

## *The Maltese SECE: An Evaluation*

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### **Abstract:**

This paper attempts to present an evaluation of the Maltese Language SEC 16+ exam. The study evaluated all the components of the May 1998 Maltese SECE, reviewed changes that may have been made to any of the Exam components ever since, and strives to show how accurately a perspective is this exam giving of the students' writing skills and linguistic competence in the Maltese language. A Mixed Research Methodology is employed: a cross-sectional survey, employing self-administered questionnaires distributed to 486 First year Post-Secondary students of varying abilities, and a number of interviews with syllabus and paper setters, markers, lecturers, assistant lecturers and teachers. The evaluation is carried out on the aspects of examination format, content, level and backwash effect.

### **Introduction**

Examinations are an essential element of the teaching and learning processes in schools as they provide a framework in which educational objectives may be set and pupils' progress formally charted and expressed. Language tests can be an asset because they provide relevant feedback on the strengths of language teaching programme (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

The importance of formal examinations has also been recognised locally with the introduction of the fairly new SEC system (early 1990s) of external examinations run by the existing MATSEC Examining Board of the University of Malta. These exams not only serve as a benchmark for the attainment of 16+ candidates taking them, but are also highly prized by educators, parents and students because they are meant to give access to post-secondary education courses. Even employers recognize their importance because some of them ask for SEC Certification. One such exam is the Maltese SECE, which certifies achievement in the Maltese Language according to the student's competence (Sultana, 1997).

### Why the Maltese SECE?

This external national exam is not just any other exam but is considered extremely important by those students seeking post-secondary and tertiary education because it is one of the compulsory subjects for entry requirement.

One of the stated aims of the Maltese SEC exam is to show the student's command of both written and spoken Maltese. It endeavours to help students demonstrate what they know and can do rather than exposing their shortcomings. Although, generally speaking, the exam is serving as a suitable benchmark of the students' linguistic competence in the mother tongue, a number of related issues intrigued me enough to carry out my research. These issues were:

**A. The results obtained by students.** An analysis of the May 1997, 1998, 2002 and 2003 results show the following tabulated data:

**B. The content of the various examiners' reports** - In their 1998 report they wrote: *'The number of candidates prepared well for the Maltese SECE is rather small. This could be the result of the fact that in certain schools there are not enough Maltese lessons, and teachers do not have enough time to teach the syllabus more diligently.'* Similar remarks were expressed again in the 2002 and 2003 reports: *'The great number of orthographical, syntactical and morphological mistakes show, that many a candidate lacks exposure to the correct form of idiomatic Maltese. The outcome of the exam clearly shows that students are not preparing themselves well for the Maltese SECE.'*

**Table 1 – Distribution of Students who obtained a pass in the Maltese SECE 1997 & 1998.**

1997						1998					
Passed			Failed			Passed			Failed		
Grades 1-5	%	Grades 6-7	UN	%		Grades 1-5	%	Grades 6-7	UN	%	
3039	76	292	7.3	672	16.7	2653	63.1	365	8.7	1184	28.2

1997				1998			
Passed		Failed		Passed		Failed	
Grades 1-7	%	UN	%	Grades 1-7	%	UN	%
3331	83.3	672	16.7	3018	71.8	1184	28.2

**Table 2 – Distribution of Students who obtained a pass in the Maltese SECE 2002 & 2003.**

2002						2003					
Passed			Failed			Passed			Failed		
Grades 1-5	%	Grades 6-7	UN	%		Grades 1-5	%	Grades 6-7	UN	%	
3014	63	441	16.2	1151	24.2	2934	59.4	661	13.4	1186	24

2002						2003					
Passed			Failed			Passed			Failed		
Grades 1-7		%	UN	%		Grades 1-7		%	UN	%	
3455		72	1151	24.2		3595		72.7	1186	24	

**C. Post-secondary students themselves expressed surprise** that they managed to obtain a pass mark when, during tutorial sessions, they were made aware of the seriousness of their problem.

