

**Analysing Orthography in
Composition and Comprehension
Components of the 2001
Year 4 Maltese Annual Examination**

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A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of Education in
Part Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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ABSTRACT

Agius Maria
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Analysing Orthography in Composition and Comprehension Components of the 2001 Year 4 Maltese Annual Examination

This study aims to analyse the orthographical mistakes made by Year 4 pupils in the Composition and Comprehension components of the Maltese Annual Examination 2001. This research also intends to make the authors and other future researchers aware of the kind of mistakes that pupils attending Primary State Schools make in orthography when completing the Composition and Comprehension tasks. This study should also reveal whether there exists a correlation between the pupils' month of birth and the type and quantity of mistakes, and also if there is gender dominance on these mistakes. The various interviews, which are to be conducted among the teachers of the surveyed sample, should give the study more credibility. The authors hypothesise that girls tend to err less than boys. Moreover, they also contend that those pupils born in the first half of the year have the tendency to make less mistakes than those born in the second six months. The statistical analysis shows that there exists no significant correlation between gender and age factor. However, the slight indication that the authors had from the collection of mistakes shows that girls born in the first half of the year tend to make more mistakes than:

1. boys,
2. those girls born in the second half of the year.

B.Ed. (Hons.)

May 2003

PRIMARY SECTOR

LANGUAGE

CORRELATION


GENDER

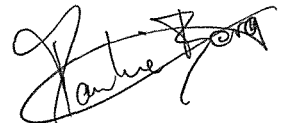
AGE FACTOR

ORTHOGRAPHY

AUTHORS' DECLARATION

We certify that we are responsible for the work submitted in this dissertation, that the original work is our own and that none of the material contained in this research has been submitted for publication or as part work for a degree.


Agius Maria


Borg Pauline

May 2003

May 2003

Maria Agius

my beloved boyfriend Paul

and

my dear parents, my sister

To

May 2003

Pauline Borg

my dearly-loved boyfriend Norbert

and

my cherished parents and brother

To

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The final paragraph must surely be entitled to our parents, our boyfriends: Paul and Norbert, and our friends, for their endless encouragement and support during the compilation of this study.

Maria Agius

Pauline Borg

May 2003

LIST OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	INTRODUCTION.....	2
1.0	THE RESEARCH'S OBJECTIVE	2
1.1	THE AREA AND IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY.....	3
1.2	APPROACH TO THE RESEARCH.....	3
CHAPTER 2	LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
PART 1:	THE MALTESE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM.....	6
2.0	INTRODUCTION.....	6
2.1	THE MALTESE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW	6
2.1.1	<i>Great Reforms in Education.....</i>	8
2.1.2	<i>Further Changes in Education.....</i>	9
2.1.3	<i>The Language Question.....</i>	9
2.1.4	<i>Post War Reforms in the Educational System.....</i>	10
2.1.5	<i>Post-Independence Reforms in the Educational System.....</i>	11
2.1.6	<i>Junior Lyceums.....</i>	11
2.1.7	<i>The Primary Sector.....</i>	12
PART 2:	MALTESE LANGUAGE TESTING.....	13
2.2	LANGUAGE.....	13
2.2.1	<i>Mastering the Native Language.....</i>	14
2.2.2	<i>Assessing learning.....</i>	15
2.2.3	<i>Language testing.....</i>	15
2.2.4	<i>Native language testing.....</i>	16
2.2.5	<i>Stages of Spelling.....</i>	17
2.2.6	<i>Comprehension.....</i>	18
2.2.7	<i>Composition.....</i>	18
2.2.8	<i>Age Factor.....</i>	19
2.2.9	<i>Gender Differences in Education.....</i>	20
2.2.10	<i>Conclusion.....</i>	21
CHAPTER 3	DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....	23
3.0	INTRODUCTION.....	23
3.1	INTENTIONS.....	23
3.2	DESIGN (METHODOLOGY).....	24
3.3	PROCEDURE (TECHNIQUE).....	24
3.4	DATA COLLECTION AND LIMITATIONS.....	25
3.5	DATA ANALYSIS.....	28
3.6	MEASURES.....	28
3.7	INTERVIEWS.....	30
3.7.1	<i>Interview Procedure.....</i>	30
3.7.2	<i>The Interview Format.....</i>	30
3.7.3	<i>Content of Interviews.....</i>	31
3.7.4	<i>Analysis of interviews.....</i>	32
3.8	CONCLUSION.....	32
CHAPTER 4	RESULTS AND ANALYSIS.....	34
4.0	INTRODUCTION.....	34
4.1	CHOICE OF SCRIPTS.....	34
4.1.1	<i>The Comprehension and Composition Components.....</i>	35
4.1.2	<i>Reasons for analysis of the orthographical mistakes performed in the selected tasks.....</i>	35
4.2	ANALYSIS OF ORTHOGRAPHICAL ERRORS.....	36
4.2.1	<i>Category 1 – Consonants.....</i>	39
4.2.2	<i>Category 2 - Capital Letters.....</i>	40

4.2.3	Category 3 – Vowels.....	40
4.2.4	Category 4 – gh	41
4.2.5	Category 5 – ie	42
4.2.6	Category 6 – h	42
4.2.7	Category 7 – Articles.....	43
4.2.8	Category 8 – Diacritic Signs.....	44
4.2.9	Category 9 – Accent.....	44
4.2.10	Category 10 – Word Compartmentalisation.....	45
4.2.11	Category 11 – Apostrophe.....	45
4.2.12	Category 12 – Phonetics.....	45
4.3	PRESENTATION OF RESULTS.....	46
4.3.1	Orthographical Errors by Gender Difference.....	46
4.3.2	Orthographical Errors by Age Difference.....	50
4.3.3	Orthographical Errors by Age Difference of girls.....	53
4.3.4	Orthographical Errors by Age Difference of boys.....	56
4.4	ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW DATA.....	59
4.5	RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDREN’S MISTAKES AND TEACHERS’ INTERVIEWS.....	64
4.6	CONCLUSION.....	65
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS.....		67
5.0	CONCLUSION.....	67
5.1	RECOMMENDATIONS.....	67
5.1.1	Reading.....	68
5.1.2	Motivating Reading Activities.....	69
5.1.3	Writing.....	70
5.1.4	Spelling.....	71
5.1.5	Assessing children’s writings.....	73
5.2	FINAL COMMENT.....	73
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....		75
APPENDIX 1.....		82
APPENDIX 2.....		83
APPENDIX 3.....		84
APPENDIX 4.....		85
APPENDIX 5.....		86
APPENDIX 6.....		94

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: TOTAL POPULATION OF CHILDREN AND CLASSES IN PRIMARY STATE SCHOOLS.....	26
TABLE 2: TOTAL POPULATION OF CHILDREN AND CLASSES IN PRIMARY STATE SCHOOLS PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY	26
TABLE 3: CLASSIFICATION OF TOTAL POPULATION BY GENDER	26
TABLE 4: CATEGORY OF THE PARTICIPATING COHORT BY GENDER	27
TABLE 5: CATEGORY OF THE PARTICIPATING COHORT BY MONTH OF BIRTH.....	27
TABLE 6: CATEGORIES OF MISTAKES.....	37
TABLE 7: NUMBER OF MISTAKES COMMITTED BY THE PARTICIPATING COHORT.....	38
TABLE 8: GROUP STATISTICS BY GENDER DIFFERENCE	47
TABLE 9: INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST BY GENDER DIFFERENCE.....	47
TABLE 10: ORTHOGRAPHICAL MISTAKES BY GENDER DIFFERENCE	49
TABLE 11: GROUP STATISTICS BY AGE DIFFERENCE	50
TABLE 12: INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST BY AGE DIFFERENCE.....	50
TABLE 13: ORTHOGRAPHICAL MISTAKES BY AGE DIFFERENCE	52
TABLE 14: GROUP STATISTICS BY AGE DIFFERENCE OF GIRLS.....	53
TABLE 15: INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST BY AGE DIFFERENCE OF GIRLS	53
TABLE 16: ORTHOGRAPHICAL MISTAKES BY AGE DIFFERENCE OF GIRLS.....	55
TABLE 17: GROUP STATISTICS BY AGE DIFFERENCE OF BOYS.....	56
TABLE 18: INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST BY AGE DIFFERENCE OF BOYS.....	56
TABLE 19: ORTHOGRAPHICAL MISTAKES BY AGE DIFFERENCE OF BOYS	58

LIST OF GRAPHS

GRAPH 1: TOTAL NUMBER OF MISTAKES COMMITTED BY ALL PUPILS.....	47
GRAPH 2: ORTHOGRAPHICAL MISTAKES BY AGE DIFFERENCE OF GIRLS.....	54
GRAPH 3: TOTAL NUMBER OF MISTAKES BY AGE DIFFERENCE OF BOYS.....	57

Abbreviations

NMC	National Minimum Curriculum
SEC	Secondary Education Certificate
MATSEC	Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation
TGAT	Task Group on Assessment and Testing
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
Jan	January
Jun	June
Dec	December
i.e.	that is
e.g.	example
Std.	standard
B1	boys born between January and June
B2	boys born between July and December
G1	girls born between January and June
G2	girls born between July and December

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.0 The Research's Objective

In the local scene, examinations are salient features experienced at the upper levels of Primary State Schools, which tend to create stressful moments for both teachers and parents as well as states of anxiety for the pupils. Such tension is brought about by the attitudes held by certain Maltese stakeholders, including parents, who strongly believe that Examination Results are the ultimate products of classroom teaching.

“all they [parents] can see is the finishing line and the possible repercussions of not reaching it in an educational system that is so thoroughly streamed that it really has boiled down to the generation of a society of educational haves and have-nots!”

(Mallia, 2003 as cited in The Sunday Times)

Our educational system believes in examinations since Primary School children have to pass exams to proceed to Secondary School. Likewise, students at Secondary level need to obtain the SEC certificate to progress to Post-Secondary Education. In order to be able to receive Tertiary Education, students must acquire the MATSEC Certificate. Apart from measuring children's abilities, examination scores can also reflect the teachers' success or failure.

This study treats one of the assessed subjects i.e. the Maltese Language. The authors believe that language examination formats at Primary Level address mostly one of the four language skills: writing. The researchers deem such skill as an important communicative competence, *“Although writing is part of a literate individual's repertoire, to write well is considered as an accomplishment with no little prestige,”* (Destefano, 1978:157).

The dissertation's hypothesis is that girls err less than boys and that girls born between January and June make less orthographical mistakes than those born between July and December in both the Composition and Comprehension tasks.

1.1 The Area and Importance of the Study

Indeed, this has lead the authors to analyse the orthographical mistakes Year Four pupils made in the Composition and Comprehension components of their Maltese Annual Examination, 2001.

The authors also intend to discover whether or not gender influences the type and quantity of orthographical mistakes pupils commit in their native language written examination. In addition, this analysis is aimed at finding out if there is a correlation between the orthographical errors made by pupils born in the first half of the year and those born in the second half.

1.2 Approach to the Research

Chapter 1 – Introduction – will outline the main objectives and hypothesis of this study. It will also present a brief overview of the dissertation’s chapters.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review – will consist of two parts. *Part 1: The Maltese Educational System* will present a historical overview of the Maltese Educational System. *Part 2: Maltese Language Testing* will incorporate sections dealing with the concept of language and the mother tongue together with their assessment formats. Spelling Developmental Stages will also be tackled in this part of the study. The issues regarding Gender and Age Factor will be dealt with towards the end of this Chapter.

Chapter 3 – Design and Methodology – will describe the design, technique, data collection and limitations, data and scripts’ analysis and finally the procedure, format and content of the interviews employed in this study.

Chapter 4 – Results and Analysis – will present the results of the orthographical mistakes performed by children in the form of graphical representations and their respective tabular conclusions obtained from the statistical package (SPSS). Other tables regarding the transmission of pupils’ orthographical errors will be included. These are followed by an in-depth analysis of each orthographical category extracted from the scripts. The interview responses will also be deciphered. The four correlations on which the research is based will address the dissertation’s hypothesis.

Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Suggestions – will provide a resumé of the significant aspects of the study. This will lead the authors to put forward various practical suggestions meant to help minimise the orthographical errors in pupils' native language writings.

This Chapter has delineated the research's objective together with the divisions of each chapter of this dissertation. The next Chapter will deal with the relevant review of literature to the research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Part 1: The Maltese Educational System

2.0 Introduction

This chapter will be divided in two parts. The first part will present an outline of the development of the Maltese Educational System (2.1), with special emphasis on Primary Education (2.1.7). The second part will treat the definition of language (2.2), the mastering of the native language, (2.2.1), assessing learning (2.2.2), language testing (2.2.3), and native language testing (2.2.4). Then, the authors will take into account the developmental stages of Spelling and what leads children to misspell words (2.2.5).

Following this, the Comprehension (2.2.6) and the Composition (2.2.7) components will be dealt with. The final section of this chapter will bring into focus both the Age Factor (2.2.8) and Gender (2.2.9) of the children. This will consider whether or not the date of birth and gender of the children affect the type and number of orthographical mistakes they made. Section (2.2.10) will conclude this chapter.

2.1 The Maltese Educational System: A Historical Overview

The geographical location of the Maltese archipelago had always attracted different peoples to benefit from its central Mediterranean position. The various rulers who governed these islands have all contributed their share towards some kind of education.

The first form of education that was recorded goes back to the Neolithics and the people of the Bronze Age (Zammit Mangion, 1992). These settlers believed in what the recent NMC states with regards to Principle 4 i.e. “*Education relevant for life*” (Ministry of Education, 1999:32). The Phoenicians continued to strengthen what their predecessors had commenced together with the introduction of the alphabet.

During the flourishing moments of the Roman Empire (218 BC – 870 AD), Malta saw the establishment of the first elementary (now known as Primary Schools) and grammar schools. The initiation of home tutors was accessible for the Maltese who wanted their children to gain a high professional status (Zammit Mangion, 1992).

The Medieval Ages brought about a drastic change in the Maltese educational set up. The people responsible for this change came from different religious communities such as the Franciscans (c. 1350) and the Augustinians (1460). These Religious Orders founded the first institutions for those children who intended to become members of any of these Orders and were employed as private tutors for the children of wealthy families.

