will consist of four different papers, one for each basic language skill, namely Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. Each paper will receive a separate mark and students will have the opportunity to obtain a certificate indicating the marks and the Level obtained for each of the skills for each language being studied annually. The project aims 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. Another important difference is the fact that the programme avoids being prescriptive by defining the moment when particular grammar points and/or vocabulary lists need to be taught and how. That will be left to the discretion of the teachers who will decide when and where will these be included in the teaching programme and the methods they should employ, depending on the academic level and the needs of their particular students in class.

Keywords: Foreign language proficiency, multilingualism, language learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

The European Commission fosters multilingualism and language learning and its 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.

In today's era, multilingualism has become more than just 'important'. Knowing a foreign language other than one's native language has evolved to be extremely beneficial. Whether viewed from the financial or social aspect, being able to communicate in a foreign language helps to make 'real' connection with people and provides a better understanding of one's language. The world has contracted to a global village and exposure to different languages is a potent equipment to reach the ladder of success in different fields like business, education, travel and research. In fact, the process of learning foreign languages is today to be considered in the light of new societal requirements to education and personality development. Gálová (2007; viii), states that:

“globalization of the world economy requires professionals and specialists in various areas to communicate effectively in foreign languages. The success is conditional on their language skills and competences with respect to their professional areas”.

Indeed, multilingualism is today considered to be one of the key elements for a modern Europe, given that learning foreign languages permits citizens to enrich their lives, to gain familiarity with new concepts and to benefit from cultural diversity. In today's European society, multilingualism and intercultural play a fundamental role in order to communicate effectively, to extend one's circles beyond the local dimension, to develop an open disposition towards diversity and change and, therefore, also to enhance professional and economic development. As the European Commission declared in one of its documents on multilingualism, entitled, 'Languages mean Business', one of the main reasons why thousands of European companies lose out on concluding deals and contracts is their lack of linguistic and intercultural competencies.

2 FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN MALTA

Multilingualism in Malta is a major asset, especially when one considers the efforts and investment currently being made in Europe to enhance language competences in European schools. Historically Malta's fortunes largely derived from the fact that its people were able to communicate with foreigners in their own language/s and that they were capable of using English whenever a specific communicative situation required this, while also retaining the capability to switch to other foreign languages if this was necessary, as in showing hospitality and openness to the other. The Maltese felt proud of their multilingualism. However, one must question if this is still the case, especially among the younger generations. Unfortunately, the number of school leavers who have no accredited certification in foreign language skills as well as in English and Maltese is on the increase. This, notwithstanding the fact that they have studied these languages for a number of years both at Primary as well as at Secondary level.

One must note that in Malta schools are divided in three sectors, namely State, Church and Independent. Compulsory schooling in the Primary level starts at the age of 5; it is co-educational and lasts for six years. The Constitution of the Republic of Malta, whilst recognising Maltese as the national language, also states that both Maltese and English are official languages in Malta, and thereby, the two languages are used in parallel for official communication. For this reason Maltese and English are both obligatory subjects from the start of Primary schooling. In Years 5 & 6 (10 year olds), a Foreign Language Awareness Programme (FLAP) is introduced for German, French and Italian, during which State School students are given a first taste of these foreign languages. The aim of this programme is to inculcate respect and appreciation of other peoples' languages, traditions and cultures whilst hoping that students will be encouraged to further their studies in these languages at higher levels. As indicated in the National Curriculum Framework (2012, p.51), this programme aids students to gain awareness of issues related to multilingualism, explained as, “...the learning of two languages other than the mother tongue from an early age is linked to the development of multilingualism.” Through this programme, light and motivating lessons are aimed at introducing the language through basic vocabulary whilst assisting students in making an informed decision as to the foreign language that they will take on during their years at Secondary school. At the start of the Secondary level (ages 11-16), all students start learning one or two foreign languages, and may generally choose between Arabic, French, German, Italian and Spanish. At the end of their final year

of secondary school, students sit for the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examinations, which enable successful students to move on to Post Secondary education (Sixth Form) and which in turn leads to access to University.

As can be seen in Table. 1, it is very worrying that in the last four SEC examination sessions, from May 2011 to May 2014, around 36% of the cohort of students who turned sixteen (and therefore ended their compulsory schooling) failed to register for any foreign language, around 15% failed to register for English language and around 20% failed to register for Maltese. Besides these students, one must also take into account another 15-20% of students who every year, either register but fail to turn up for the examinations or fail to make the grade. This means that around half of the students aged 16 fail to obtain any kind of accredited certification in at least one foreign language and around 30% fail to get certification in either English or Maltese.

Table. 1. No. of students who fail to register for SEC examinations in languages.