**D. Complaints** by teachers in post-secondary institutions, lecturers and assistant lecturers of the Maltese Department at the University Junior College and University, that the majority of post-secondary and tertiary students lack the ability to communicate their thoughts coherently in grammatically structured Maltese. Students at these two levels lack verbal communication skills, and make gross morphological, syntactical and orthographical mistakes.

**E. Comments** by the Ministers of Education, Academics, Lecturers, Assistant Lecturers and teachers that the standard and level of the Maltese language have fallen.

## **Background – An Overview**

### **1. Language testing**

Several studies (e.g. Bachman, 1990; 1989; Davies 1990; Hildebrand cited in Gipps and Murphy, 1996; Linn & Gronlund, 1995; Nitko, 1983, Nuttall, cited in Murphy and Broadfoot, 1995;) that have researched the use of tests have shown that the primary role of public external examinations is to assess the achievement of an

individual at the end of a course of study because they can provide a framework within which educational objectives may be set and pupils' progress charted and expressed. Although testing and assessment in an educational programme provides information for decision-making, it should also be seen as a form of human encounter where the teachers find out about the students (Rowntree, 1989) and should not determine what is to be taught and learned. It should identify learning goals and make judgement concerning the extent to which these goals have been attained (Linn & Gronlund, 1995).

Research continues to show that because of the communicative nature of language use and language ability, '*language teaching has developed enormously in recent years.....*' (Underhill, 1987). Communicative language ability, as some studies in this field have shown (Canale, 1983; Munby, 1978; Savignon, 1983; Widdowson, 1983) comprises the competence and the ability to use this knowledge appropriately in the context in which the language use occurs. According to Davies (1990), one of the problems with language testing is that testers have to use samples because it is almost impossible to teach and test the whole of a living language. Bachman (1990) adds that in this regard one questions whether the sample of language use we obtain from a test adequately characterizes the overall potential language use of the individual.

Extensive studies (Bell, 1981; Hughes, 1989; Oller, 1979; Rivers, 1987; Underhill, 1987) have been carried out on the construction of test tasks, and the individual components that make them up. Some approaches suggested for testing of the different language skills and which can be deemed relevant to the evaluation of the Maltese SECE are: reading, speaking and writing skills. Assessment and test developers should strive to:

- Design accountability assessment and tests that will provide good quality information on the students' performance, but will also encourage good impact on teaching and curriculum.
- Establish a relationship between the language used on tests and that used in real life.
- Work so that testing will not be an isolated activity but will give information about the very ability that one wishes to measure.

## **2. Learning the native language**

Upshur (1971) noted that there exists an intrinsic relationship between research in language acquisition and developments in language teaching, and language testing. Language is primarily a system of communication among humans. In any reference to the mother tongue the emphasis is placed on communication among native speakers.

The mother tongue should be given its due importance not only because it is undoubtedly the most important instrument when children are growing and learning, but also for a number of reasons, mainly:

- Competence in the mother tongue is one of the means that can help native speakers express or exchange information about an idea;
- The mother tongue plays an important role in many an individual's experience and in communicating these personal experiences to others;
- The mother tongue is an important tool in teaching since competence in language bears influences the way children learn;

Maltese, like any other language, is constantly developing. Briffa, (1994) and Farrugia, [cited in Borg (1998)] contend that the historical development of the Maltese language shows that the language has kept itself abreast with the changes taking place in the world as Maltese is a living language subject to change.

Competence in one's own language involves the individual's capacity to use one's own language efficiently. The foundations for acquiring the mother tongue are established during the initial period of childhood (Doughty, 1972). It is only later that he learns the more elaborate and artistic variations of language (Lado, 1961). Chomsky contends that:

*“Normal mastery of a language involves not only the ability to understand immediately an indefinite number of entirely new sentences, but also the ability to identify sentences and on occasion, to impose an interpretation on them.”*

(Chomsky, 1964: 7)

### **3. Testing the Native Language**

Lado (1961) in treating this subject claims that all normally developing children of a particular nation are exposed to the central core of language. He contends that dialect differences, faulty logic, inadequate vocabulary, writing skill and style are the problems to be tested with native speakers.