The Municipal Grammar School in Mdina was set up in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, no literacy skills were taught at this grammar school.

Another kind of formal education, documented in the history of the Maltese Educational System, is 'The Cathedral Church Music School' in which educators were both native and non-native priests (Dalli, as cited in Sultana, 2001). The main objectives employed in this school were to teach students Holy hymns and music. The third type of formal schooling was given by private educators.

During the years prior to the era of the Knights, education was more of an informal kind with the family. Family members taught and learned family trades. Such form of education also took place in a formal way by having the child enrolled with a master to learn a particular trade and/or acquire a profession (Dalli, in Sultana 2001). Those children, who attended the Grammar School, run by the Municipal, had to have a basic knowledge of the Italian language since most of the Latin instructors were Italian.

The mid-sixteenth century brought with it a great renovation in education. It is at this time that printed books were introduced and those people who did not have any knowledge of Latin could only improve their education by reading books on their own (Cassar, as cited in Sultana, 2001).

In the sixteenth century there existed only two schools in the Maltese Islands: that of San Salvatore in Mdina and a class in Sant'Antonio's Church in Birgu. Other Religious Orders such as the Dominicans, the Augustinians, and the Carmelites built schools, which they administered from the mid-fifteenth century (Zammit Mangion, 1992).

The Jesuit College in Valletta, which served as a learning centre for the *crème de la crème* of the society, was founded in 1592. As cited in Sultana (2001), this College, together with the Grammar School which was built adjacent to it, taught grammar, theology, and philosophy.

Those members of the society, who did not make part of the elite, received their education orally and were mainly taught catechism lessons. As mentioned in Sultana (2001), the only schools available for the children of the working class were administered by ordinary men and women, very often themselves illiterate. Village schools served to teach children primary subjects like reading, writing, arithmetic and other basic subjects.

British rule under the Governor, Sir Thomas Maitland, brought enhancement to our Educational System. Maitland advocated the setting up of “*public schools on the economic lines lately introduced in this [united] Kingdom.*” (Laferla (1936) as cited in Zammit Mangion, 1992:17).

As cited in *Normal School Society* (Zammit Mangion, 1992:17), the very first elementary school was set up in Valletta, in 1819. Other similar educational institutions were opened in various other villages in Malta and Gozo.

The Report of the Royal Commission (1836) spurred the Government of the time to introduce free education for children attending Primary Institutions as well as to set up schools in all the towns and villages of Malta. (Zammit Mangion, 1992)

2.1.1 Great Reforms in Education

Canon Pullicino throughout his term of office structured the Education Department: started great reforms in Primary Education, abolished the Monitorial System, introduced the ‘class system’, formulated regulations for this sector, and also propelled training for the in-service members of staff (Zammit Mangion, 1992). He also initiated infant education, trade classes for those pupils in the last years of the Primary Education and introduced Evening and Sunday classes.

“*Canon Pullicino laid the basis for the extension of primary education to the masses in Malta and must be credited with the foundation of a truly ‘national system of [popular] education’.*” (Zammit Mangion, 1992:21)

Other important developments in education were carried out by the Director of Education, Dr. Sigismondo Savona. He introduced the use of the Maltese language as the medium of instruction in the higher classes of the primary level, made amendments in the Secondary and Tertiary Institutions, and encouraged pupil-teacher after-school instruction by the local heads of schools.

Salvatore Flores was responsible for the commencement of Secondary School Examination certificates along with the introduction of examinations such as the technical examinations of the City and Guilds of London Institute (Zammit Mangion, 1992).

In 1903, Primary Education became an independent sector and was no longer run by the University. However, the University was responsible for the division of the Lyceum, and reforming various Faculties.

2.1.2 Further Changes in Education

The First World War period brought with it various modifications regarding the education of the Maltese. Dr. Albert V. Laferla (1887-1943), was responsible for the development of Primary Education and the establishment of literacy classes to aid soldiers improve their education. Zammit Mangion (1992) states that the year 1920 saw the structure of a Board of Education to help the Government in the decision-making on Educational matters. Hon. W. Bruce proposed the introduction of extra-curricular subjects in the Primary Curriculum.

The first Government of Malta (1921-1926) keen on the rectification of Education opened various schools around different localities of Malta. In 1924 a vital step regarding education was made: the first compulsory Attendance Act was passed. In this Act it was reported that school attendance was made compulsory up till the age of 12. This Act was later revised in 1928, and children were obliged to show up at school until the age of 14. The year 1946 was vital, as Full Compulsory Education was ordained.

2.1.3 The Language Question

Political reverberations had negative effects on the entire system, starting from the Primary Sector to University.

In the 1930s, the Lyceums were combined with the Secondary Schools and the Elementary Schools Department and became known as the Department of Education.

The self-government Constitution in 1934 worked towards Maltese as the official language of the Island. The native language of the island started to be considered

as the accredited language of the Elementary Schools of Malta and caused Maltese to become an obligatory subject in the Secondary and Tertiary sectors. By 1936, students had to sit for their Maltese Malta Matriculation Examination which was made a compulsory requirement for the University's introductory courses. (Zammit Mangion, 1992)

2.1.4 Post War Reforms in the Educational System

Development and renovations in education was an on-going process in the educational field. Thanks to "*The Primary Schools*" report (1948), Education experienced a comprehensive change, new subjects were introduced in the curriculum and children started to be treated as individuals. (Zammit Mangion, 1992)

The period of 1955 – 1958 is eminent for the radical modifications in education. Children were soon obliged to attend schools on a full-time basis. Additionally, Secondary Education was also offered free and children could benefit from the borrowing of textbooks without the need to pay any money.

The University adopted the examination systems used abroad, thus decreasing the Matriculation Examination at 'O' level to a limited number of subjects whilst for University one could sit for his/her 'A' levels.

During the years 1959 – 1964, the Technical Institute of Naxxar and Paola concurrently with the Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology (MCAST) were made officially accessible to the interested learners.

The new autonomous state of the Maltese Islands in 1964 brought with it vital educational progress. The language of the people was encouraged in all the teaching institutions. In fact, it became a compulsory subject.

As cited in Zammit Mangion (1992), "*Secondary Education for All*" was made compulsory in 1970 (Zammit Mangion, 1992:78). Children had the right to receive Secondary Education and hence could do so without the need to sit for entrance examinations.

Those children who did not succeed the re-sit of their 11+ examination were sent to the General Secondary Schools (Zammit Mangion, 1992). Tertiary Education was made "*free of charge to all Maltese students,*" (Zammit Mangion, 1992:83).

The MCAST or 'the Polytechnic' came into being in the late 1960's. There were three divisions of study, namely the Engineering Department, the Business Study Department and the Department of Hotel Management, Catering, Food Technology and Tourism.

2.1.5 Post-Independence Reforms in the Educational System

In the first years of the 1970s, four vital rectifications concerning education were implemented. One of the reforms in Education was the commencement of the 'comprehensive system' within secondary level institutions.

The Comprehensive Secondary Education is based on an egalitarian system where it considers each child as special and unique with the fundamental right to receive a decent type of education. Children's transition from Primary to Secondary Institutions led to various amendments in certain schools because no entrance examination was required. The Comprehensive Secondary Education was short-lived. Parents preferred to send their children to private institutions that taught through highly planned curricula and extensive discipline. This led the Government (1974) to reintroduce formal school examinations. Furthermore, children were streamed according to their abilities and achievement based on their annual examination, the half-yearly examination and the teacher's assessment.

The Government of the time was also responsible for the creation of Trade Schools that trained children in basic skills so as to become good future industrial workers. Trade Schools were primarily set up for boys of over fourteen years. They provided an interchangeable secondary education for the sake of those pupils who achieved quite low compared to their age group. (Zammit Mangion, 1992)

2.1.6 Junior Lyceums

In April 1981, the Government opened the Junior Lyceums within the Secondary Sector. They had to cater for high achievers and were up to the standard of private institutions.

In 1984 (as cited in the *Annual Report* for the years 1985 and 1986 by the Education Department), those children who did not pass the Junior Lyceum entrance

examination and were not attending a private school were placed in a 'Preparatory Secondary' school or an 'Opportunity' centre. (Zammit Mangion, 1992:133)

2.1.7 The Primary Sector

Compulsory Primary Education is administered to pupils between the ages of 5 and 11. The Maltese Primary Sector runs over a span of six years that is from Year 1 to Year 6. The first three years (i.e. Years 1, 2 and 3) of Primary Education are identified as 'The Early Years' whilst the last three years (i.e. Years 4, 5 and 6) are known as 'The Junior Years'. Pupils in 'The Early Years' are normally of mixed ability and gender, however, in 'The Junior Years', pupils are usually streamed (of homogenous ability).

The Maltese Primary Sector is made up of three different organisations:

- Primary State Schools
- Primary Church Schools
- Primary Independent Schools

Part 2: Maltese Language Testing

2.2 Language

Language is:

“The systematic conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression.”

(Crystal, 1992:212)

Many linguists differentiate between two aspects of language i.e. between “*surface structure*” and “*deep structure*” (Smith, 1982:42). The surface structure is concerned with the language’s physical properties such as the grapheme ‘*tieghu*’ in which the last syllable of the word is one of the diphthongs in Maltese [au] or [ou]. The deep structure concentrates on the meaning of the words rather than their sound and graphology.

Others, such as Friggieri (2000), distinguish between two aspects of language which are somewhat different from Smith’s (1982). Friggieri, like Richards (1925), states that the written form of language has both a scientific and a poetic use. The former serves the user to communicate his/her thoughts, while the latter aids the writer to express his/her emotions which are intimate and unique.

Subsequently, our study treats more with the surface structure of the Maltese language since we are to analyse the children’s orthographical mistakes in their Year Four Maltese Language Annual Examination.

Educational systems provide children with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes that they are expected to attain within certain parameters. Actually, the Maltese Educational System expects that by the time pupils are promoted to their Early Junior Years (i.e. Year Four), they should be competent enough to use language effectively in all language skills meaning that children at this stage, are literate. As UNESCO (1961:10) puts it, “*A person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community.*”

2.2.1 Mastering the Native Language

“A man’s proper vernacular is nearest unto him, in as much as it is more closely united to him, for it is simply and alone in his mind before any other.”

(DANTE: De Vulgari Eloquentia as cited in Gurrey 1958:6)

The authors strongly agree with Dante as it seems that the foundation for mastering the mother tongue is initiated during the primary milestone i.e. (between 10 months and 3 years) of childhood (Doughty, 1972). Such milestone is a point of departure for the children’s native language development. They start to express their desires in single/isolated utterances e.g. **Mamà, Papà**, and most often they want to mean much more than the word they have pronounced. From utterances, the children proceed to connect single words and construct simple sentences. Once they are capable of doing this, the next step would lead to more elaborate and expressive sentences (Chomsky, 1964).

The home is the primary environment where children are exposed to their native language. Children may acquire certain phrases such as idiomatic expressions through various media including radio and television stations. Older siblings and adults present around in the house all contribute to the mastery of native language development to young children. Hence, children’s acquisition of vocabulary is greatly enriched at home. This informal schooling gives a golden opportunity to consolidate their skills, thus leading them to do better at school. Informal learning of the native language is also broadened through social interaction with peers inside and outside school. Moreover, the specialised form of the native language is the one that *“the child learns not at his mother’s knee but in the process of schooling”* (Olson, as cited in Macnamara, 1977:113)

It is important to note that failure to master the native language leads to lack of literacy. In our educational system, literacy focuses mainly on two fundamental aspects which are reading and writing. On the other hand, if a child lacks one of these basic skills, s/he is not considered literate. In fact, Mifsud et. al. (2000) discovered that twenty percent of the seven year olds of our country (including children from all the institutions accessible) already show some form of literacy difficulties. Literate persons should be able to read fluently and understand the meaning of the text. They should also be proficient in writing well-structured sentences with correct grammar usage, spelling, and mechanics as argued by Kern Richard (2000).

2.2.2 Assessing learning

As assessment and learning are complimentary, teachers should give equal importance to both.

“Promoting children’s learning is a principal aim of schools. Assessment lies at the heart of this process... it should be an integral part of the educational process, continually providing both ‘feedback’ and ‘feedforward’. It therefore needs to be incorporated systematically into teaching strategies and practices at all levels”

(TGAT, 1988: paras 3-4 as cited in Torrance, 1995)

The National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999:78) suggests that school assessment should be a combination of two forms: Summative and Formative. However, teachers still tend to assess pupils using the Summative method rather than the Formative. This is exemplified in our exam-oriented system.

Indeed, such implication does not exclude the fact that there are not many teachers, who besides this method, choose to adopt a formative way of measuring language. Henceforth, learning can be assessed for different purposes:

- 1) To keep up the appropriate standards
- 2) To distinguish the differences among pupils
- 3) To measure achievement
- 4) To evaluate teaching strategies
- 5) To identify academic impairments
- 6) To be able to detect approaches and materials according to the specific pupils’ learning styles and requirements.

(Wray & Medwell, 1991:195)

2.2.3 Language testing

“In a modern society, education can only thrive in a context of examinations” (Cox, 1969, as cited in Eckstein & Noah, 1992). This means that our learning needs to be constantly assessed especially in our small competitive society.

“Language testing is central to language teaching ... It is normal for teaching to be directed towards assessment sometimes labelled examination.” (Davies, 1990:1)

Our schools have the vital role to assess the progress that children make in a particular language along their primary years of schooling. Research shows that it is quite difficult to establish a set of standards to measure ‘language performance’. Such standards should be defined around the element of language i.e. sounds, intonation,

stress, morphemes, words and syntax. A valid and reliable test should surely include the use of certain skills in order to test these elements. (Lado, 1961).

According to Perry (2000) as cited in (Mifsud et. al., 2000:185), it is very difficult to find a test which is “*perfectly reliable and perfectly valid.*” Presently, in our country, language tests set for the Junior Primary Years are composed of two parts: Oral and Written. The oral part contains a number of exercises which the children have to complete in fifteen minutes:

- A matching exercise (word with picture)
- Choose the odd one out
- A short multiple choice comprehension test
- A true/false exercise
- Matching exercise (sentence building)

The written part consists of a comprehension including various grammar exercises, and a composition which the children have to finish in one hour.

