

start-up



Learnapy: Future-Proofing the Maltese Language

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A homegrown digital platform is changing how children and newcomers learn Maltese – through smart tech, playful design, and a strong sense of purpose.

In a world increasingly shaped by global languages and digital convenience, smaller languages often struggle to keep up.

Maltese, though rich in history and identity, faces its own set of modern challenges, especially when it comes to how it's taught and learned. Traditional methods don't always resonate with today's learners, and for many, especially children and newcomers to Malta, the tools just haven't been keeping pace. That's where a fresh approach – and a passionate local team – comes in.

Learnapy is a locally-developed learning app designed to make mastering the Maltese language not just easier, but genuinely enjoyable. It is aimed at two core audiences: primary

school students building their literacy skills, and foreign workers looking to better integrate into Maltese life. Learnapy was awarded seed funding from the 2024 TAKEOFF Seed Fund Award (TOSFA), which is a joint initiative between the Ministry for the Economy, Enterprise and Strategic Projects (MEEP) and the University of Malta through the support of UM's Knowledge Transfer Office, the Centre for Entrepreneurship and Business Incubation, and the TAKEOFF Business Incubator.

A VISION BORN IN THE CLASSROOM

The idea for Learnapy came from a master's thesis. Roderick Cassar, the founder, who has spent over two

decades working in tech and product design, noticed a gap in the language learning landscape. Maltese, while a national language, lacked engaging, modern tools for learners – particularly digital-native children and newcomers to the island. 'We wanted to bridge that gap with a digital-first platform that meets today's learning expectations while preserving the linguistic heritage of our country,' says Cassar.

Rather than reinvent the wheel, the team looked to build on existing educational methods. The Maltese national curriculum provides a foundation, but the delivery is being reimaged for the digital era. That means modules structured around clear learning objectives, but delivered through interactive games, adaptive



Roderick Cassar

feedback, and voice recognition features. Learnapy possesses the essence of traditional teaching, but with an upgraded approach.

ADAPTING TO EVERY LEARNER

From the first interaction, Learnapy gets personal. A quick placement test determines where a learner should start, and from there, the platform adjusts in real time. Struggling learners are supported with hints, visuals, and audio guides, while high performers are nudged toward more advanced challenges. The system doesn't just react – it learns from the learner. 'We've built Learnapy using a combination of cloud-native technologies, real-time analytics, and AI-powered modules,' says Cassar. This results in a high-quality app that teachers, parents, and guardians can feel confident about their kids using. Even pronunciation practice is smart, using voice recognition to help users sound things out correctly.

GAMES WITH A PURPOSE

Gamification, the process of applying elements of game-playing for better engagement and learning, is a big part of what makes Learnapy so attractive. The app includes features like streaks, experience points (XP), and gem rewards – but only for real learning. Gems are earned for consistent practice or high scores, and

can be used to unlock new content, not just sparkly animations. The focus is on motivation, not distraction.

This approach has resonated well with its target audience. According to Cassar, children describe using Learnapy as 'fun' and 'like playing a game' – not because it replaces learning, but because it disguises effort in enjoyment. The reward system reinforces meaningful behaviours, keeping users engaged for the right reasons.

TWO AUDIENCES, ONE PLATFORM

At first glance, teaching six-year-olds and adult learners on the same app sounds like a recipe for confusion. But the Learnapy team tackled this head-on with a smart design strategy. The underlying tech is shared, but the user experience isn't. Upon sign-up, learners are guided through a personalised onboarding process tailored to their age, goals, and language background. 'Language is the bridge between people, community, and identity,' confirms Cassar.

For younger users, the platform offers curriculum-aligned lessons with colourful visuals and friendly audio cues. For adults, the focus shifts to practical usage – think conversations at work, reading signs, or navigating social situations. The tone and tempo adapt, but the quality remains consistent. The design team behind Learnapy

saw common ground between these two user groups: both face a lack of modern, effective resources to learn Maltese. Children need a solid literacy foundation, whilst adults require a solid foothold in society. By designing for both, Learnapy maximises its reach without splitting its vision.

TECHNOLOGY CHALLENGES AND LANGUAGE QUIRKS

Behind the scenes, Learnapy had to overcome some major technical and linguistic hurdles. 'One of the toughest challenges was reconciling a flexible digital interface with the rigid structure of formal education,' says Cassar. Maltese isn't a language most commercial AI or Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools cater for. Its hybrid roots and unique structure meant the team had to custom-build parts of the app from scratch. They couldn't rely on existing frameworks designed for more widely spoken languages. Integrating into school environments and meeting national standards wasn't just about ticking boxes – it also meant working closely with educators, building relationships with institutions, and gaining the trust of stakeholders across the education ecosystem.

That trust is now paying off. Learnapy is currently running pilot programmes in Maltese schools and collaborating with academic experts, ➔

including those from the Faculty of Education, the Centre for Entrepreneurship and Business Incubation, and the TAKEOFF Business Incubator at UM. These partnerships have helped shape the platform's curriculum, validate its pedagogy, and refine its assessment strategies.

MEASURING SUCCESS IN REAL TIME

Learnapy tracks how long users spend on each task, where they make mistakes, and how they move through different levels. This data doesn't just indicate what users are learning but reveals how they are learning.

Early signs are encouraging since learners are retaining vocabulary more effectively and using new words more confidently. Teachers report that the platform supports classroom teaching rather than replacing it, while parents appreciate having clear insight into their children's progress through user-friendly dashboards. For foreign workers, the app is proving to be more than a tool and acts as a confidence booster. Many describe feeling like they finally have a clear, manageable path to learning Maltese.

At its heart, Learnapy is about connection. In a bilingual country like Malta, English often takes centre stage in digital and commercial life, but that can leave Maltese at risk of being sidelined, especially for newcomers. By making Maltese more accessible, Learnapy is helping reinforce its value. For young learners, it builds literacy and cultural pride. For foreigners, it opens doors: socially, professionally, and emotionally. Language, after all, is a key to belonging.

RECOGNITION AND WHAT'S NEXT

In December 2024, Learnapy's efforts were formally recognised when it received an Intellectual Property Award from the Ministry of Commerce. It was a proud moment for a small team with a big vision.

Next up is a full public launch by the end of 2025, starting with Year 1 and Year 2 primary content. In addition, the roadmap includes full primary coverage, expanded content for adult learners, and new features to further personalise the learning journey. The team also acknowledges that many smaller languages face digital extinction simply because there aren't enough tools to support them. Learnapy may yet become a blueprint for how to preserve language through technology.

Ultimately, Learnapy represents a belief that even a small, dedicated team can have a big impact when it combines the right expertise with a shared sense of purpose. By using smart technology to protect a small but significant language, Learnapy is proving that innovation doesn't always have to be the loudest – it can have a strong impact by speaking to the heart of a culture. **T**



Learnapy was awarded the Intellectual Property Award in December 2024
Photo courtesy of Roderick Cassar



Get in Touch with Learnapy

The Learnapy team is looking to name their mascot – reach out to share a cool name idea!

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