	% of cohort	%	%
	Did not sit for any Foreign Language at SEC level	Did not sit for English Language at SEC level	Did not sit for Maltese at SEC level
2011	33.5	14	18.3
2012	39.1	19.6	24
2013	38.5	19	23.7
2014	35.6	13.6	17.4

Source: MATSEC Statistical Reports.

This negative trend in the number of school leavers who sit for SEC examinations in foreign languages has persisted for the past 10 years, as can be seen in Table. 2.

Table. 2. Number of students registered for SEC exams 2004 & 2013.

NUMBER OF STUDENTS REGISTERED FOR SEC EXAMS 2004 & 2013			
Subject	2004(% of total)	2013 (% of total)	% Change
French	2238 (37.7%)	1402 (34.4%)	-38%
Italian	2981 (50.2%)	2026 (49.5%)	-30%
German	423 (7.1%)	346 (8.4%)	-19%
Spanish	285 (4.8%)	311 (7.6%)	+9%
Total	5927	4085	-31%

Source: MATSEC Statistical Reports

Such statistics, showing the declining numbers of students sitting for SEC exams in foreign languages, indicate clearly that the interest in foreign language learning in Malta is waning and that a number of children complete their studies at Secondary Level without obtaining any form of certification in these areas. This is not necessarily accompanied by an improvement of our students' level of English. Furthermore, even those who achieve SEC certification do not necessarily find opportunities to improve their language competence as their field of specialisation at tertiary level often does not provide the opportunity to do so.

This is very sad, even more so, in view of the fact that Malta's economy is dependent on human resources and foreign trade, driven by financial services and tourism. And foreign language skills are an integral component in the provision of a high standard of service in the tourism industry, with many researchers and educators (Horng & Lu, 2006; Lafrenz, 1991; Wenyuh, 2012) highlighting the link between excellence in tourism services and excellent language skills.

This means that mastery in foreign languages is considered, in today's world, not just an excellent tool to bridge gaps between people coming from different countries and to create strong sentimental and professional relationships, but above all an instrument that enables workers to considerably improve their career prospects. As Pace (2013) puts it,

“In the global marketplace that we now live in, languages have become crucial across all sectors. From law to finance, from tourism to technology, from marketing to administration, most businesses today need workers who can speak different languages, not just to permit communication across the globe, but also to understand different cultural realities and needs”.

This is further confirmed by the CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey 2013: “Seven in ten (70%) businesses value foreign language skills among their employees, particularly in helping build relations with clients, customers and suppliers”.

3 PROBLEMS WITH REGARDS FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING & LEARNING

A pertinent question worth posing and considering here is: why are so many students quitting languages at school? There may be various answers for this question. One of the main reasons is the perception that learning a language can be an important prerequisite for just a few. Suffice it to say that within the 3 most important institutions in Malta that offer tertiary education, the presence of foreign languages is negligible. At the University of Malta, only two Faculties are involved in the teaching of foreign languages: the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Arts. Further to this, languages are also included in the Degree Plus programme, which is effectively the only programme in which students from different faculties come together in order to follow courses, at various levels, in order to learn foreign languages or to enhance their competence in them. At the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) the presence of foreign language teaching is negligible whereas at the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS), foreign languages are not compulsory for all students. Furthermore, the percentage of students learning foreign languages in vocational or pre-vocational education is considerably lower compared to those in general education.

Another reason why students quit languages is that they very often see little connection between what is taught in class and real life situations, especially in view of the fact that in Malta there still exists a system of assessing foreign languages based almost entirely on writing skills. Furthermore, students who in their first years of studying a language fail to grasp the basic concepts, find it very difficult, if not impossible, to keep the pace with the other students in their year group as the years go by, given that a 'one size fits all' programme of studies is usually presented in class with syllabi that do not allow for flexibility on the teachers' part. This very often leads to language teaching focusing almost entirely on a particular skill (writing) rather than giving equal importance to the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) with the result that students very often lose motivation. It is a known secret that motivation is a key factor in foreign language successful learning. Pupils' perception of the usefulness of the languages they learn can clearly contribute to increasing their motivation.

Many students are nowadays falling back in their foreign language studies even because there is a lack of exposure to the language being studied. It is a known fact that many school aged students prefer chatting and surfing on the net to reading or watching TV programmes in the target language. Just like babies learn to speak a language by hearing and parroting sound, foreign language learners can significantly benefit from practising to listen in order to learn, given that, as stated in the main findings of Eurydice-Eurostat (2012) high exposure to foreign languages facilitates the acquisition of language skills. Listening is the communicative skill we use most in daily life, yet it can be the most difficult to practise unless one lives in a foreign country or attends immersive language classes.