The same author argues that language testing in the native language usually tests the student on what is considered as the standard dialect of that particular mother tongue. Writing is a skill that must be taught separately and it incorporates a number of abilities (such as word formation, sentence construction, correct use of grammar and other characteristics concerned with writing the native language) that must be tested. Style is also considered important because it involves the appropriate use of language and aesthetic elegance for a particular situation.

### **4. The Local 16+ Maltese Language Exam – Past and Present**

The teaching and the method of assessing the Maltese Language is an important aspect in the Maltese Educational System. Determination and belief in the language have helped the cause of the Maltese Language, and the hard work of those who believed that the Maltese Language can serve its users has led to teaching and examining Maltese like other languages.

The first Maltese Matriculation Exam that was held in 1940 consisted of two three hour papers:

### **Paper I**

- a) Composition including paraphrase from unseen works.
- b) Translation from English to Maltese.

### **Paper II**

Literature –

Questions testing knowledge of the set texts, including passages from (i) and (ii) to be explained with reference to the context and the allusions therein contained.

- I. Saydon – Aquilina – *Ward ta' Qari Malti* – it-tieni Ktieb, pp. 1-157.
- II. Dun Karm – *X'emmen il-Poeta*.
- III. For less detailed study:  
Ġ. Bonnici – *Il-Qawwa ta' l-Imħabba*.

The historical background of the Maltese SECE shows that it has come a long way and although it was a difficult road, steps were always taken wisely and their objective was to improve the status and importance of our mother tongue. The Maltese SECE forms part of an assessment system that fosters positive achievement, rather than failure. The Maltese SECE today is made up of three sections, testing both the oral and written elements of the Maltese language:

### **Paper 1**

(i). **The oral** [In 1998 it carried a total of 30 marks, was reviewed in 2000 and brought down to a maximum of 20 marks, and reviewed again in 2002 when it was adjusted to a total of 15 marks] is designed to test:

- The ability to read fluently;
- To speak the Maltese language well using an array of vocabulary, correct grammar and also coherence.

Each part of the 1998 Oral (divided into two parts) carried fifteen marks. The first part had two items:

- a) the reading component (for which the teacher-examiner was to give a mark out of ten); and
- b) the communicative component in which the candidate was asked to give the main points of the passage just read, (for which the marker gave a mark out of five).

The teacher-examiners<sup>1</sup>, were given guidelines on the main points of the passage and a marking scheme.

The second part of the Oral, which carried fifteen marks, tested the candidate's communicative ability in the language. The candidate had to choose one of the two given titles on the paper of his choice, and speak about it. The teacher-examiner was to give prompts to help the student where necessary and then mark accordingly. Overall, the topics for conversation addressed issues that the 16+ population felt at ease with. The topics were varied but the descriptive, narrative and argumentative dominated. The conversation assessment sheet provided for the teacher-examiner

<sup>1</sup> Teachers who teach Maltese in local schools, examine the Oral component.

used a marking scheme based on three levels and each carrying a total of five marks. Markers were to allot marks on grammatical accuracy, variety of vocabulary, self-expression and ideas.