This implies that children have to be quite quick to finish all the tasks in a relatively few minutes. On the other hand, especially in the past, test papers lacked attraction. As Rosalie Kerr (2000) puts it “*the appearance of the tests should be attractive, with clear layout and brightly coloured pictures, and the method of administration simple and easy to follow*” (Mifsud et. al., 2000:173). This will help the children to nurture a positive attitude towards tests. Hence, once anxiety and fear are decreased, children are bound to do better at tests.

2.2.4 Native language testing

Native language speakers perceive the basic elements of their mother tongue quicker than if it were a foreign language. Such elements can be tested at any age to check at what rate the native speakers (in our case children) are improving their use of language. Such elements include difficulties, different dialects, defective sequences, poor vocabulary, writing, and style (Lado, 1961:20).

Since writing incorporates a different aptitude from oracy, pupils should be given the opportunity to express themselves freely in a logical and creative way. Logic and creativity are evident in the Composition and Comprehension components as well as in Orthography throughout the entire exam paper in which the native language is constantly being tested during the upper years of Primary Schooling.

2.2.5 Stages of Spelling

As Smith (1982:142) states, spelling is “*the skill of using letters in conventional ways to produce written words.*” Spelling words correctly is vital to all languages. The Maltese Educational System places great emphasis on Examinations. In fact, Maltese children are promoted if they fair well in the final exam of the current scholastic year. The content of the exam is based on the material (syllabus) taught by the teacher during the year. Maltese examiners penalise poor spelling severely. This results in children scoring poorly in language exams because they misspell a number of words.

When children are writing in their mother tongue, they have a wider range of vocabulary. Indeed, they do not find any difficulty with the meaning of words but at times they still seem to encounter difficulties with spelling. This may result from the fact that they would have not yet grasped the rules for writing such words correctly. In reality, many children produce incorrect spelling because as Chomsky (1971) states in Macnamara (1977:17) “*the sound system that corresponds to the orthography may itself be a late intellectual product*”.

At times, graphemes do not correspond with the sound of the letter because **gh** and **h** cannot be easily recognised since they are silent letters. The word **taghna** is heard as [ta:na] and the word **hena** is heard as [e:na]. These tend to confuse children. Although phonetics play an important role in a language, as Smith (1982:148) argues “*the worst spellers are the wuns hoo spel fonetikly.*”

Besides, listening to the sound of words, pupils should consider the meaning of these homonyms before writing them down e.g. ‘**dari**’ meaning ‘house’ and ‘**dahri**’ meaning ‘my back’. However, we believe that with time children are to move on from spelling the words phonetically to basing the orthography of words on its meaning. Unfortunately, these type of errors recur in the Maltese SEC Examinations carried out by older students. (Examiners’ Reports, May 1994 – 1998) as cited in Cutajar (2000).

2.2.6 Comprehension

Reading Comprehensions are widely used in the course of learning. Their main objective is to help children make sense of what they read. Williams (1973:93) identifies five objectives behind the use of reading comprehensions. Such goals coach children to be ready for:

- 1) Literal connotation
- 2) Inferred messages
- 3) Association of ideas
- 4) Grasping the general idea of the reading
- 5) The essential facts

Reading comprehensions assume that children have grasped the sufficient skills of reading and that they are familiar with a wide range of vocabulary, especially if they are native language speakers.

Lunzer et. al. (1979:38) define comprehension as:

“to penetrate beyond the verbal forms of text to the underlying ideas, to compare these with what one already knows and also with one another, to pick out what is essential and new, to revise one’s previous conceptions.”

Similarly, Smith (1975:34) describes comprehension as *“the condition of having cognitive questions answered the absence of uncertainty.”*

2.2.7 Composition

Delivering a lesson on composition or creative writing is one of the toughest tasks a teacher has to perform in a classroom. Creative writing requires different skills that range from forming sentences and compiling them in a sensible way to developing ideas that reflect the exposition of the title. Children need to watch out closely to spell the words used correctly. One of the difficulties that a child encounters is to be extremely lucid and clear in his/her transmission since certain gesture and facial expression are absent (Norrish, 1983).

According to Bright and McGregor (1970) as cited in Mifsud (1998), compositions may be of various natures including narrative and descriptive. Palmer (1996) sustains that all compositions build up a line of reasoning. Sometimes this reasoning is suggested by the title itself but at other instances the children have to struggle to develop a valid argument for their writing. Additionally, Palmer (1996), as

cited in Mifsud (1998), believes that all children, (whether they are of high ability or not), encounter some kind of difficulty when they come to writing compositions. Smith (1975) states that these difficulties can be eased out through practice.

Children may be asked to develop their free writing from a title. However, there are often types of compositions which guide children through a number or a set of pictures which help them to sequentially develop their points (Breitkreuz, 1972 as cited in Dalli, 1981). Nevertheless, pictures do not help children to improve their orthography. Therefore, children need to have a solid base of how to write in correct spelling during language tests.

Orthographical mistakes can be affected by both gender and age factor.

2.2.8 Age Factor

As cited in Borg (1995), age, i.e. birth date has a great effect on children's performance and attainment in the core subjects. This research also showed that girls performed better than boys in all these subjects. It is said that children's date of birth, effects their cognitive and emotional development (Borg Mark, 1995).

“Studies indicate that within any year group, the older children tend to perform better at school than the younger.” (Borg Mark, 1995:6).

Contrary to various studies, which found that autumn-born children achieve better grades than the spring and summer-born children, Armstrong found a number of differences between the two groups of children (Borg Mark, 1995).

As was said by Pidgeon and Dadds (1961) in Borg (1995:62), attainment is probably effected by *“length of schooling”* and *“age position”*. Conclusively, from the research carried out by Profs. Mark G. Borg, it was found that older children perform better in the core subjects.

2.2.9 Gender Differences in Education

Large scale studies regarding children's achievement illustrate that:

"... girls consistently do better than boys academically through their primary education in all subjects, with the possible exception of Mathematics." (as cited in Measor and Sikes, 1992:53)

This suggests that girls perform better at languages than boys. Different researchers have concluded contradictory views concerning the gender and performance of children at Primary Level. Indeed, a team of researchers (Joffe and Foxman, 1984 as cited in Measor & Sikes, 1992) believe that by the end of Primary Education, gender differences in Mathematics attainment will be easily recognised. However, this view is opposed by other researchers who state that gender inequalities arise after age 11.

The teacher's role model affects the learner's achievement. This may result because practitioners tend to treat boys and girls differently in class. Teachers are inclined to take boys' questions more into account to the extent that girls' academic enquiries are given less preference (Hodgeon, 1988; Byrne, 1990). Moreover, although teachers' social interactions with girls can be stronger they seem to engage in deeper conversations with boys. Such attention leads boys to improve their cognitive development. This by no means leads girls to occupy disadvantaged positions in the classroom (Croll and Moses, 1991, as cited in Lloyd and Duveen, 1992).

Additionally, studies (Bonaci & German, 1981; Debono & Schembri, 1981) have shown that girls tend to grasp languages better than boys. It is also agreed that girls achieve better results in spelling, reading, and verbal fluency.

2.2.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, the authors intended to give an overview of the development of the Maltese Educational System including the Primary Sector. This section was followed by the definition of language and the ways by which children master their mother tongue. Assessment was dealt with at length in the succeeding sections.

The stages which lead to correct spelling were also tackled in this chapter. Since the authors' study concerns orthographical mistakes performed by children in the Comprehension and Composition tasks, a detailed discussion was also given. The final part of this chapter focused upon the age factor and gender differences in attainment.

The following chapter will forward a detailed exploration of the methodology employed in this study.

Chapter 3

Design and Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter commences with the authors' intentions of this research (3.1). The design of the study will be described in detail in section (3.2) followed by the techniques employed in this dissertation (3.3).

The researchers will then outline the data collection and limitations (3.4). This is followed by the data analysis (3.5). The proceeding section will focus on the choice and formulation of the examination scripts (3.6).

Section (3.7) will provide the background of the interviews while the sub-sections will deal with interviews' procedures (3.7.1), interviews' question formats (3.7.2), objectives concerning each interview question (3.7.3), and the process by which the conducted interviews were analysed (3.7.4). Section (3.8) will end this chapter.

3.1 Intentions

This study was based on a criterion-referenced test. The main objectives of this project were to find out whether there exists a correlation between the pupils' months of birth and the type and quantity of orthographical mistakes Year Four Primary children made during their Maltese Annual examination in 2001 (**Appendix 5:85**). The authors also planned to find out whether there exists gender dominance in these mistakes.

The authors decided to choose the annual examination scripts of Year Four children for their study because they had a direct experience with such children's writings during their teaching practice experiences. The authors were struck by the number of mistakes in the children's writings. This motivated the authors to carry out an in-depth study into why children make so many errors when writing in Maltese. The researchers decided to analyse only the Composition and Comprehension components, because, as other studies have shown (Palmer, 1996; Smith, 1975; Lunzer et. al., 1979), they give the teacher a better perspective about the linguistic skills that pupils should have to make them proficient users of their mother tongue.

3.2 Design (Methodology)

This research adopted a mixed methodology approach. Since the main advantage of such an approach would interconnect different methods with one another, this would increase the validity and reliability of the results attained by this research. Therefore, the problems of biases and other weaknesses would be minimised (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Denzin (1970) as cited in (Massey & Walford, 1999) has called this type of methodology a '*methodological triangulation*'.

The study was a cross-sectional one because it involved only one level from the Primary School Course. It comprised children whose age ranged between seven and eight years. For the investigative part of the research, an existing statistical package called SPSS was used. This software, normally used in a quantitative approach design, was employed to process statistically the collected data on the children's mistakes found in their exam paper. This was applied to the entire participating cohort, thus supporting the comparison and statistical aggregation of the data (Patton, 1990).

The statistical results of SPSS were then explored by the authors to give interpretative meaning to statistical data since "*the organisation of words into incidents or stories has a concrete, vivid, and meaningful flavour*" (Miles & Huberman, 1984:1). Moreover, the amalgamation of the graphical information, tables, and evaluations promoted an accurate presentation of the results of the study.

After exploring the statistical results, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers who taught Year Four pupils in the schools participating in the research. The reason for such a professional interview helped the authors acquire first hand information and opinions about the mistakes they found in their analysis of the examination scripts. This design meant to increase the validity and reliability of the study.

3.3 Procedure (Technique)

In order to be able to collect the data necessary for the research, the authors had to obtain a letter of approval from the Director of Research and Planning at the Education Division. The Director who was given a detailed explanation of the objectives of the project, gave her consent. (Appendix 1:81)

The authors had to visit the schools several times in order to collect the required data. Most of the Heads of Schools contacted were quite helpful but some others were not as co-operative. Whilst some refused to give us access, others accepted our proposal but were very demanding. Such attitudes created certain difficulties especially when in some cases the authors were uncertain about the Head's co-operation.

The required sections (Composition and Comprehension components) of the children's scripts were photocopied and labelled with the specific details for gender and month of birth e.g. *boy, March*. All forms of labelling remained anonymous. Total confidentiality was observed as promised to the Heads of Schools.

The results obtained from the statistical analysis created a dilemma for the authors since it became obvious that although the children were aware of the grammatical rules they lacked the skills to apply the rules in their writings. Therefore, the authors decided to view the observations and opinions of educational practitioners who were currently teaching the Year Four classes in the participating schools. The authors obtained the required information through a series of semi-structured interviews (**Appendix 2:82 & Appendix 3:83**).

3.4 Data Collection and Limitations

The cohort participating in the study (**Table 2:26**) was selected from different geographical areas of the island to have a representative sample of the population. The map of Malta was divided into three areas: North, Central, and South. A number of schools were chosen from each area. The following points were considered when choosing the types of schools in order to have a varied range of children i.e. children coming from:

- Urban and rural areas
- Different family backgrounds
- Different cultures within Malta
- Different types of Primary schools i.e. schools B & C.

Then two schools were picked up at random from each geographical location of the island. (**Table 1:26**) depicts the distribution of the population.

Table 1: Total Population of Children and Classes in Primary State Schools

PRIMARY STATE SCHOOLS IN MALTA	
Year 4 in 2001	
Total Population	3115
Classes	146

Table 2: Total Population of Children and Classes in Primary State Schools participating in the study

PRIMARY STATE SCHOOLS IN MALTA	
Year 4 in 2001	
Participating cohort in study	320
Classes	16

Table 3: Classification of total population by gender

POPULATION	BOYS	%	GIRLS	%
3115	1635	52.5	1480	47.5

The total population of children was classified by gender: boys and girls (**Table 3**). The participating cohort was also divided into two sub-groups according to the gender (**Table 4:27**). (**Table 5:27**) categorises children in relation to their month of birth i.e. Children born in the first half of the year (January – June) and those born in the second half of the year (July – December).

Table 4: Category of the participating cohort by gender

GENDER	N° OF CHILDREN	%
Girls	148	46.2
Boys	172	53.8

Table 5: Category of the participating cohort by month of birth

AGE	BOYS		GIRLS	
	N° of children 1.	%	N° of children 2.	%
January – June	80	25	76	23.75
July – December	92	28.75	72	22.5

Note: 1. Total Number of Boys = 172

2. Total Number of Girls = 148

Before commencing the analysis of the scripts, the authors set up a template to facilitate the categorisation process of the children's mistakes (**Appendix 4:84**). The authors then proceeded with the analysis of mistakes by reading through the Comprehension and Composition components of each and every script, and elicited the errors made by the children. Each mistake was later recorded on SPSS v. 11.00 (an existing statistical package) in order to facilitate the progress of the generation of results.

A limitation which the authors faced during this study regarded the diacritic signs. The dots on Maltese consonants (**ċ, ġ, and ż**) were not considered during the analysis because the authors felt that such errors could not be analysed properly since the scripts were photocopied and the resolution of the photocopies were not clear enough to show all the dots marked.

3.5 Data Analysis

After uploading SPSS, the *Variable View* window was chosen and the authors entered the variable *name* and selected their *type*. The variables of *gender* and *age* required a specific *value* e.g.