4 THE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENT (LPA) PROJECT

The Language Proficiency Assessment (LPA) programme introduced as from September 2014 keeps all this in mind and has the intent to set up a home-grown alternative assessment based on subject proficiency at levels 1, 2 and 3 of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) as in Table. 3. It 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. The main scope

of the programme is to enable learners acquire and develop a communicative competence which allows for an effective and meaningful interaction in diversified social contexts. S/he will also develop skills, language and attitudes required for further study of the language, work and leisure.

Table. 3: Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF)

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	VET Level 2	2
1	General Education Level 1 School Leaving Certificate	VET Level 1	1

Source: www.ncfhe.org.mt

This programme, which will eventually be offered on a national basis, will initially target 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 is currently being piloted with the Italian language in two different schools. Form 3 students (year 9) in these two schools are 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, as in Table. 4, and for logistical purposes. It is envisaged that in September 2015 the pilot project will be extended to include also French, German and Spanish whereas in September 2016 there will be a purposeful national roll out which will start addressing not just foreign languages but also English and Maltese. It is therefore proposed that whilst allowing for contingencies, in September 2016 the programme will be extended to 6 languages, namely Italian, French, German, Spanish, English and Maltese in a number of identified schools and its implementation will proceed as complementary to the traditional Secondary Education Certificate (SEC).

Table. 4: % of students studying a foreign language at Form 1 (Year 7) level in State, Church and Independent Schools.

	2011/12			2012/13			2013/14			2014/15		
	State	Church	Ind.	State	Church	Ind.	State	Church	Ind.	State	Church	Ind.
French	18%	69%	71%	18.17%	65%	81%	16.49%	47%	83%	16%	52%	74%
Italian	59%	80%	69%	59.13%	79%	106%	56.67%	66%	84%	57%	69%	76%
German	10%	13%	6%	9.29%	17%	12%	11.47%	17%	0%	11%	19%	8%
Spanish	12%	2%	4%	10.74%	3%	7%	10.88%	2%	4%	11%	4%	3%
Arabic	0%	0%	5%	0.95%	0%	4%	0.98%	0%	5%	1%	0%	5%
Russian	0%	0%	0%	0.00%	0%	4%	0.00%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Courtesy of *Research and Development Department*. Directorate for Quality & Standards in Education. Ministry of Education. Malta.

The LPA programme is developed on a number of principles and criteria common for all foreign languages, namely:

- The whole programme will comprise 7 units of 9 lessons each and a final revision unit of 18 lessons for a total of 54 contact hours.
- The aim of the first part of the programme is to help learners achieve a level 1 on the Malta Qualifications Framework in the four basic skills in language learning.
- The learners will acquire and develop a communicative competence which allows for an effective and meaningful interaction in diversified social contexts. S/he will also develop skills, language and attitudes required for further study of the language, work and leisure.
- The learner will develop skills in order to be able to listen to and interact with others and understand the general sense of a variety of basic oral messages, intended for various purposes.
- Level 1 can be defined as a “survival kit” in the target language. For this reason, attention to reading and writing might be delayed till a later stage, when the groundwork for listening and speaking will have been well laid and solidified.
- Writing will not be totally excluded from the first units: but attention will be focused on speaking and listening. Decisions of this sort will be left at the discretion of the teacher and according to students’ needs.
- Topics such as Christmas, Carnival etc. which are related to a particular period of the year can be included as the programme unfolds.
- Cognates are to be used regularly especially to alleviate difficulties students might meet in vocabulary learning and to recognise similarities and/or differences among Maltese and other languages.
- The focus of this programme is communicative competence. Grammar is to be inserted in order to develop communicative abilities and language proficiency. Emphasis is not to be made on memorising grammatical forms and meta language (e.g. defining the various parts of speech). The programme is not prescriptive and does not define the moment when a particular grammar point needs to be taught. The teacher may decide when and where a particular grammar point will be included in the teaching programme.
- The LPA will not specify any cultural topic since culture is a means to teach the language and to develop intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes. It will be teacher who will decide which cultural topics to use and when.

Form 3 students are being offered this programme on the basis of their demonstrated performance in the subject. A thorough analysis of the students’ summative assessment at the end of Form 2 (Year 8) is carried out. Heads of School, in consultation with the respective language teachers, decide a cut off mark that will determine which students are to be offered the possibility to join the LPA programme of studies. The students, together with their parents/guardians will choose between SEC and LPA

following a detailed explanation of the two options. Although one track does not necessarily exclude the other, those students who opt for the LPA will start a Level 1 programme of studies in the particular language and at the end of the scholastic year they will sit for LPA Level 1 (MQF) exams. The examinations, which will be set at the national level, will consist of four different papers, one for each basic language skill, namely Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. Each paper will receive a separate mark and students will have the opportunity to obtain a certificate indicating the marks and the Level obtained for each of the skills for each language being studied annually. Students who reach proficiency level and obtain a pass mark in at least two of the four skills, will, at Form 4, proceed to LPA Level 2 (MQF) whereas those students who fail to do so, will, at Form 4, continue to follow LPA Level 1 in that particular language.