Today this part of the exam has seen some changes, although not what the researcher had recommended in his research of 2000. Unfortunately the oral component has been overloaded and students have been burdened with an endless list of material. The Maltese SEC Oral Exam of 2002 and 2003 was divided into two main sections. The first section kept the same format of the 1998 Exam. The only change in this section affected the allotted marks because it carried a total of six marks, divided equally between the reading and the spoken part of this section of the Exam. However, there was a complete overhaul to the second section. Where, in 1998 this section tested only the communicative abilities of the candidate in the language, since 2002 it began to test also the linguistic and cultural knowledge of the candidate. The second section of the Maltese SEC Oral Exam was sub-divided in two parts that:

- a) A linguistic section that tested the candidates knowledge on the three Elements of the Maltese Language; and
- b) A cultural section that incorporated both past and present items (folklore, customs, famous Maltese artists and linguists, legends, and all other material that falls under the umbrella of Maltese social life).

The marking scheme for this section was changed because, for the 2002 and 2003 Exam it carried a total of nine marks (three marks for the first part and six marks for the second part).

(ii). The **Essay, Comprehension and Letter/Report** [In 1998 it carried a total of 70 marks, since 2002 it carried a total of 85 marks] is designed to test:

- a) the candidate's linguistic skills in Maltese
- b) the candidate's ability to understand a Maltese text and answer in good grammatical and idiomatic Maltese.

It is a one and three quarter hour paper. In 2000 the researcher had recommended that the allotted time should be increased or the items in the Exam Paper, reduced. However, this seems to have been ignored because the time was not revised, and the content of the Paper was loaded with other items.

## **Paper 2**

(Papers 2A and 2B) carried a total of 100 marks. According to the syllabus, Paper 2 was designed to test:

- a) the candidate's knowledge on the set textual items
- b) the candidate's knowledge of the historical backgrounds and literary aspects of the set poems and prose passages
- c) the candidate's ability in literary appreciation

Both are two-hour papers. The specified length of the literary essay and the number of questions candidates were asked to answer differentiated one paper from another. The 1998 Paper 2A asked candidates to answer three items (a reference-to-the-context question and two 400-word essays). The 1998 Paper 2B asked candidates to answer two reference-to-the-context questions and two 200-word essays.

This part of the Exam has also seen some changes in format. Both Papers, now, ask for two reference-to-the-context answers and two essays. The essay section of Paper 2 has been divided into two parts and candidates are required to write to essays, one from each section.

### **Methodology**

A mixed methodology, that combines the quantitative and qualitative approaches, was used within the different phases of the study to ensure more reliability.

1. Conducting a self-administered questionnaire to a sample of 486 post-secondary students from Junior College, State, and Church institutions.
2. Analysing the examiners' reports on the exam results from 1994 to 2003.
3. Conducting a series of interviews with teachers, assistant lecturers and lecturers, syllabus and paper setters, markers and Matsec Officials.

#### **1. Questionnaire**

The questionnaire, made up of 37 items, was divided into seven sections that contained questions regarding different related areas, such as:

- ❖ The level of the Maltese SECE as envisaged by the students
- ❖ The Maltese SEC Exam Papers – the correspondents' views about components, content and format of the Maltese SECE Papers
- ❖ The preparation for the Exam – that is the teaching the respondents received at School or at Private Lessons in preparation for the Exam

#### **2. Interviews**

Some of the questions asked to Interviewees addressed identical issues as those of certain questionnaire items, and also their views on retaining or eliminating the new components of the examination (**Oral** and the **new tiered format of Paper 2**), the format and content of the two papers, set texts in the syllabus and teaching methods.

Furthermore, the interviews with people directly involved in the teaching of the subject, provided a wealth of information about the problems and the limitations of the teachers in teaching Maltese and preparing students for the Maltese SECE, and the students' reaction to the examination and syllabus.

### **Findings**

#### **1. Examination Format**

The aim of the questionnaire and interview items concerning this aspect of the exam was to answer the investigative question as to how students and interviewees perceived the examination format. The objectives of the survey and interview questions were to elicit, among other things, the students' and interviewees' views



regarding format of the exam, the time constraints, the oral, Paper 2 syllabus, and any changes they would like to see in the format.