- *gender* – value 1 refers to the value label *male*, value 2 refers to the value label *female*
- *age* – value 1 refers to the value label *Jan-Jun*, value 2 refers to the value label *July-Dec*

This was done because the SPSS programme does not read words and to facilitate the data input task. It was extremely important to save the progress from time to time. When all the variables were set and data input was ready, it was necessary to generate the results. It was decided that the Independent Samples Test was suitable to:

- (i) Compare the number of mistakes against gender
- (ii) Compare the number of mistakes against age

The Independent Samples Test was instrumental in comparing the number of mistakes against the grouping variables of gender and age.

A total of 320 scripts were analysed and recorded. However, it was decided that the correlation will work better if scripts with similar parameters were compared. This meant that a substantial part of the analysed records had to be omitted for such a task because they had one or more of the following defects:

- Composition left out
- Comprehension left out
- Illegible handwriting

Although the authors had followed two consecutive courses in SPSS, the help of a statistician was necessary to help in the process of the results in digital format.

3.6 Measures

The Maltese Language Annual Examination is carried out at the end of the scholastic year. All children attending State schools whether Primary or Secondary sit for a National Examination Paper. The authors selected such exam scripts for analysis because they felt that since all Year Four Primary Students take the same National Maltese Examination paper, this would give their study more credibility. The choice of components fell on the Composition and Comprehension exercises because as studies have shown (Palmer, 1996; Smith, 1975; Lunzer et. al., 1979), the authors feel that these two tasks are not controlled exercises and therefore leave enough space for the teacher to

formulate an idea of the pupils' linguistic skills in the language, especially the orthography. In these sections, children are allowed to demonstrate their mastered vocabulary and their linguistic skills.

The analysed Maltese Language Examination Paper (**Appendix 5:85**) was of one-hour duration. The paper was divided into ten sections. The Comprehension exercise was the first section and weighted twenty marks. This exercise constituted of a short story followed by fifteen questions.

The Composition exercise was the last section of the paper and carried twenty marks. The children had to choose one title from a choice of five, one of which included a set of pictures. Since such exercises require the pupils to demonstrate the use of language, many children lose a lot of marks.

The Composition titles set in the exam paper required the pupils to make use of different skills so as to answer their chosen title. The creative writing titles from which the children had to choose were the following:

“Li kieku kont huta”¹ - Those children who opted for this title had to use their imaginative and descriptive skills.

“Annimal li nhobb hafna”² – This choice involved the use of the descriptive and narrative skills.

“Dawra bid-dghajsa taz-ziju”³ – Narration and description had to be employed by the children who selected this title.

“Jien u sejjer l-iskola”⁴ - The pupils' descriptive and reflective abilities were meant to be assessed by this choice of title.

“Hares sewwa lejn dawn l-istampi u ikteb storja dwar x'tahseb li ġralu dan ir-raġel”⁵ - This picture composition required the children to show off their descriptive, imaginative and reflective competencies.

¹ If I were a fish

² The animal I like most

³ A trip in my uncle's boat

⁴ On my way to school

⁵ Look carefully at these pictures and write about what you think happened to this man.

3.7 Interviews

As interviews had to be carried out during school hours, the authors decided that every interview should not take more than half an hour. Before performing the task, the interviewers had to obtain the approval of the Heads of Schools (**Appendix 6:93**) and of the interviewees. Where a quiet room was available, the interviewers used this facility to minimise noise distractions.

It was highly important that the interviewees guaranteed their co-operation so that the objective of the interview would be reached. The interviewers ensured the interviewees' confidentiality and informed them about this ethical obligation. These vital aspects were carried out in such cases (Hoinville, et. al., 1978).

3.7.1 Interview Procedure

The authors conducted personally the interviews with the selected teachers i.e. those in charge of the Year Four classes in the participating schools. The interview took the form of an informal encounter which helped to make the interviewee feel at ease and confident with the interviewer. It was of paramount importance that the structured questions addressed a general point and in no way were they seem to refer to particular schools or teachers. The authors felt that semi-structured interviews were the ideal kind to gather the needed data. The interviewing questions were aimed to prompt and encourage self-expression leading to the desired objectives. Before commencing an interview, the authors gave a detailed description about what the study consisted of including a reasonable objective regarding the interview (Cohen and Manion, 1994). Although all teachers were quite willing to participate, they still felt uncomfortable being recorded on tape. Hence, this lead the authors to take brief notes of the main points given by the respondents. Every teacher was asked the same set of questions in the same order.

3.7.2 The Interview Format

The authors were aware that for an interview to reach its objectives, the questions should be carefully construed. The interviewer had to be capable of initiating an adequate relationship with the interviewee. Thus, the researchers followed a series of steps in order to conduct the interview in a scientific manner.

Questions were clearly structured and short (Kvale, 1996) because long questions tend confuse the respondent. Therefore, it was wise to use the “*most relevant vocabulary, phrases, questions, sentences and contexts to lead to the proceeding question.*” (Werner and Schoepfle, 1987:65). The authors considered it of paramount importance to ask one question at a time (Patton, 1987).

Patton (1987) stated that open-ended questions reflect the interviewee’s will-power to answer in his/her own thoughts. He also deemed it beneficial to ask questions related to the experience of the respondent before proceeding to touch on sensitive issues. It was also important to keep control of the interviewee’s responses. This was done in order not to exceed the time allocated.

Additionally, the authors considered Cohen and Manion’s (1994:277) recommendations regarding the order of how the questions should be asked i.e. from general to specific, a technique called “*funnelling*”.

At times, the researchers elucidated what the interviewee has just said. This task was done to make sure that the interviewer comprehended the interviewee’s perspectives in the correct manner (Kvale, 1996).

During the interview, the authors were quite conscious of non-verbal features. These may either complement or distract the interview. In fact, various researchers (Carkhuff, 1972; Egan, 1975; Benjamin, 1987) agree that “*a good contact is established by attentive listening, with the interviewer showing interest, understanding, and respect for what the subjects say*” (Kvale, 1996:128).

3.7.3 Content of Interviews

The objective of the interviews was to place the authors in a better position to interpret statistical results and to help them provide some practical recommendations of how teachers can improve Maltese Language Teaching.

Questions 1 and 2 of the interview addressed the teaching methodology. Here, the authors expected to get a general response from the teachers. Questions 3 to 6 dealt with the specific strategies presently employed in the classrooms. The last question was planned to help teachers reflect on the present situation and think of possible solutions that may be adopted to improve teaching and learning.

The interviews were conducted on the school premises and during school hours. Such a procedure required that while one author carried out the interview the other substituted the class teacher for the duration of the interview. In this manner, the authors experienced a one-to-one contact with professionals in their working habitat. Since this study was intended to help educators, it was deemed important to respect their experiences. Hence, as Lincoln and Guba (1985:120) put it: *“If you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them information in the form in which they usually experience it.”* Additionally, the interviews’ reports containing the events of people working in the teaching environment give more sense as *“they may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader’s experience”* (Stake, 1978:5).

The content which was elicited from the interviews proved to be quite useful for the objective of the study. The interviews gave the authors a clear perspective of the limitations and difficulties teachers face while teaching the language and those children encounter while writing in their native language.

3.7.4 Analysis of interviews

This required the authors to analyse each and every conversation and decipher its relevant content. The next task was to analyse the teachers’ opinions and learn whether there were any contrasting views among the interviewees due to their role as individuals with different opinions, and whether the collected interviews’ data had any relationship with the findings derived from the analysis of the examination scripts.

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, the authors intended to deal with the reasons of choosing such title for the study. This was followed by the methodological approach employed in this research. Consecutively, the procedure of the study was dealt with in detail.

Since the researchers’ thesis required the collection of amounts of data, the authors decided to highlight the limitations encountered during its collection. Another part of this chapter was dedicated to the analysis of the data. The measures of the examination scripts were also discussed. The semi-structured interviews were tackled in the penultimate section of this chapter.

Chapter 4

Results and Analysis

4.0 Introduction

The focal point of this chapter will be the results obtained from the authors' research vis-à-vis the orthographical mistakes children made in the Composition and Comprehension components of the Year Four Maltese Annual Examination, June 2001. Such results will be accompanied by a detailed analysis showing whether or not there exists a correlation in the number of orthographical errors between:

- the pupils' gender difference
- those born in the first six months and in the second six months
- female pupils and their age factor
- male pupils and their age factor

section (4.3).

The authors will commence this chapter with an overview regarding the choice of scripts (4.1). This chapter will also present the reasons why the authors chose to analyse the Comprehension and Composition components (4.1.1). An in-depth analysis regarding the orthographical errors collected from the scripts will be discussed in section (4.2). Interviews' analysis (4.4) will also be included in this chapter. In section (4.5), the authors will analyse whether or not there exists a correlation between the results obtained concerning pupils' mistakes and the responses collected during the teachers' interviews. It is important to note that for confidential purposes the authors labelled the interviewees from numbers 1 to 16. Section (4.6) will conclude this chapter.

4.1 Choice of Scripts

The chosen scripts date back to the year 2001. The authors have decided to analyse the Year Four Maltese Annual Examination Scripts of the above-mentioned year because these were the most recent scripts they could collect when they were to commence their study. The research was conducted over a number of examination scripts written by boys and girls born in different months of the year, from all areas around Malta, i.e. ranging from Northern to Southern villages. A total of 320 scripts were analysed, 274 of which were appropriate for the research's correlations. The remaining forty-six scripts were discarded on advice of the SPSS consultant who suggested that scripts containing illegible handwriting and missing tasks should not be

considered in order to obtain a valid and reliable result. The analysed components of the Examination scripts were the Comprehension and Composition exercises.

4.1.1 The Comprehension and Composition Components

The National Maltese Annual Examination 2001 paper included a number of sections ranging from grammar exercises meant to be completed by rote, to Comprehension and Composition tasks which required more creativity and skill.

The authors decided to research solely the Comprehension and Composition components because they contend that children have to rely on their imaginative, creative, and linguistic skills to be able to perform and reflect on such tasks (3.6). These tasks require more intellectual commitment than grammar exercises. Moreover, the end-product, especially the creative writing task, has to be written completely by the learners themselves. Furthermore, when pupils work out a Composition they tend to make more orthographical mistakes than the Comprehension, which normally encourages pupils to copy sentences or phrases directly from the text in their answer. Hence, orthographical errors will be minimised.

4.1.2 Reasons for analysis of the orthographical mistakes performed in the selected tasks

The selected components were analysed by the authors for the simple reason that our mother tongue is quite complex to express in writing because of the number of grammatical rules it includes. This study should also give an indication as to whom, from boys and girls born in the first and second halves of the year errs most.

The authors' aim is to provide teachers with possible suggestions to help children overcome such orthographical mistakes. Some of the suggestions, which will be dealt with in the succeeding chapter, were forwarded by the interviewees after the completion of the analysis of the scripts.

4.2 Analysis of Orthographical Errors

“Ortografija: ir-regoli tal-lingwa miktuba. Fil-Grieg ortos tfisser “tajjed” filwaqt li grafia tfisser “kitba”. Ghalhekk, l-ortografija tirregola l-kitba korretta ta’ l-ilsien.”⁶

(Cassar, 2000:6)

Prior to the analysis of each examination script, the authors formulated a template (**Appendix 4:84**) to help them categorise the different types of orthographical mistakes committed by the pupils. The authors grouped the various kinds of orthographical errors into twelve categories as depicted in (**Table 6:37**).

The researchers decided that it would be wise to sum up the total number of mistakes performed in each group. This was done to help the authors visualise the number of times each mistake was made by the pupils during the examination.

The tabular presentation (**Table 7:38**)⁷ also provided the authors with a clear delineation regarding the categories in which the children erred most together with those in which they made fewer mistakes.

Hereunder, a description together with an in-depth analysis of each category will be presented. Each group of mistakes will be dealt with separately in a descending order, that is, according to the number of times each mistake was found in the examination scripts. Although the errors were categorised separately, it does not mean that they did not intertwine. For example, the group “assimilation of consonants” in the category “Phonetics” links with the category of “Consonants”.

⁶ Orthography: the spelling rules of a language. In Greek *ortos* means “correct” whereas *graphia* means “writing”. Therefore, orthography directs the correct spelling of the written language.

⁷ The percentages were rounded up to 1 decimal place thus slight inaccuracies may occur.

Table 6: Categories of Mistakes

Category	Groups
Consonants	<p>Misplaced consonant</p> <p>Missing consonant</p> <p>Double consonant missing</p> <p>Added consonant</p> <p>Incorrect consonant</p>
Capital letters	<p>Omitted capital letters</p> <p>Misplaced capital letters</p>
Vowels	<p>Added euphonic vowel</p> <p>Missing euphonic vowel</p> <p>Misplaced euphonic vowel</p> <p>Changed vowels</p>
gh	<p>Missing <i>gh</i></p> <p>Added <i>gh</i></p> <p>Misplaced <i>gh</i></p>
ic	<p>Missing <i>ie</i></p> <p>Misplaced <i>ie</i></p> <p>Added <i>ie</i></p>
h	<p>Added <i>h</i></p> <p>Missing <i>h</i></p> <p>Misplaced <i>h</i></p> <p><i>h</i> instead of <i>h</i></p>
Articles	<p>Hyphen in article missing</p> <p>Missing articles</p> <p>Added articles</p> <p>Added article hyphen</p>
Missing diacritic signs	<i>h</i> instead of <i>h</i>
Accent	Missing accent
Word compartmentalisation	<p>Break-up of single words</p> <p>Joined words</p>
Apostrophe	<p>Added apostrophe</p> <p>Missing apostrophe</p>
Phonetics	<p>Homonyms</p> <p>Assimilation of consonants</p>

Table 7: Number of mistakes committed by the participating cohort

<i>Types of Errors</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Quantity of Mistakes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Total %</i>
Consonants				
Misplaced consonant	nihdlu → nidhlu	128	1.2	34.7
Missing consonant	tlaqa → tlaqna	915	8.6	
Double consonant missing	maru → marru	1099	10.4	
Added consonant	ferhann → ferhan	598	5.6	
Incorrect consonant	nahstuh → nahsluh	955	9.0	
Capital letters				
Omitted capital letters	ghadira → Ghadira	771	7.3	11.2
Misplaced capital letters	paPa' → papa'	410	3.9	
Vowels				
Added euphonic vowel	marru il-belt	628	5.9	10.0
Missing euphonic vowel	mar l-belt → mar il-belt	76	0.7	
Misplaced euphonic vowel	li-skola → l-iskola	8	0.1	
Changed vowels	jihodhom → jehodhom	350	3.3	
gh				
Missing gh	imbad → imbaghad	789	7.4	9.5
Added gh	raghmel → ramel	75	0.7	
Misplaced gh	jogghob → joghjob	149	1.4	
ie				
Missing ie	sabieh → sabih	441	4.2	5.9
Misplaced ie	niextiq → nixtieq	27	0.3	
Added ie	niextieq → nixtieq	147	1.4	
h				
Added h	Jismhu → jismu	119	1.1	5.6
Missing h	Tider → tidher	300	2.8	
Misplaced h	Jhisima → jisimha	14	0.1	
h instead of h	hallieh → hallieh	171	1.6	
Articles				
Hyphen in article missing	ilbajja → il-bajja	248	2.3	5.1
Missing articles	tfal → it-tfal	140	1.3	
Added articles	iz-zija → zija	62	0.6	
Added article hyphen	il-tqajt → iltqajt	100	0.9	
Missing diacritic signs				
h instead of h	hadu → ħadu	527	5.0	5.0
Accent				
Missing accent	papa → papa'	523	4.9	4.9
Word compartmentalisation				
Break-up of single words	anni mal → annimal	63	0.6	2.9
Joined words	kinemm → kien hemm	243	2.3	
Apostrophe				
Added apostrophe	sa' → sa	55	0.5	2.6
Missing apostrophe	ma → ma'	224	2.1	
Phonetics				
Homonyms	u → hu	95	0.9	2.3
Assimilation of consonants	gbir → kbir	145	1.4	

4.2.1 Category 1 – Consonants

This category was subdivided into five groups. The “double consonant missing” comprised the greatest amount of mistakes which the authors extracted from the children’s examination scripts. This shows that the majority of the children found it difficult to recognise that certain Maltese words have a double (repeated) letter in their morphological composition. This may be deemed as a phonetical problem resulting from the way children pronounce such words, hence leading them to write a single consonant e.g. **‘maru’** instead of a double letter i.e. **‘marru’**.

