



Foreign Language Proficiency & Certification amongst Youths in Malta – from Compulsory Schooling to Courses for Specific Purposes

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Abstract

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. The Business Forum for Multilingualism established by the European Commission (2008: 8) states that "A significant percentage of European SMEs lose business every year as a direct result of linguistic and intercultural weaknesses. Although it appears certain that English will keep its leading role as the world business language, it is other languages that will make the difference between mainstream and excellence and provide a competitive edge" [1]. Even the CBI/Pearson education and skills survey, Changing the Pace (2013: 7) states that "Seven in ten (70%) businesses value foreign language skills among their employees, particularly in helping build relations with clients, customers and suppliers" [2]. 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 grasp new ideas and to benefit from the European cultural diversity. Yet, the number of school leavers in Malta who have no accredited certification in foreign language skills is on the increase. The paper will analyse the reasons as to why young people quit languages at school and prefer to study other subjects like IT and sciences and will discuss new initiatives that are being implemented on a national scale to remedy this situation, rendering 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 the different language skills.

[1] http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/languages-mean-usiness/doc1460_it

[2] http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/2119176/education_and_skills_survey_2013.pdf

In the 21st century, foreign language competence and proficiency and intercultural understanding are no longer considered as optional extras or a luxury but have become an essential part of being a citizen. Both in the society in which we live as well as in the global economy, an increasingly important characteristic is the ability to understand and communicate in other languages. Such a characteristic not only contributes to the cultural and linguistic richness of our society but increases personal fulfilment and promotes global citizenship. Foreign languages have become a lifelong skill and this explains why 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. For the individual citizen this means that s/he not only needs training which will enable her/him to successfully conduct her/his professional and personal projects but also to have knowledge of languages, to understand different languages and cultures and to operate within them. As the European Commission (2004: 10) puts it: "Learning one lingua franca is not enough. Every European citizen should have meaningful communicative competence in at least two other languages in addition to his or her mother tongue." [1] And the European Commission gives four major reasons why it fosters multilingualism and language learning namely, to promote intercultural dialogue and a more inclusive society; to help the public to develop a sense of EU citizenship; to open up opportunities for young people to study and work abroad and to open up new markets for EU businesses competing at the global level.

As each economy around the world becomes increasingly international, the need and demand for foreign languages continues to grow. And the importance of foreign language proficiency for graduates cannot be underestimated. In today's era, multilingualism has become more than just 'important'. It was for this reason that the European Commission launched the first European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) [2], 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. The ESLC also served to assist the European Commission in establishing a European Indicator of Language Competence to monitor progress against the Barcelona European Council Conclusions (2002). 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" [3]. 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. This shows 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.

Foreign language proficiency is crucial for younger generations of workers to succeed today. In the global marketplace that we now live in, languages have become crucial across all sectors. From law to finance, from tourism to technology, and from marketing to administration, most businesses today need linguists not just to permit communication across the globe but also to understand different cultural realities and needs. In the world of work, language skills are becoming always increasingly important in organisations and businesses who want to remain competitive on an international level. This is highly recommended even in the Report from the thematic working group "Languages for Jobs" European Strategic Framework for Education and Training (ET 2020) [4] which states that the demand for foreign languages and communication skills is steadily rising on the European labour market. In order to reduce the gap between offer and demand of language skills and to increase the motivation of learners, the experts of the group encourage the development and dissemination of new methods of teaching languages which are more learner-focused, practically oriented and more applied to professional contexts.

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. 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. In fact, as can be seen in Figure 1, statistics show a decline in the number of students sitting for Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) exams in foreign languages. This indicates 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.

Fig.1: Percentage of students in Malta who sat for end of compulsory schooling in a Foreign Language;

	% of cohort
	Did not sit for any Foreign Language at SEC level
2011	33.5
2012	39.1
2013	38.5
2014	35.6

This is not only very worrying and in sharp contrast to European trends as shown in the "Eurobarometer Survey on Europeans and their Languages" carried out in 2012 [5] and based on the responses of almost 27,000 people in 27 countries, but also 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 [6]; Lafrenz, 1991 [7]; Wenyuh, 2012 [8]) highlighting the link between excellence in tourism services and excellent language skills. Furthermore, several research studies not only show that a variety of languages are required on international markets but also that the most quoted barrier to intra-European mobility remains lack of foreign language skills [9]. It is no surprise that language skills are considered by employers as one of the ten most important skills for future graduates. This was confirmed by a recent Eurobarometer study [10] where 40 % of recruiters in the industry sector highlighted the importance of language skills for future higher education graduates.

It is clear that languages today require a new market, and 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. So, although teaching and learning foreign languages does need to take root in schools, it can only flourish if opportunities are provided to further this when one reaches adulthood and therefore has the necessary cognitive ability to be motivated to learn them. It is not surprising that the market of foreign language learning and teaching is improving steadily among adults, including those at the third age and decreasing at school level. Pace (2015) identifies various reasons for this, namely, that there exists a perception among students that learning a language can be an important prerequisite for just a few, that students very often see little connection between what is taught in class and real life situations, a “one size fits all” programme of studies offered at schools for foreign language teaching and learning and a lack of exposure to the languages being studied [11].