#### **A. *The two tiered Paper***

The Maltese SECE is made up of two papers. Paper 1 is the core paper and falls within the ability range of all and Paper 2, which is a two tiered paper, is meant to reflect the different abilities: high achievers would be expected to choose 2A, low achievers 2B. However, many interviewees think that, in the case of the Maltese SECE, the Paper 2A and 2B format seems to be defeating its own aims, many students seem to be choosing paper 2A:

**Table 3 – The 1998 Cohort considered in the study**

Items	Number of Candidates	%
Paper 2A	2134	62.7
Paper 2B	1272	37.3
Total	3406	100

The table presents a picture that goes against the norm in other subjects where, according to Ventura and Murphy, (1997) the average candidates think that they stand a better chance of obtaining a useful grade if they sit for Paper 2B.

Both teachers and students complained that Paper 2B (when considering the time factor, content and format of the Paper) was more demanding than Paper 2A, and probably one of the many factors that at the time of the study, was contributing to the fact that more candidates were sitting for Paper 2A. The format of Paper 2A was one reference to the context questions and two 400-word essays, while the format of Paper 2B was two reference-to-the-context questions and two 200-word essays. Furthermore, the titles of the Paper 2A essays were more generic because they addressed a theme, unlike those found in Paper 2B which addressed a specific text. This meant that those sitting for Paper 2B had to know well the seventy-one items that they had for the exam, while those sitting for the Paper 2A simply regurgitated the teacher's notes.

Today, this has changed because candidates sitting for the Maltese SECE seem to be following the norm as more students are sitting for the Paper 2B. This information can be seen in tabulated form in Table 4:

**Table 4 – The May 2003 Maltese SECE Population**

Items	Number of Candidates	%
Paper 2A	2259	45.7
Paper 2B	2684	54.3
Total	4943	100

This attitude in Paper choice has been gaining ground since 2001 when changes were made to the format of Paper 2. All candidates sitting for the Maltese SECE were required to answer two reference-to-the-context questions and two literary essays. The essay titles, for both papers were based on themes rather than texts, as was previously the case for Paper 2B. The two papers differentiated on the amount of words for the essay, which remained the same as it was in 1998.

## **B. Time Constraints**

### **i) Students**

Students complained about the question of the allotment time for working out Paper 1 and Paper 2. They considered this factor a serious problem because it affected their performance during the exam.

The majority of questionnaire respondents found the time of one hour and 45 minutes and two hours for Paper 1 and Paper 2 respectively insufficient to work out the tasks of the Papers. Paper 1 is made up of three components – a 450-word general essay, a comprehension exercise involving a set of questions that test the understanding and writing skills, a semantic task and a series of questions that test one's knowledge of grammar, and writing a letter or a report. Unfortunately matters have aggravated because rather than growing aware of the excessive stress that this question of time places on the student and correcting this inconceivable peculiarity, since 2001, the comprehension component has been loaded with more components. The situation has also worsened in the case of Paper2, especially for those who sit for Paper 2A, because all the students have to answer two reference to the context questions and two literary essays – Paper 2A, 400-word essays and Paper 2B, 200- word essays.

**Table 5 – A Summarized Version of the Level of Appropriateness vis-à-vis Exam time**

<b>Paper</b>	<b>Appropriate</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Inappropriate</b>	<b>%</b>
Paper 1 (1¾ hrs)	161	33.1	325	66.9
Paper 2A (2 hrs)	189	45.5	227	54.6
Paper 2B (2 hrs)	49	70	21	30

The research also revealed that at the time of the study there existed a startling difference between state and non-state schools as to when students are introduced to literary texts. State school students start in Form V, while non-state students start at Form IV.

**Table 6 - When all the respondents were introduced to the Syllabus of Paper 2**

Categories	In form 4		In Form 5		In Form 3	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Maltese State Schools	-	-	45	140	-	-
** Secondary Schools in Gozo	* 23	-	25	71	-	-
Church & Private Schools	94	88	-	-	-	-

Notes: \* The 23 Gozitan respondents attended the Archbishop Seminary in Gozo

\*\* There is only **one** Church school in Gozo - The Archbishop's Seminary for boys.