Another subcategory, “missing consonant” concerned children omitting a consonant from particular words e.g. **‘tlaqna’** written as **‘tlaqa’**. Through close observation of the scripts, the authors noticed that very often this was a result of carelessness. Quite a number of pupils had written an incorrect consonant in words e.g. **‘nahstuh’** instead of **‘nahsluh’**. A similar orthographical error, concerned the sub-group “assimilation of consonants” present in the category “Phonetics” relating to an unvoiced consonant in this case the **‘h’** which unvoices the preceding voiced consonant **‘d’** e.g. **‘dhakna’** is misspelled as **‘thadkna’**. Similarly, such mistake was made when a voiced preceding consonant changed the sound of an unvoiced consonant e.g. **‘gbir’** instead of **‘kbir’**. (Cassar & Diacono, 1987). At first glance, this may seem a phonological problem because children wrote the consonant phonetically. The authors defined this as an act of inattention. One may argue that children perform such errors because they may have not developed pronunciation competency of certain consonants accurately e.g. **‘bajmil’** instead of **‘barmil’**. The authors also observed that certain children confused the letter **‘b’** with **‘d’** and wrote **‘dajja’** instead of **‘bajja’**. From the overall observation of the scripts, one could easily notice that these children were low attainers. This was also documented by Cassar & Diacono (1987:72).

A repetitive mistake that was noted by the authors was the addition of an extra letter to a particular word such as **‘ferhann’** instead of **‘ferhan’** and **‘nixtrij’** instead of **‘nixtri’**. This could occur since pupils, at times, tend to over stress certain words that end with a stressed letter. At other instances, children simply add letters because they think they are part of the word e.g. **‘tiejghej’** as a replacement for **‘tieghi’**. One possible reason for this frequent error is that children spell the way they pronounce the word because orthography is conditioned by phonology. This shows that children tend to ignore the linguistic phenomenon of metathesis: the transposition of letters in a word.

Children made the least number of mistakes in the subcategory, “misplaced consonant” which refers to a misplaced consonant in a word e.g. ‘**nihdlu**’ instead of ‘**nidhlu**’. Children’s mispronunciation of certain words may effect the position of the radical consonants. ‘**Nikpu**’ instead of ‘**Nibku**’ is another classical example. The authors feel that the onus lies on educators because they have to make pupils aware that in Maltese they have to pay attention to the interchange of radicals.

4.2.2 Category 2 - Capital Letters

An additional group of mistakes which the authors may partly attribute to negligence concerns the use of capital letters. The reason for this being that such error was not recurring in every sentence. In certain instances, the children wrote capital letters inappropriately e.g. **paPà** instead of **papà**. At other times, pupils omitted to write the capital letter where necessary, for example, in the beginning of sentences they wrote ‘**il-kelb**’ instead of ‘**Il-kelb**’. Such mistakes were also irregularly noticed when children failed to distinguish between proper and common nouns e.g. ‘**peter**’ instead of ‘**Peter**’. Another case in point where children erred in this respect concerned the contextual meaning of a word. A really common occurrence was the word ‘**ghadira**’ (meaning lake in English) as an alternative to ‘**Ghadira**’ (the name of a Maltese locality). The latter is considered to be a careless mistake since the Comprehension text clearly showed that ‘**Ghadira**’ should have been written with a capital letter. This also implies that the children do not copy well from the text, a common error as teachers themselves implied in the interviews.

4.2.3 Category 3 – Vowels

The greatest number of errors noted in this category included an added euphonic vowel e.g. ‘**marru il-Belt**’. This could be since children would not be able to hear that there is no euphonic vowel ‘i’ in ‘**marru I-Belt**’ as they may pronounce the whole phrase in bits in order to find it easier to spell correctly. Another group in which children made quite a number of errors in this category was “changed vowels”. The researchers think that this could also be linked to the children’s pronunciation of words e.g. ‘**jihodhom**’ instead of ‘**jehodhom**’ according to their dialect. Another sub-category was “missing euphonic vowel”. This included examples like ‘**mar I-Belt**’ instead of ‘**mar il-Belt**’. Children may have heard so much about not writing a vowel next to a

word which ends with a vowel that they may remain with that impression even when writing examples like the one mentioned above. In such case, the euphonic vowel is necessary to help in the articulation of the word (Cassar, 2002). Furthermore, children also made mistakes by misplacing the euphonic vowel as in **'li-skola'** instead of **'l-iskola'**.

4.2.4 Category 4 – gh

The considerable amount of mistakes appearing in the Comprehension and Composition components had to do with the pseudo-consonant **'gh'** (Cassar, 2000:14). This led the authors to devise a category for such orthographical mistakes. Some of the errors concerned the omission of the **'gh'** in words like **'imbaghad'** which was written as **'imbad'** by most candidates. Since the **'gh'** is a silent letter, children may find it difficult to recognise its morphological function in words. Presently, the digraph **'gh'** *“has lost its original sound in Maltese and now serves only to give a more or less perceptible pharyngeal colouring to the preceding, or the following vowel.”* (Aquilina, 1997:78) The pseudo-consonant **'gh'** may sound as **'h'** at the end of the word or when followed by an **'h'**. This phenomenon was not evident in children's writings even though they could have easily erred in this respect. The authors thought that children may write **'h'** instead of **'gh'** e.g. **'f'qiegh il-bahar'** would have been easily written as **'f'qieh il-bahar'**. Misplacing the **'gh'** shows that although the children are aware of the presence of this pseudo-consonant in a particular word such as **'joghghob'**, they do not know its correct placement in that word. Indeed, quite a number of children wrote the word **'joghghob'** as **'jogghob'**. The last sub-group in this category dealt with the addition of the digraph **'gh'** in a word which does not have an **'gh'** in its morphological root. A clear example of this would be **'ramel'** which was frequently written as **'raghmel'**. Children may make morphological errors of this kind because, at times, teachers and/or other supervisors may over emphasise the silent consonant (especially the **'gh'**) in words because these unvoiced consonants only effect the preceding or the following consonant (Aquilina, 1997).

4.2.5 Category 5 – ie

This “*dialectic sound*” ‘ie’ (Aquilina, 1997:77), like the pseudo-consonant ‘gh’ /ajn/ and ‘h’ /akka/, creates quite a number of problems when it comes to children writing in their native language. Indeed, the researchers have realised that a lot of children left it out, thus wrote ‘kin’ instead of ‘kien’. This vowel has the function of lengthening the sound of words which include it because it is always accented. Nevertheless, this characteristic does not help children in writing words with the ‘ie’ correctly because at this point children may not be able to identify a stressed vowel. Phonetic judgement may also lead to confusion since various words which have a prolonged sound such as ‘imexxih’ (imexxi lilu) do not take an ‘ie’. Exceptions of this kind may also lead to puzzlement.

Children may have known that an ‘ie’ was present in particular words such as ‘nixtieq’, yet they wrote it twice as ‘niextieq’. This indicates that they did not know the rule that a word should only contain one ‘ie’. (Cassar, 2000:6) Such error was also implied when children wrote the plural of certain words for example: ‘missierijiet’ instead of ‘missirijiet’. This apparently indicates that children were unaware that the accent falls on the ‘ie’. The least number of mistakes committed in this category involved misplacement of this vowel. This shows that the children knew that the word contained an ‘ie’ but were unable to place it in its correct position. This may be due to the fact that they were not able to identify which part of the word was being stressed. An example of this kind was ‘affariejit’ instead of ‘affarijiet’.

4.2.6 Category 6 – h

The category of orthographical mistakes which was believed to be one of the most problematic areas by the authors proved to be one of the least as verified by this study. This concerns the letter ‘h’ (pronounced as ‘akka’ in Maltese). One of the reasons that lead children to confuse this letter’s position might have been because in most Maltese words it is silent as in English (Aquilina, 1997). Therefore, when ‘h’ is found at the beginning or in the middle of a word, it puts children in an uncertain stance to decide where to place this silent letter ‘h’ correctly. Occasionally, the children were knowledgeable about the silence of the letter ‘h’ and adapted their awareness of this letter by writing it in words in which it does not exist e.g. ‘jismhu’ instead of ‘jismu’; no word in Maltese ends in ‘hu’. This may show that children seem to forget that the

third person Masculine suffix – known in Maltese morphology as ‘**Pronom Mehmuz**’ – is inexistent. They seem to have been influenced by the existence of the Feminine suffix ‘**ha**’. At other times, children were not aware that the ‘**h**’ existed in a particular word and therefore left it out e.g. ‘**tider**’ instead of ‘**tidher**’. Another area in which the pupils erred was in misplacing the consonant ‘**h**’. This indicates that the children knew that such a letter existed in the particular words but were unable to place it correctly e.g. ‘**jhisima**’ instead of ‘**jisimha**’. A different domain in this category was the transposition of the ‘**h**’ with the ‘**h**’ at the end of a word. One possible reason could be that “*h is phonetically equated with weakened pharyngal fricative h*” (Aquilina, 1997:131).

4.2.7 Category 7 – Articles

The majority of the children who sat for the Maltese Primary Annual Examination of 2001 committed errors concerning the omission of the hyphen in the article e.g. writing ‘**liskola**’ instead of ‘**l-iskola**’. It should be noted that this group of mistakes included also the elimination of the hyphen when particles such as **ma**’ were added to an article e.g. ‘**l-**’ which was meant to be written as ‘**mal-**’. A common mistake observed in the scripts was **mal mamà** instead of **mal-mamà**. This could have resulted from carelessness. Another reason which could have led the children to leave out the hyphen when writing articles is that the hyphen is an unvoiced character. Children also committed errors when they excluded articles from words. A clear example present in the scripts was ‘**zija**’ instead of ‘**iz-zija**’. This reflects that children have not understood the importance of the definite article, i.e. that the latter identifies which aunt the candidate was referring to, thus leading them to fail to give function to words (as cited in Briffa in Borg, 1998:177 [3b]). Another subcategory included in ‘Articles’ was that of “added article’s hyphen”. The researchers hypothesised that this could result from the way teachers carry out explanations concerning articles. Teachers stress that the article should be written as ‘**l-**’. This could mislead children to make orthographical mistakes in writing words containing the letter ‘**l**’. The first syllable of the word is mistaken for an assimilated article. This may have been the reason why children wrote ‘**l-tqajt**’ instead of ‘**ltqajt**’ or ‘**l-ura**’ instead of ‘**lura**’. This was quite a recurring orthographical error.

The group “added articles” reveals that few mistakes were recorded in writing an article where unnecessary e.g. they wrote ‘**iz-zija**’ instead of ‘**zija**’ or adding an article to a proper noun e.g. ‘**il-Peter**’ instead of ‘**Peter**’. This is also indicative of the

fact that at this age it seems that children's awareness of the importance of writing the article to words would not be clear, hence leading them to apply articles' grammatical rules wrongly. The in-depth observation of the scripts regarding a noun beginning with a coronal consonant surprised the authors because they observed that the basic grammatical rules related to this were firmly grasped by all candidates as no errors were recorded. This applies also to particles added to a coronal article e.g. "ma' + z + ziju" becomes "maz-ziju". The researchers reckon that since no mistakes of this kind were present in any of the scripts, it seems that the children were aware that the "assimilation is brought about purely as a result of phonological conditions in that it is the coronal environment that triggers it." (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997:136)

4.2.8 Category 8 – Diacritic Signs

Another common orthographical mistake made by the Year Four pupils was the omission of diacritic signs. The errors observed in the scripts included children writing 'hadu' instead of 'ħadu' i.e. omitting the bar of the letter 'ħ'. Such mistake was also evident in the writing of the digraph 'gh' as in the example 'ghamlet' instead of 'ġhamlet'. At times, the pupils also omitted the diacritic sign of the consonant 't' which lead the consonant to be confused with 'l' as in the word 'zejl' instead of 'zejt'. The first couple of examples may indicate that the children were either negligent or confused the letter 'h' with the letter 'ħ'. However, the authors deem it as pure carelessness not to write the diacritic sign when writing the letter 't'. The frequent encounters of this error lead the authors to conclude that such mistakes were a result of negligence rather than awareness of the correct orthography. One should also mention the dots which some Maltese consonants have e.g. ċ, ġ, ż. These diacritic signs were not taken into account by the researchers since the resolution of the photocopied scripts was not clear enough to detect such dots. These letters could have led children to err since they may have transposed the 'ċ' with the letter 'c' as in English, the 'ġ' with the 'g' and the 'ż' with the 'z' as in the native language.