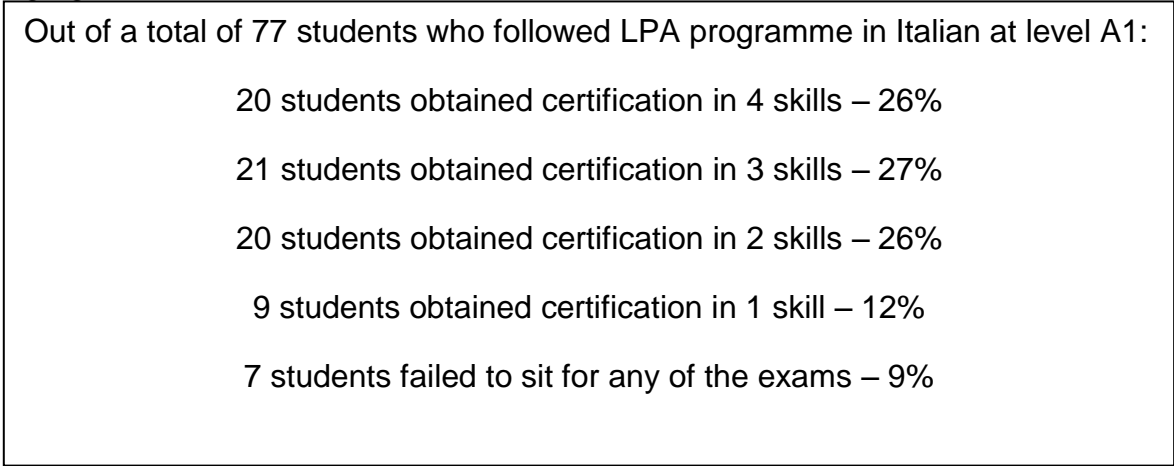
Fig. 2: Percentage of students in Malta who at the end of compulsory schooling obtained certification in a foreign language.

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

This scenario has led to the introduction, as from September 2014, of the Language Proficiency Assessment (LPA) programme in a number of Secondary schools in Malta. The programme has the intent to set up a home-grown alternative assessment based on subject proficiency and 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. This programme, which will eventually be offered on a national basis, initially targeted 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 was to offer highly demotivated students the possibility of obtaining proficiency qualifications and certificates in a foreign language. This home-grown curricular programme was initially piloted with the Italian language in two different schools. Form 3 students (year 9) in these two schools were, in September 2014, offered a special programme of studies for Italian at CEFR Level A1. 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. Following the highly encouraging results obtained (see Fig.3), the pilot has been extended, as from September 2015, to include also French and German. It is envisaged that in September 2016 there will be a purposeful national roll out which will start addressing all students and all foreign languages studied in Maltese Secondary schools.



Fig. 3: Percentage of students following the LPA programme who obtained certification in any of the 4 language skills.



The fundamental notion of this programme is communicative competence. Richards (2006) [12] explains that communicative competence does not simply include knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions but also knowing how to vary the use of language according to the setting and the participants and how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge. This means that emphasis is not to be made on memorising grammatical forms and meta language (e.g. defining the various parts of speech) but the teaching of grammar is to be inserted in order to develop communicative abilities and language proficiency. This is why the LPA programme is not prescriptive and does not define the moment when a particular grammar point needs to be taught. It is up to the teacher to decide when and where a particular grammar point will be included in the teaching programme. 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. As Klapper 2001:17) puts it, "The art of teaching does not lie in accessing a checklist of skills but rather in knowing which approach to adopt with different students, in different curricular circumstances or in different cultural settings." [13]

The introduction of the LPA programme has also raised an awareness of the urgent need to diversify the Maltese local language training market with courses in foreign languages for specific purposes even because the number of young people studying for language qualifications post-16 is always on the decline. If we really want languages to be embedded within lifelong learning more young people must be encouraged to study languages at the end of compulsory schooling and in further and higher education. There must be more diverse language provisions and work-based learning, including the opportunity to study languages for specific purposes.

Unfortunately most foreign language courses currently provided for young people and adults are concentrated on conversation and traditional language classes. There is little provision that targets individual learners learning at their own pace or courses for specific purposes. There exists a language deficit in the teaching of languages when it comes to key vocational areas such as hotel and tourism and business and management as well as a need to broaden the range of students taking languages at different levels. The first step in this direction is the introduction, as from September 2015, of foreign language courses for specific purposes in two post compulsory education institutions in Malta, namely the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS) and the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). As language courses for specific purposes should be, these courses will offer students real-world opportunities to practice language and navigate culture in the context of a specific field. This implies determining what skills to teach, how to teach them and what materials must be used to help the learners reach their goals. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that the role of the teacher is to help, to facilitate communication in class, to provide the tools for the learners to develop and acquire the skills they need, to equip the learners with tools and strategies that will empower them in a world where the teacher is only one of the many providers, or sources, of language exposure and communicative practice. The main challenge is to provide the learners with the necessary linguistic tools to be able to apply the concepts, interpret them, and above all communicate in the target language, not just with the particular jargon characteristic of that specific occupational context but also with the language of everyday informal talk, that allows them to communicate effectively with their clients regardless of the occupational context. (Pace, 2013). [14] Consequently the various methodologies and materials used in such courses have to be adapted to particular



groups of learners and to each learner's needs leading, in turn, to the development and use of a variety of teaching materials emphasizing different instructional techniques and teaching approaches.

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