Table 6 reveals that those students who attended Secondary State Schools were at a disadvantage when considering that their counterparts were introduced to the Paper 2 syllabus as early as Form 4. The effect of the disadvantage is more serious when considering that Form V is a relatively short scholastic year, because exams start as early as end of April, and state school students could only skim through the set poems and prose passages as the teachers had no time for in-depth study. Today this anomaly has changed, and Secondary State School students are introduced to the Paper 2 syllabus in Form 4.

#### ii) Teachers

Interviewed teachers and subject coordinators admitted that the time constraint factor affected their teaching strategy to cover the vast syllabus, especially the overloaded literature component. They admitted that literature could not be taught in an effective way. Students were simply receiving a summary and some information on the author. This created a situation not conducive to fostering a love for Maltese literature, especially if teachers do not have time to make the lessons more enjoyable and interesting.

Due to the fact that literature is being taught with the Maltese SECE in mind, many teachers feel obliged to resort to supplying the students with notes, which simply encourages rote learning and 'indoctrination' and does nothing to enhance literary appreciation.

Teachers and subject coordinators claimed they have been appealing to the authorities to allot more teaching time to Maltese in Form V because they find it unacceptable that more teaching time is given to English. At present the number of lessons for English, including those taking English literature, is six while for Maltese the number is four. At the time of the study only three lessons a week were allocated for the teaching of Maltese. Teachers contend that learning one's mother tongue is just as tasking, if not more, as learning a second language.

### C. *The Oral*

The oral component (reading and conversation) was introduced in the exam in 1994. It underwent changes in 2000 and then again in 2002. A large percentage of the surveyed sample (78.2 percent – presented in Table 7) considers the oral one of the appropriate means of testing an individual's verbal competence in a language.

**Table 7 - Summarized Version of the Level of Appropriateness [n=486]**

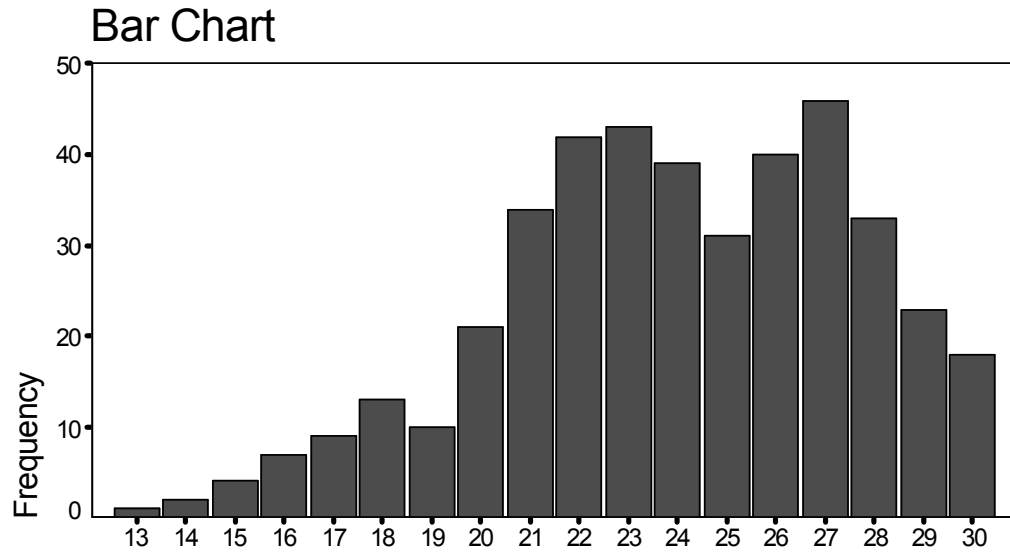
Aspects of Paper 1	Very Appropriate & Appropriate	Not very Appropriate & Inappropriate
The Oral	380 [78.2 %]	106 [ 21.8 %]