4.2.9 Category 9 – Accent

The omission of the accent was most common in the words **mamà** and **papà**. Indeed very few children wrote these words correctly. After analysing the scripts, the authors deduced that although these words were included in the Comprehension text and

the students frequently used them without the accent in the creative task showed that the children were careless and did not pay attention to their work even though they had exposure.

4.2.10 Category 10 – Word Compartmentalisation

One of the categories in which children erred less concerned “word compartmentalisation”. The children’s uncertainties lay in dividing single words as in the example ‘**anni mal**’ which should have been written as ‘**animal**’. Following this, was the joining of separate words, for example, a common recurring mistake in various scripts was ‘**kinemm**’ instead of ‘**kien hemm**’. The authors feel unsure as to what may have caused children to write words in this way. The answer may lie in the fact that ‘**h**’ is a silent letter.

4.2.11 Category 11 – Apostrophe

The apostrophe is quite complex for children to understand as is clearly shown by the total number of errors they made. The elimination or addition of the apostrophe to a word results in changing its meaning. The example of **ma** instead of **ma’** is a clear indication that since children are made aware of writing the preposition **ma** to show negative actions, when they come to write **ma’** to refer to ‘with’, they omit the apostrophe. Pupils may not realise the importance held by the latter.

Nevertheless, from the various examples collected and grouped in this category, the authors realised that, at times, children wrote the apostrophe where unnecessary. Pupils either added an apostrophe to prepositions which take no apostrophe e.g. **sa’** instead of **sa** or confused the verb **ta** with the preposition **ta’**. The authors also noticed that the apostrophe was not used by pupils when they wrote adverbs as in **’l isfel**. They also left it out when abbreviating particles preceding nouns as in **’l ommi** instead of **lil ommi**.

4.2.12 Category 12 – Phonetics

The researchers have recognised that it was not that common for native language speakers to write words exactly as they hear them. However, mistakes of this

kind were still recorded. The soft and harsh consonants play an important role in the articulation of certain words. A clear example of this kind was 'gbir' instead of 'kbir', 'kelp' instead of 'kelb', 'nigber' instead of 'nikber'.

Another problematic area, which was observed in this category, was that of homonyms. The latter has led children to err since they did not help to distinguish between "*phonetic coincidences*" (Aquilina, 1997:23) of the most frequently used words in the scripts e.g. children mixed up the spelling of 'hadd', 'Hadd' and 'hadt' since the three words are of different meanings. Pupils also confused the use of 'u' and 'hu'. However, the authors believe that once children grasp the homonyms, they may end up committing less mistakes of the sort.

4.3 Presentation of Results

This study was based on two hypotheses, namely:

- Girls have a tendency to make less orthographical mistakes than boys
- Pupils born in the first half of the year tend to make less orthographical mistakes than those born in the second half

These hypotheses lead the researchers to formulate four correlations which will be dealt with in depth in this chapter:

- Orthographical Errors by Gender Difference
- Orthographical Errors by Age Difference
- Orthographical Errors by Age Difference of girls
- Orthographical Errors by Age Difference of boys

4.3.1 Orthographical Errors by Gender Difference

This section deals with whether or not girls commit fewer orthographical mistakes than boys. The authors took into account the following probabilities:

H₁: Total Number of mistakes is affected by gender

H₀: Total Number of mistakes is not affected by gender

Table 8: Group Statistics by Gender Difference

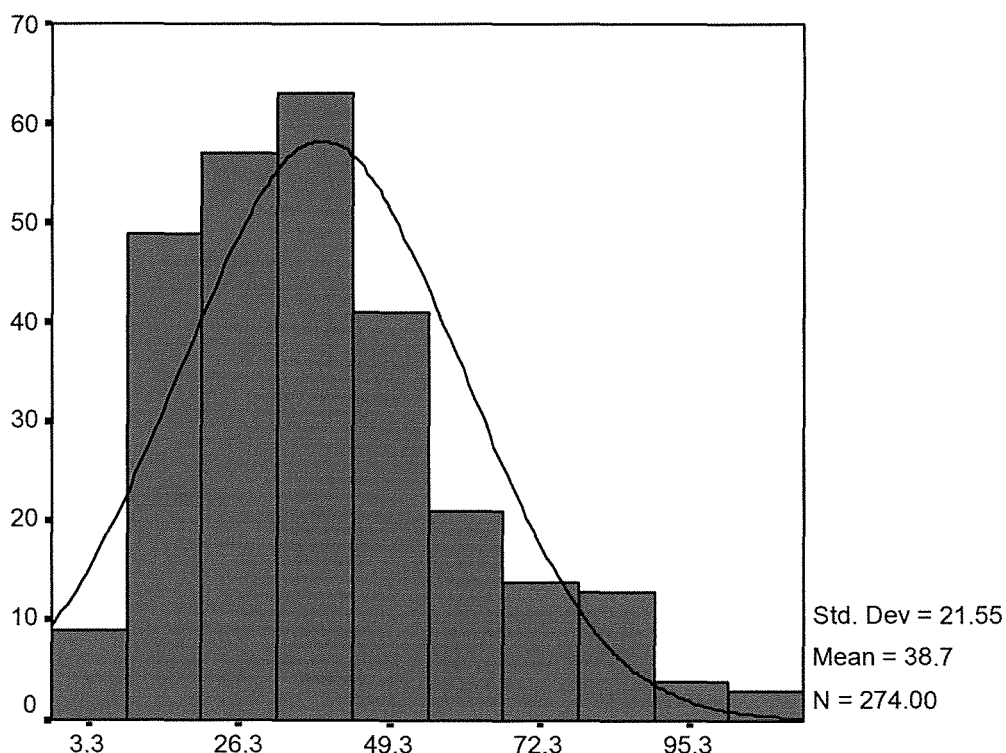
Group Statistics					
	Gender	Number of pupils	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total number of mistakes	male	144	37.5764	20.97670	1.74806
	female	130	40.0154	22.18456	1.94571

Table 9: Independent Samples Test by Gender Difference

Independent Samples Test						
		t-test for Equality of Means				
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Total number of mistakes	Equal variances assumed	-.935	272	.351 ₁	-2.4390	2.60814
	Equal variances not assumed	-.932	265.343	.352 ₂	-2.4390	2.61563

Note: 1. 'p' value
2. 'p' value

Graph 1: Total Number of Mistakes committed by all Pupils



Total number of mistakes committed by all pupils

Since the two-tailed probability value (0.351) in **(Table 9)** is greater than the level of significance (0.05), then H_0 is accepted. This demonstrates that the total number of mistakes for boys and girls in the population is not significantly different. It is interesting to note that 130 girls achieved a higher average number of mistakes than did 144 boys (Std. Error Mean in **Table 8:46**). The histogram (**Graph 1**) shows that the distribution is not a normal one. In fact, it is slightly skewed to the right. This means that at the tail of the curve very few children seem to have made mistakes well-above the mean.

Close observations to the categories (**Table 10:49**) under which the types of mistakes were listed clearly show that girls erred slightly less than boys. However, one has to keep in mind that the participating cohort of girls was less than that of the boys. Indeed, the average mean vividly indicates that girls made more mistakes than boys.

Table 10: Orthographical Mistakes by Gender Difference

Category	Example	Mistakes committed by	
		Boys	Girls
Consonants			
Misplaced consonant	nihdlu → nidhlu	51	77
Missing consonant	tlaqa → tlaqna	444	471
Double consonant missing	maru → marru	597	502
Added consonant	ferhann → ferhan	290	308
Incorrect consonant	nahstuh → nahsluh	491	464
Capital letters			
Omitted capital letters	ghadira → Ghadira	468	303
Misplaced capital letters	paPa' → papa'	177	233
Vowels			
Added euphonic vowel	marru il-belt	293	335
Missing euphonic vowel	mar l-belt → mar il-belt	33	43
Misplaced euphonic vowel	li-skola → l-iskola	2	6
Changed vowels	jihodhom → jehodhom	163	187
gh			
Missing gh	imbad → imbaghad	408	381
Added gh	raghmel → ramel	35	40
Misplaced gh	jogghob → joghgob	61	88
ie			
Missing ie	sabieh → sabih	220	221
Misplaced ie	niextiq → nixtieq	21	6
Added ie	niextieq → nixtieq	68	79
h			
Added h	jismhu → jismu	64	55
Missing h	tider → tidher	141	159
Misplaced h	jhisima → jisimha	5	9
h instead of h	hallieh → hallieh	85	86
Articles			
Hyphen in article missing	ilbajja → il-bajja	131	117
Missing articles	tfal → it-tfal	63	77
Added articles	iz-zija → zija	43	19
Added article hyphen	il-tqajt → iltqajt	47	53
Missing diacritic signs			
h instead of h	hadu → hadu	303	224
Accent			
Missing accent	papa → papa'	275	248
Word compartmentalisation			
Break-up of single words	anni mal → annimal	22	41
Joined words	kinemm → kien hemm	137	106
Apostrophe			
Added apostrophe	sa' → sa	20	35
Missing apostrophe	ma → ma'	108	116
Phonetics			
Homonyms	u → hu	53	42
Assimilation of consonants	gbir → kbir	78	67

4.3.2 Orthographical Errors by Age Difference

The correlation is between those pupils (boys and girls) who were born in the first six months of the year and those born in the second half of the year. The authors assumed that children born between January and June commit fewer errors than those born between July and December because the former are supposed to be more intellectually mature. (*Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development*)

H₁: Total Number of mistakes is affected by month of birth

H₀: Total Number of mistakes is not affected by month of birth

Table 11: Group Statistics by Age Difference

Group Statistics					
Age		Number of pupils	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total number of mistakes	January - June	136	39.3162	22.15056	1.89940
	July - December	138	38.1594	21.01242	1.78870

Table 12: Independent Samples Test by Age Difference

Independent Samples Test						
		t-test for Equality of Means				
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Total number of mistakes	Equal variances assumed	.444	272	.658	1.1568	2.60804
	Equal variances not assumed	.443	270.772	.658	1.1568	2.60905

The Sig. (2-tailed) value (0.658) in (Table 12) is larger than the level of significance (0.05), therefore H₀ is accepted. Hence, the total number of mistakes children made in their examination scripts was by no means affected by their month of birth. It can be deduced that the age factor does not contribute to the amount of orthographical mistakes made in Maltese Language Examinations. It is worth noting that the Standard Error Mean (Table 11) of those pupils born between July and December is less than that of the ones born between January and June. (Table 13:51) shows that the older children committed more mistakes than the younger ones in the categories namely:

consonants, vowels, **gh**, word compartmentalisation and phonetics. This result annuls the authors' hypothesis.

Table 13: Orthographical Mistakes by Age Difference

Explanation	Example	Mistakes committed by	
		Jan – Jun (B1+G1)	Jul – Dec (B2+G2)
Consonants			
Misplaced consonants	nihdlu → nidhlu	62	66
Missing consonant	tlaqa → tlaqna	465	450
Double consonant missing	maru → marru	548	551
Added consonant	ferhann → ferhan	311	287
Incorrect consonant	nahstuh → nahsluh	491	464
Capital letters			
Omitted capital letters	ghadira → Ghadira	403	368
Misplaced capital letters	Papa' → papa'	138	272
Vowels			
Added euphonic vowel	marru il-belt	295	333
Missing euphonic vowel	mar l-belt → mar il-belt	35	41
Misplaced euphonic vowel	li-skola → l-iskola	6	2
Changed vowels	jihodhom → jehodhom	203	147
gh			
Missing gh	imbad → imbaghad	388	401
Added gh	raghmel → ramel	45	30
Misplaced gh	jogghob → joghgob	83	66
ie			
Missing ie	sabieh → sabih	225	216
Misplaced ie	niextiq → nixtieq	10	17
Added ie	niextieq → nixtieq	80	67
h			
Added h	jismhu → jismu	61	58
Missing h	tider → tidher	128	172
Misplaced h	jhisima → jisimha	2	12
h instead of h	hallieh → hallieh	92	79
Articles			
Hyphen in article missing	ilbajja → il-bajja	149	99
Missing articles	tfal → it-tfal	63	77
Added articles	iz-zija → zija	36	26
Added article hyphen	il-tqajt → iltqajt	58	42
Missing diacritic signs			
h instead of h	hadu → hadu	246	281
Accent			
Missing accent	papa → papa'	294	229
Word compartmentalisation			
Break-up of single words	anni mal → annimal	27	36
Joined words	kinemm → kien hemm	138	105
Apostrophe			
Added apostrophe	sa' → sa	17	38
Missing apostrophe	ma → ma'	116	108
Phonetics			
Homonyms	u → hu	53	42
Assimilation of consonants	gbir → kbir	83	62

4.3.3 Orthographical Errors by Age Difference of girls

The presumption forwarded by the researchers regarding this correlation was that females born in the first half of the year err less than those born in the second half in Maltese Orthography.