This means that the teaching & learning process will be rendered more personal and relevant to the students' needs with particular attention targeted at the level, motivation and ability of acquisition of students taking LPA. Another important difference will be that, due to the nature of the LPA programmes of study, there will be no traditional half yearly examinations as these will be replaced by continuous assessment. In fact these home-grown curricular programmes, which shall be drawn up within the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) working groups, should be seen as a general guide rather than a prescriptive instrument and do not provide a single method for applying them.

5 ASSESSMENT AND TESTING










When it comes to assessment and testing, the LPA programme had to move away from the SEC system whereby the students obtain one final global achievement mark for the language being studied, meaning that marks are transferable from one skill to another and emphasis is laid on writing skills. On the contrary, the LPA programme has, as one of its specific aims, to establish the individual student's language ability and describe the learner's language skills. Its main aim is to provide a method of learning, teaching and assessing which applies to all languages. The programme, in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) offers a fully comprehensive assessment of the four basic skills or abilities in a language, namely speaking, listening, reading and writing and the following principles form the basis for this system:

- The LPA has three levels in line with the Malta Qualifications Framework – from Level 1 for the most basic user to Level 3 for the independent user.
- Proficiency tests, unlike achievement tests, are intended to measure a learner's command of a language irrespective of his/her background in that language and therefore do not depend on particular class content or course materials.
- There will be no traditional half-yearly exams but throughout the year students will be continuously assessed in class.
- All students following the LPA programme at Form 3 (both at State and Non State schools) can take the LPA national exams for Level 1 at the end of the scholastic year.
- Students who obtain a pass mark in at least 2 of the 4 language skills will be promoted to the next Level of LPA, whereas those students who do not reach the grade in a specific language, will, in the following scholastic year, be promoted to the next form but continue to follow the LPA programme of studies at the same level of the previous scholastic year.
- There will be one national examination session per year at the end of the scholastic year.
- The productive skills (speaking and writing) and the receptive skills (reading and listening) will be assessed.
- A certificate will be issued specifying the level in which skills are obtained and the marks for each respective skill.

Another important innovation in the LPA programme is the introduction of the notion of assessment for learning, in which continuous assessment methods are 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. To do this evidence of specific skills and other items at one particular time and language performance and progress over time is collected in all four abilities (listening, speaking, reading and writing,) or in all three communication modes

(interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational). 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. Furthermore, at the end of each unit, the student is asked to fill in a short self evaluation form as in Table. 5. On completing the form, the student gives the self evaluation form to the teacher who, on his/her part, goes through it and confirms or otherwise the student's self assessment. Should there be differences between the student's and the teacher's assessment, the two will discuss the matter and reach a final decision. This should also serve as feedback not only for the teacher but also for the parents or guardians of the child who will be asked to acknowledge the progress or otherwise of their child in the particular language being studied.

Table. 5: Students' Self Assessment Sheet

 = Yes, I can	 = I still have difficulties	 = No, I cannot
UNIT 1.01: Salutare il mondo e presentarsi – Greeting the world and introducing oneself		
NAME: _____ CLASS: _____ At the end of this unit, I can:	Student   	Teacher   
express and understand basic greetings according to the time of the day	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>
ask and say my name in Italian	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>
ask, answer and understand questions on where I live	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>
identify, say and understand numbers from 1 to 20	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>
ask, answer and understand questions about my age	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>
orally present myself briefly	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>
recognize and spell correctly simple words in Italian	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>
understand and use basic classroom instructions	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>

6 CONCLUSION

It is expected that the LPA programme will lead to a reduction in the number of students with no accredited certification in languages on leaving compulsory schooling, whilst offering an alternative route to obtaining certification in language / subject proficiency at levels 1,2 and 3 of MQF. Its main aim is to provide a method of learning, teaching and assessing which applies to all languages whilst offering a fully comprehensive assessment of the four basic skills or abilities, namely speaking, listening, reading and writing. Consequently the LPA certificate will give a faithful picture of the acquired language skills which will be of great benefit to both students as well as their future employers. The programme also implies that, contrary to past common practice, it is the students, in

consultation with their parents and teachers, who choose between the traditional foreign language course leading to SEC certification or the LPA course of studies. And since such programme of studies moves towards a system of individualised, personalised teaching and learning and towards a different way of assessing students, teacher training re methods of assessment and teaching is already underway.

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