The fact that a large number of the surveyed sample (78.2 percent) considers the oral (reading and speaking) as an appropriate means of testing the students' competence in the Maltese language can be attributed to the fact that the language tested is the students' mother tongue. In fact, students' perception of the oral of another language tends to show a different picture. Research work on the evaluation of The English Language Exam showed a completely different picture. In her work: Baldacchino found that:

*'...there was more acceptance of the more traditional parts such as comprehension and composition than of new parts such as the three aspects of the listening-speaking component, which ranked among the least appropriate'*

(Baldacchino, 1998: 70)

On the other hand all interviewees tend to show a certain wariness of the oral. This is based on their knowledge of test organization and marking. Moreover, the interviewed examiners, paper setters and MATSEC officials are inclined to think that very often the oral examiners inflate this oral mark. A fact illustrated by the remark of Ventura and Murphy (1997): *'...it has been noted that class teachers tend to give inflated marks for reading and conversation skills'* (p.10) and by the oral marks of the surveyed cohort that sat for Paper 2A & 2B. The relevant oral marks of 486 of the surveyed sample, which is represented graphically, ranges between 13 and 30 marks. The lowest mark scored was 13, obtained by one member of the 486 respondents, while the highest mark scored was 30 (the maximum mark), and this was obtained by eighteen members of the sample. From the data, one can easily make out a negatively skewed distribution.



Oral marks of surveyed sample.

**Table 8 - When Respondents began receiving formal preparation for the Oral**

Categories	In Form 4	In Form 5	Before Form 4	Never
Maltese State Schools	-	96	-	89
* Gozitan Schools	5	36	-	78
Church and Private Schools	15	131	-	36

Notes: \* There is **one** male church school in Gozo

Table 8 shows that 41.8 percent [203 out of 486] never received any form of instruction or training for the Oral Component of the Maltese SECE. This seems to imply that a good number of teachers do not seem to be preparing students for the Oral. If this is the case, why do we have a negatively skewed bar chart of the Oral Marks for the sampled respondents who sat for Paper 2A & 2B? How could the minimum mark and the highest mark scored by the 486 respondents be 13 and 30 respectively, when 203 have had no instruction whatsoever in the oral part of the exam? One may argue that this is after all the candidates' mother tongue. That is true, but even so it is difficult to accept the May 1998 Oral results. The data shows about eighteen students who obtained the maximum mark of 30 in the oral and the majority of the marks lie between 22 and 28. This implies that those 18 that were given a maximum mark did not make one single mistake. If this is the case, this means that those 18 students must have demonstrated excellence in intonation, stresses and pronunciation when reading. They must have shown perfection in the understanding of the text and in eliciting the main points of the passage. They must have also been exceptionally good in discussing one of the suggested topics, which suggests that they

must have shown coherence, fluency and mastery of the spoken language, especially in the use of idiomatic Maltese. On the basis of these arguments and comments made by certain interviewees, one questions both the validity and the reliability of the Oral Exam and its marking. These interviewees contend that the way the oral is conducted and marked falls short of how this should be done.

The oral in the Maltese SECE is the **Prepared Oral** test type as the candidates are given about five minutes to prepare themselves for the reading of the unseen passage, eliciting the main points of the passage, and the topic for discussion.

*‘A prepared oral test... tests the ability to compose and present statements with care and deliberation rather than the spontaneous self-expression of an interview-type test’.*

(Underhill, 1987: 33)

Some interviewees contended that overall, the markers are not actually marking what Underhill points out in his book on testing the spoken language. They also claim that not all students are placed on the same footing. They believe that the way the Maltese SECE Oral is conducted, places emotive students, or students with a personality problem at a disadvantage. They allege, that candidates who are shy or embarrassed to speak openly in front of a stranger, are bound to do badly. On the basis of this argument they think that recorded tests rather than live interviews could be a substitute. However, they also argue that such a form of oral testing has its disadvantages, especially logistic ones. At the end they contended that there is no clear-cut solution to the problem, but they assert that something must be done to at least place all the candidates on an equal footing. Finally, it is also evident from Table 8 that more Church and Private School teachers are preparing their students for the Oral component than their counterparts in state schools.