H_1 : Total Number of mistakes is affected by month of birth

H_0 : Total Number of mistakes is not affected by month of birth

Table 14: Group Statistics by Age Difference of Girls

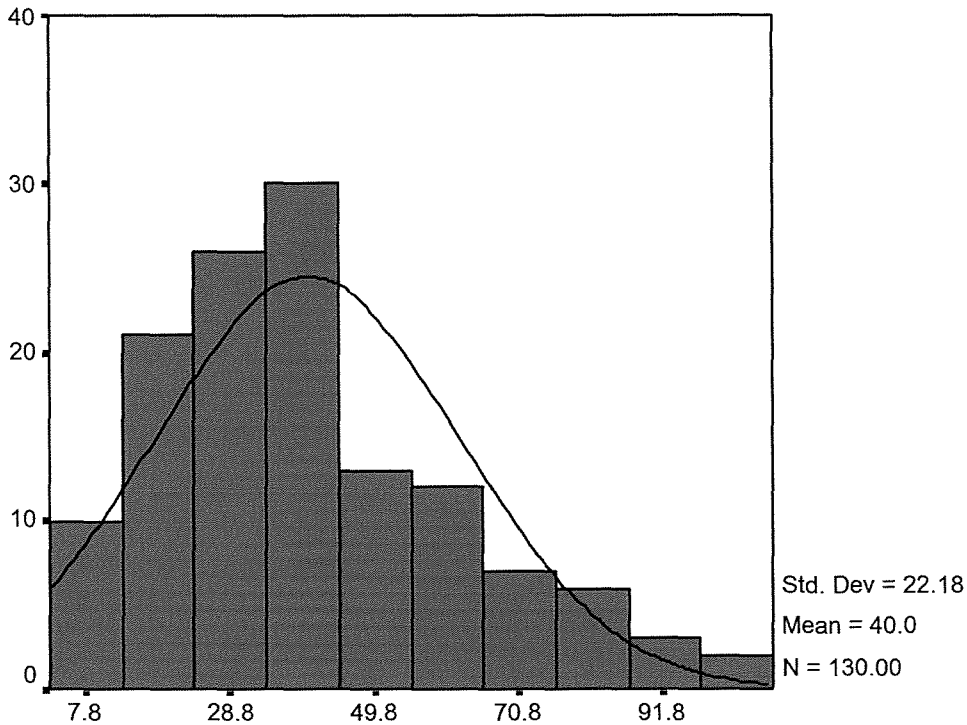
Group Statistics					
Age		Number of girls	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total number of mistakes	January - June	70	40.63	23.307	2.786
	July - December	60	39.30	20.972	2.708

Table 15: Independent Samples Test by Age Difference of Girls

Independent Samples Test						
		t-test for Equality of Means				
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Total number of mistakes	Equal variances assumed	.339	128	.735	1.33	3.916
	Equal variances not assumed	.342	127.683	.733	1.33	3.885

Since the two-tailed probability value (0.735) (**Table 15**) is greater than the level of significance (0.05), then H_0 is accepted. Therefore, the total number of mistakes seems not to be affected by age in females. The histogram (**Graph 2:53**) is positively skewed which means that the distribution is not a normal one. The short tail on the right-hand side of the curve shows a number of girls who committed many mistakes.

Graph 2: Orthographical Mistakes by Age Difference of Girls



Total number of mistakes committed by girls

(Table 14:52) clearly illustrates that those girls born in the first six months committed more mistakes than those born in the second half of the year. In fact, the tabular presentation (Table 16:54) shows that the girls born in the first half of the year (G1) excelled in the number of mistakes in each category except in ‘capital letters’. However, this fact is not significant and may have occurred by coincidence. Contrarily, the younger girls that is those born in the second half of the year (G2, Table 16:54) were expected to commit more mistakes that the older ones (G1, Table 16:54). Although, the table compliments the authors’ presumption, the scientific test does not indicate any significance in this regard.

Table 16: Orthographical Mistakes by Age Difference of Girls

Category	Example	Mistakes committed by	
		G1	G2
Consonants			
Misplaced consonant	nihdlu → nidhlu	37	40
Missing consonant	tlaqa → tlaqna	265	206
Double consonant missing	maru → marru	263	239
Added consonant	ferhann → ferhan	163	145
Incorrect consonant	nahstuh → nahsluh	253	211
Capital letters			
Omitted capital letters	ghadira → Ghadira	163	140
Misplaced capital letters	paPa' → papa'	86	147
Vowels			
Added euphonic vowel	marru il-belt	169	166
Missing euphonic vowel	mar l-belt → mar il-belt	22	21
Misplaced euphonic vowel	li-skola → l-iskola	4	2
Changed vowels	jihodhom → jehodhom	114	73
gh			
Missing gh	imbad → imbaghad	198	183
Added gh	raghmel → ramel	31	9
Misplaced gh	jogghob → joghgob	53	35
ie			
Missing ie	sabieh → sabih	127	94
Misplaced ie	niextiq → nixtieq	4	2
Added ie	niextieq → nixtieq	54	25
h			
Added h	jismhu → jismu	29	26
Missing h	tider → tidher	76	83
Misplaced h	jhisima → jisimha	1	8
h instead of h	hallieh → hallieh	61	25
Articles			
Hyphen in article missing	ilbajja → il-bajja	75	42
Missing articles	tfal → it-tfal	42	35
Added articles	iz-zija → zija	16	3
Added article hyphen	il-tqajt → iltqajt	35	19
Missing diacritic signs			
h instead of h	hadu → hadu	124	100
Accent			
Missing accent	papa → papa'	155	93
Word compartmentalisation			
Break-up of single words	anni mal → animal	18	23
Joined words	kinemm → kien hemm	76	30
Apostrophe			
Added apostrophe	sa' → sa	11	24
Missing apostrophe	ma → ma'	66	50
Phonetics			
Homonyms	u → hu	21	21
Assimilation of consonants	gbir → kbir	39	28

4.3.4 Orthographical Errors by Age Difference of boys

The authors' hypothesis concerning the age factor in boys was that boys born between January and June err less in Maltese Orthography than those born between July and December. The assumption is as follows:

H_1 : Total Number of mistakes is affected by month of birth

H_0 : Total Number of mistakes is not affected by month of birth

Table 17: Group Statistics by Age Difference of Boys

	Age	Number of boys	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total number of mistakes	January - June	66	37.92	20.943	2.578
	July - December	78	37.28	21.136	2.393

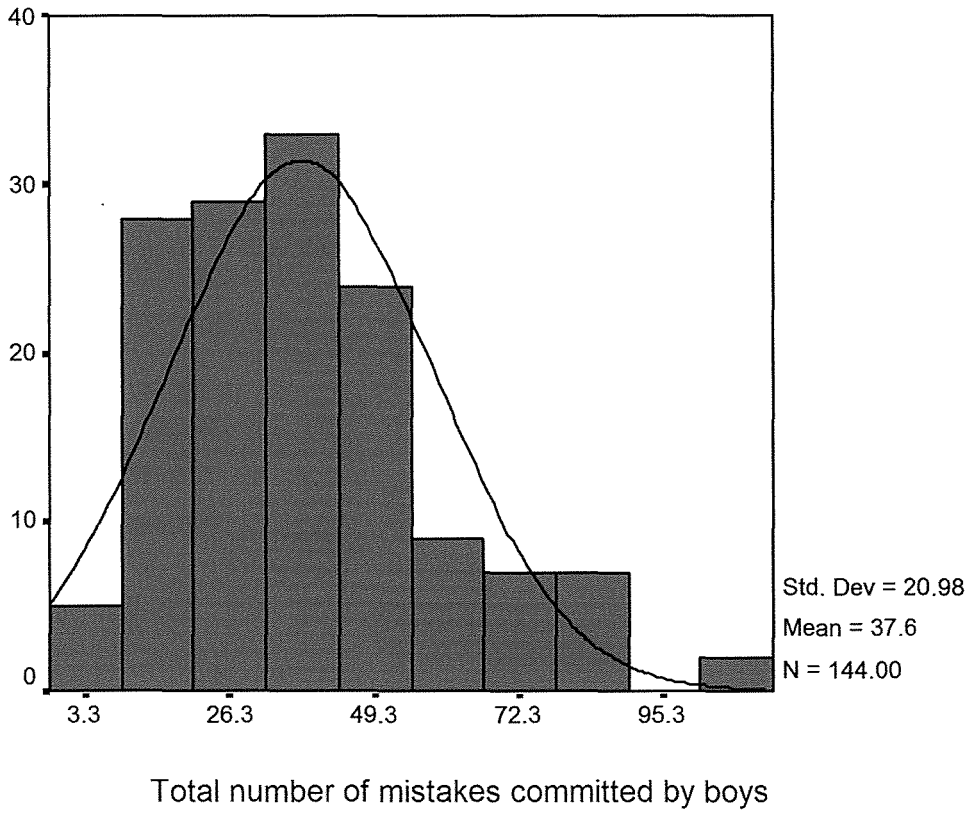
Table 18: Independent Samples Test by Age Difference of Boys

		Independent Samples Test				
		t-test for Equality of Means				
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Total number of mistakes	Equal variances assumed	.182	142	.856 ₁	.64	3.520
	Equal variances not assumed	.183	138.488	.855 ₂	.64	3.518

Note: 1. 'two-tailed probability value'
2. 'two-tailed probability value'

The two-tailed probability value, 0.856 (**Table 18**), is greater than the level of significance (0.05), then H_0 is taken into account. Hence, the amount of mistakes is not affected by the age factor. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to note that the older boys achieved a higher mean than the younger ones (**Table 17**). The histogram (**Graph 3:56**) illustrates a curve slightly skewed to the right. It is worth considering that the tail is short, thus very few boys committed a considerable number of mistakes.

Graph 3: Total Number of Mistakes by Age Difference of Boys



An in-depth look at (Table 19:57) demonstrates that the boys born in the second half of the year erred more than the older ones in all categories, except the “Accent”. Although these findings compliment our presumption, the scientific test reveals no significant difference.

Table 19: Orthographical Mistakes by Age Difference of Boys

Explanation	Example	Mistakes committed by	
		B1	B2
Consonants			
Misplaced consonant	nihdlu → nidhlu	25	26
Missing consonant	tlaqa → tlaqna	200	244
Double consonant missing	maru → marru	285	312
Added consonant	ferhann → ferhan	148	142
Incorrect consonant	nahstuh → nahsluh	238	253
Capital letters			
Omitted capital letters	ghadira → Ghadira	240	228
Misplaced capital letters	paPa' → papa'	52	125
Vowels			
Added euphonic vowel	marru il-belt	126	167
Missing euphonic vowel	mar l-belt → mar il-belt	13	20
Misplaced euphonic vowel	li-skola → l-iskola	2	0
Changed vowels	jihodhom → jehodhom	89	74
gh			
Missing gh	imbad → imbaghad	190	218
Added gh	raghmel → ramel	14	21
Misplaced gh	jogghob → joghgob	30	31
ie			
Missing ie	sabieh → sabih	98	122
Misplaced ie	niextiq → nixtieq	6	15
Added ie	niextieq → nixtieq	26	42
h			
Added h	jismhu → jismu	32	32
Missing h	tider → tidher	52	89
Misplaced h	jhisima → jisimha	1	4
h instead of h	hallieh → hallieh	31	52
Articles			
Hyphen in article missing	ilbajja → il-bajja	74	57
Missing articles	tfal → it-tfal	21	42
Added articles	iz-zija → zija	20	23
Added article hyphen	il-tqajt → iltqajt	24	23
Missing diacritic signs			
h instead of h	hadu → hadu	122	181
Accent			
Missing accent	papa → papa'	139	136
Word compartmentalisation			
Break-up of single words	anni mal → animal	9	13
Joined words	kinemm → kien hemm	62	75
Apostrophe			
Added apostrophe	sa' → sa	6	14
Missing apostrophe	ma → ma'	50	58
Phonetics			
Homonyms	u → hu	32	21
Assimilation of consonants	gbir → kbir	44	34

4.4 Analysis of Interview Data

This section deals with the analysis of the feedback obtained from the interviews conducted to the teachers who taught the Year Four classes in the participating schools. Each interview question will be tackled individually except for the second and third questions which are directly related to each other.

Do you use the same methodology for the teaching of Maltese and English Creative Writing and Comprehension lessons?

All interviewees responded that both tasks are delivered similarly in both languages. The most common strategy used when delivering Creative Writing lessons was by holding a discussion to elicit ideas from the pupils. However, certain teachers illustrated their creativity by writing pupils' ideas in the form of a web for them to be able to visualise the points as a whole unit. Charts and flashcards were planned to help children understand any new expressions or vocabulary brought about both by the teacher and the children. Picture flashcards were the most common visual aid used by the majority of the interviewees. The 'fantasy trip' motivates the pupils to imagine about various things which have to do with the title. This kind of in-depth reflection is intended to encourage innovative ideas to children's minds. The authors do not define reproduction of stories as totally progressive since these promote the notion of giving back what you have heard. In fact they are not so much used by traditional teachers. When children pass this phase, one particular interviewee encourages them to complete the story which they would have already started in class. Picture compositions are also popular with one of the male teachers interviewed.

Various other interviewees opted for a more traditional approach, which involves the extraction of ideas through a discussion. The latter is accompanied by the explanation of any new words which children will be asked to copy from the whiteboard. Several teachers exclaimed that the Creative writing task is planned to be completed in the classroom. A particular teacher explained that even though in Year 3 children are asked to write sentences only, during the first semester in Year 4, she starts by writing a passage from which she then rubs off certain words and encourages children to insert their own. This method is followed by the traditional one of the elicitation of ideas.

On the other hand, the Comprehension component is delivered in a more traditional way by almost all the interviewees. This involves the reading of the passage together with a discussion and an explanation of the difficult words present in the text.

Most often, Maltese Comprehension texts are understood better than those in English. Teachers tend to use less visual/auditory aids when conveying Maltese Comprehension lessons. However, two particular interviewees convey such lessons more creatively. Teacher no. 12 encourages role-play during which children are dressed up as the characters in the story. Teacher no. 14 who also delivers Comprehension lessons through role-plays added that she starts by reading the text herself to the whole class and explaining the difficult words before distributing the handouts. Subsequently, she assigns roles to the children and encourages them to act out the passage as they remember it. This facilitates students' ability to understand the passage by using the difficult words in the right context.

Does the school you teach in adopt any specific procedures that you are asked to use during Maltese language teaching?

Do you follow any guidelines when delivering Creative Writing and Comprehension lessons?⁸

All interviewees from the different areas around Malta have agreed that they use no specific strategy for the teaching of the native language, except for interviewees no. 15 and 16 who said that the school they teach in encourages the conveyance of lessons through topic work. However, teachers are free to use the pedagogies they think are best for their pupils. The participating teachers stated that they follow their individual teaching strategies they acquired during their training.

From your teaching experience which are the most common orthographical mistakes committed by children in these kind of tasks?

Every interviewed teacher stated that pupils make quite a number of orthographical errors when writing in their native language. The most common mistakes observed by the interviewees included words having the pseudo-consonant 'gh' in their morphological root which children misplace or eliminate from words. Children are also likely to make mistakes concerning vowels. Indeed, they tend to commence a word with a vowel successive to a word which ends with another or the same vowel; thus breaking

⁸ This question and the previous one were analysed collectively because they are directly linked.

the native language rule which states that it is incorrect to write two vowels, which are not an integral part of the word, adjacent to each other in two separate words for example, '**morna il-Belt**'.