However, the table does show a positive element because 54.1 percent of the students did receive some form of instruction on the oral in Form V. This fact should be encouraging and an incentive to all stakeholders and work to improve on what exists. Although the findings might make us question the validity of the oral, I would like to point out that:

1. All respondents (both students and interviewees) contend that the oral is important.
2. A language exam must include both the oral and written components if we truly want to assess the student's linguistic skills and competence in a language.

### C. *Paper 2 Syllabus*

Both student respondents and interviewed teachers contended that the literature content is not only vast but most of the prose and poetry in the syllabus is either remote from the experience of the students or pitched at a level that is beyond them, especially those sitting for Paper 2B.

Most of the questionnaire cohort felt that they were simply studying the material to pass their exams, without making any attempt to appreciate and enjoy the educational

experiences the content can provide. Many feel that the literature content has been imposed upon them and very few show a real love of the subject.

The end result is that the aims and objectives related to this component are not being reached. Students are not acquiring even the foundation of the art of literary criticism because, as pointed out by post-secondary educators, students are ill-equipped with the necessary skills in this field.

Examiner's comments point out that the responses to literary essays, especially those of Paper 2A, are simply a regurgitation of published notes or the teacher's notes. The students' responses show that rote learning is not only rampant but also flagrant. Students very often show that they fail to understand the question because much of what they write is irrelevant. They simply present parrot-like answers.

### **Conclusion**

The major objective of this study was to present an unbiased evaluation of the Maltese SECE that will hopefully enthuse teachers of Maltese and other stakeholders to work towards improving the Maltese language and the environment in which it exists. It will also, hopefully, give the necessary information to improve the Maltese SECE.

### **Recommendations**

1. The competent authorities should strive to rectify the present situation. The teaching of Maltese should have more quality time on the timetable. Many teacher interviewees contend that extra lessons are needed so the students receive sound feedback on their performance. Presently, the teacher does not have enough time to deal with individual students. Our educational system, so far, has been based on summative testing. The time constraint factor does not allow for formative assessment. All students, whether in a homogeneous or mixed ability class, need individual attention to strengthen their weaknesses.
2. Interviewed officials of the Maltese SECE, examiners lecturers, assistant lecturers, coordinators and teachers suggested that there should be more in service courses for teachers of Maltese, more seminars and meetings where teachers and academics share ideas about new methodologies of teaching the Maltese language and its various registers, and imparting the skills that will make the students competent in the language.

Courses should also be held for Oral examiners so that the scores of the Oral component would be more reliable. The Matsec should seek the necessary funds and the respective authorities should provide them so that such courses will be organized and held with the goal of establishing some form of standardization in marking the Oral.

On the other hand the Matsec should strive to see that the structure of the Oral component of the exam emphasises equity.

3. The attitude of all the players – whether students, parents, teachers, academics, and policy makers - towards the Maltese language needs to be addressed. We all need to recognise that there exists a major problem synonymous with a bilingual country like Malta. The influence of the English language hinders progress in the Maltese language and interferes with the children's use of their mother tongue.

All stakeholders must feel the need to inculcate a love of the language in students and their parents, (as the Akkademja tal-Malti has been doing) by presenting our native language in an enjoyable and motivating environment.

The awareness of the importance of our national heritage should be stressed not only at primary, secondary and post-secondary level, but also at university level. The status of Maltese at the University of Malta does not reflect its standing as the national language.

Maltese should not be considered just another language in the curriculum.

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