The omission of the apostrophe from prepositions is also considered as a common mistake by most respondents. The confusion of the '**ie**' and '**h**' were also pointed out by a number of interviewees. Missing articles, articles' hyphens and missing euphonic vowels were also mentioned as areas in which pupils frequently err. Teachers also mentioned the phenomenon of double consonants written as one e.g. '**siġġijiet**' instead of '**siġġijiet**' as pointed out by one of the interviewees. Contrarily, words that take a double consonant in the singular as in '**gaġġa**' and which in the plural drop one of the middle double consonants are very often mistaken and written with a double consonant even in the plural e.g. '**gaġġeġ**', as was also alluded by the same interviewee. Interviewee no. 9, mentioned the omission of a dot characteristic of certain letters in our native language, the **ċ**, **ġ** and **ż**. The leaving out of the dot gives a non-existent meaning to various words, which include these letters.

Interviewee no. 14, among other types of orthographical errors that were also mentioned by other teachers explained that her class pupils tend to forget the proper use of the capital letters where necessary especially in the beginning of sentences. Besides, she also specified that at times, children tend to write phonetically. This was also observed by the authors in the extraction of orthographical errors from the examination scripts. The authors were also surprised by interviewee no. 16 who commented that the majority of mistakes committed by his class pupils concerned confusion of consonants such as the consonant 'd' with 'b'. Incidentally, the category that included consonants comprised the majority of orthographical errors elicited from the examination scripts observed by the authors.

Why do you think children commit such mistakes?

The majority of the interviewed teachers contend that children make a number of orthographical errors because they do not read. Reading is considered important for the enhancement of the other language skills. Other interviewees commented that pupils err because they are careless – "**ghax traskurati**". However, they also claimed that at Primary Level it seems quite difficult for children to grasp particular grammatical concepts of a language, especially the mother tongue which may seem quite complex to

write. Lack of writing practice is also regarded as a factor which leads children to err. Since at this age children have not yet been exposed to certain grammar rules, several orthographical mistakes could not be avoided. Lack of concentration was also mentioned as a cause which leads children to make various orthographical mistakes. Indeed, teacher no. 13 alludes that children are not capable of stopping and thinking – ***“M’humix kapaçi jieqfu u jahsbu.”***

Another important language phenomenon, which was considered as lacking in children, was the division of words into syllables. Indeed, teachers, especially teacher no. 7, contend that if children grasp such phenomena well, their orthographical errors would decrease radically. Another interviewee complained that children have *“no exposure to the printed word”*, (teacher no. 10) that is children are not provided with sufficient books and environmental prints in both the classroom environment and at home. This leads them to make orthographical mistakes when writing in their native language. Interviewee no. 16 pointed out that it seems that among other factors, children lack environmental literacy, which is extremely important for them as they visualise the printed words and thus leads them to minimise their orthographical errors.

How are you helping children to err less?

The majority of teachers insist on traditional strategies to be taken at stake in order to help children reduce or overcome such orthographical mistakes. In fact, they insist on the importance of correction which involves children writing the whole sentence that includes the wrongly spelt word or writing the corrected version of the incorrect word for three times. Reading was again prompted by all teachers. Dictations are not a method which is frequently used by the interviewees, because they argue that children are given a number of words to learn for dictation and this would be more a case of learning by rote. In fact, when it comes to rewriting the same word within a context, children make errors they used to make before the dictation. Others were of a different opinion because they considered dictations as extremely important and helpful to reduce orthographical errors in Creative writing tasks. Sometimes, children are also encouraged to spell the incorrect words verbally in the correct way in front of their classmates. Interviewee no. 7 shows children how words are written correctly through ‘tricks’ as she herself referred to them. Word model-building is constantly exposed to children by

teacher no. 12 who regards the former as vital for children to minimise their orthographical errors.

A couple of other teachers opt for more progressive teaching styles in order to help their pupils reduce the amount of orthographical mistakes they make. A particular interviewee (no. 2) explained that she finds word games handy and very helpful in this regard. She writes the most common mistakes on the whiteboard and then carries out an explanation. As a reinforcer, the whole class plays *hang man*. She believes that games help pupils minimise orthographical mistakes. Whole class explanation regarding the most common errors is also popular with the majority of the interviewed teachers. Flashcards with the words which children tend to mix up especially those including the consonants 'd' and 'b' accompanied by pictures are resources which are frequently used by interviewee no. 16. Moreover, the same interviewee helps his pupils reduce their orthographical errors concerning the 'gh' and 'ie' by presenting them with various flashcards containing words with the 'gh' and 'h'. He also asks them to count the number of letters in the words to make them aware that the 'gh' and 'ie' are considered as one letter.

In our research, we found out that children make these mistakes (Appendix 4:84). What do you think should be done to minimise such errors?

Most of the interviewees felt the need for something which would help children overcome these orthographical problems. Various teachers stated that games like crossword puzzles and jumbled-word games might be helpful for children. Interviewee no. 12 claimed that children's books should be reviewed and children should be given the opportunity to learn through stories forwarded through a computer CD. Repetition and practice are also regarded as very important. The respondents also suggested that word model-building and presentation of frequently erred words within a context will definitely improve children's spelling. Giving hints and reminding children how certain words are written helps reduce orthographical mistakes. Teachers claimed that there needs to be a set of guidelines which would specifically cater for the teaching of orthography. A newly graduate has suggested that seminars providing helpful tips for teachers about orthography would improve their pedagogical skills together with the children's ability to spell words correctly.

The importance of reading was also mentioned at this stage, “*L-aqwa medicina hija l-qari*”⁹. A copybook in which children write difficult words together with their meaning/s was also suggested. Another recommendation was to shorten the syllabus in order to allow teachers spend more time teaching orthography.

4.5 Relationship between children’s mistakes and teachers’ interviews

The authors decided to analyse the results obtained from the examination scripts (the total number of mistakes made by all children) with the teachers’ interviews in order to give a better meaning to the study. The researchers intended to interpret the results in a relevant manner with regards to the teachers’ interviews.

Despite the fact that the authors introduced the aims of the research before the commencement of the interviews, none of the interviewees related their responses to gender difference and/or age factor. Actually, they seemed to be more concerned with the hints of orthographical errors.

The interviewing cohort of teachers from the participating schools around Malta revealed that children’s common orthographical mistakes are mostly related to ‘ie’, ‘gh’, ‘h’, double consonants, vowels, articles and the apostrophe. These disclosures validate and confirm this study since the researchers’ results are closely related to the teachers’ observations. Although various studies have dealt with orthographical mistakes made in written Maltese Language, little research has been done regarding the authors’ aims. In fact, the authors were quite surprised when they discovered that the teachers’ impressions about the most common mistakes were the ones that ranked highest in the research. Interviewee no. 13 believed that the onus lies on the teachers and that the Education Division cannot do anything about this problem of Maltese Orthography.

⁹ *Reading is the best medicine.*

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, the authors planned to set forth the results acquired from the analysis of the orthographical mistakes made by children during their Year Four 2001 Maltese Annual Examination.

In view of the fact that the authors' research followed mainly a quantitative design, the researchers presented their results in a statistical and tabular form accompanied by an in-depth analysis. Since a valid and reliable study should include more than one research method, (Cohen and Manion, 1997; Denzin, 1970; Ritchie and Hampson, 1996), the authors concluded this chapter by correlating the detailed evaluation of the teachers' interviews with quantitative data.

The following chapter will conclude this study by forwarding some practical suggestions and recommendations of how orthographical mistakes in children's writings may be minimised. The authors will consider the teachers' ideas revealed during the interviews when formulating their suggestions.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Suggestions

5.0 Conclusion

The main objective of this research was to analyse the Composition and Comprehension components of the Year Four Maltese Language Annual Examination Scripts of 2001. This research sought to discover whether or not there exists a correlation between the children's gender and month of birth with reference to the orthographical mistakes children made in the above-mentioned components.

The cross-sectional study included a mixed methodology approach in order to give the research a valid and reliable status. The statistical data obtained from the SPSS package was illustrated together with an in-depth analysis of the different types of mistakes extracted from the examination scripts. The correlations that mark the basis of this research followed by an evaluation of the teachers' interviews answered the hypotheses.

The results clearly show that the hypotheses failed since no significant difference exists among the gender, the age factor, and the mistakes made by the pupils. Furthermore, the authors decided to address the spelling difficulties envisaged in the scripts by taking into account the interviewees' responses and formulating suggestions that could shed light to future studies and in-service educators.

5.1 Recommendations

“When we read or spell we use only twenty-six letters [thirty letters in Maltese], in different combinations to represent all the spoken words that there are in our language. We can do this because each spoken word has a phonological structure, a string of abstract phonological elements and we represent the phonological elements or sounds of all the spoken words in our language with different combinations of these few alphabetic letters.”

(Lieberman and Shankweiler, 1985; Mattingley, 1972, 1985 as cited in Pumfrey & Elliott, 1990:84)

This does not exclude the fact that once children have grasped the skill of writing independent words, they will be conditioned by phonological sounds. However, this is not an appropriate approach to employ when writing in one's native language since certain sounds have the tendency to confuse the pupils, for example, in words like

'bieb' the final harsh consonant 'b' is often mistaken with the soft consonant 'p'. Such linguistic difficulties are further explained in chapter 4 section (4.2.1). Subsequently, teachers should pay more attention to these difficulties in order to make their pupils aware that correct orthography does not depend solely on the phonetical elements of a language but also on the lexicography, graphology and morphology amongst others. Indeed, Primary School teachers have the vital role of providing pupils with the appropriate grammatical rules concerning the Maltese Language. Furthermore, the authors have come up with various suggestions meant to help teachers in teaching Maltese orthography correctly and pupils to err less. The recommendations that the authors will be putting forward were collected and reflected upon from:

1. the teachers' interviews,
2. relevant literature and
3. the authors' experiences in native language teaching and learning.

5.1.1 Reading

An important factor that leads to correct spelling is reading. In fact, "*reading has received more attention than any other aspect of education.*" (Gibson and Levin, 1975 as cited in Destefano 1978:125) Such attention is still regarded important nowadays because the majority of interviewees encourage reading to help their learning community improve all the language aspects including that of orthography. Indeed, teacher no. 11 said that "***L-aqwa mediċina hija l-qari.***"¹⁰ Reading is also helpful to children because when they read they would be exposed to the printed word. Various other respondents have suggested that a new collection of textbooks should be introduced in our schools. The Maltese reading text, "Id-Denfil" is no longer relevant to the children's lifestyles. This book is outdated especially because the pictures are in mono colour, unattractive and deal with a different way of life. Most of the stories are no longer realistic. This was also accentuated by teacher no. 12 who said, "***Id-Denfil jitqacċat***".¹¹ Before educators choose a particular textbook for classroom use, they should look for books "*written by authors who know children and write with different voices than those usually found in textbooks. Children's literature covers virtually the entire span of human experience and knowledge.*" (Graves, 1983:67).

¹⁰ The best medicine is reading.

¹¹ "Id-Denfil" should be abolished.

An alternative to this currently used reading book would be “**Żveljarin**” by Trevor Zahra which provides a set of verses that focus upon subjects of interest to children in this day and age. The Maltese translation of the Disney Ladybird series is an ideal selection for Year Four pupils to read since it presents a readable version of the most popular movies for children. “**Hrejef Helwin għat-tfal Maltin**” by Natalie Portelli is another collection which the authors recommend because the linguistic flow employed by the authoress helps the children to comprehend well what they are reading. Although the text is not accompanied by many colourful pictures, it gives the children the opportunity to imagine the characters they are reading about. “**Il-Familja Vella**” by Francis Ebejer presents daily experiences of this family in a humorous vein. This could motivate the children because they may identify their family with the one portrayed in the book. An additional supplement of reading material which may be used in the classroom is the monthly magazine “**Sagħtar**”. Apart from being exposed to different genres of literature, teachers may create reading activities that include direct extracts from this magazine, which is bought by the majority of the children in the Primary Schools.

5.1.2 Motivating Reading Activities

Attractive books should also be accompanied by motivating reading lessons that could include drama e.g. having children dressed up as the characters and encouraged to use different gestures and tones of voice in their acting. Reading different texts may be set as a radio programme. During such activity, children may pretend to be broadcasters. The teacher may encourage the pupils to record their own voices on a cassette in the classroom. This will stimulate children with different reading abilities to participate actively, thus learn more during these kinds of lessons. The cassette together with the text can be placed in the reading corner for the pupils to use at a later stage.

Motivating Reading tasks need not only be set round the ‘traditional book’ but should also incorporate “*material which relates to the real world, such as labels, captions, notices, children’s newspapers, books of instructions, plans and maps, diagrams, computer print-out and visual display.*” (English in the National Curriculum (No. 2) Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office, London, HMSO (1989), para. 3, as cited in Bearne & Farrow, 1991:29). Using varied reading material motivates children to engage themselves in direct roles during reading sessions. This

recommendation is based on the authors' personal experiences during their teaching practices when they employed newspaper cuttings and advertisements as part of their pedagogy. They observed that the

pupils felt very enthusiastic and looked forward to having similar reading sessions. Apart from capturing the children's attention during lessons of this kind, the authors verify that through such ideology the lesson objectives were attained as desired, as was clearly recorded in the children's assessment sheets.

5.1.3 Writing

“Writing cannot be seen in isolation from other modes of language use – it requires attention to reading and to talking as two of the means by which it can be fostered.”

(Harris, 1993:81).

This should inspire teachers to plan reflective reading activities which help children to comprehend and analyse the texts they are being provided with. Exposure to a variety of literature (as outlined in section 5.1.2) helps in the *“Stimulation of Analytical, Critical and Creative Thinking Skills”* as proposed by Principle 3 of the NMC, (Ministry of Education, 1999:31). These skills should lead children to produce original writings: the Composition component. Children like to write. Graves states that *“Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school.”* (Graves, 1983:3) Indeed, the authors believe that teachers should plan activities through which they encourage pupils to come up with novel ideas in their writings. This may be achieved by encouraging the children to share their ideas on the title in question. Meanwhile, the teacher organises them in the form of a web on the whiteboard. *“Writing becomes a process of sharing what we know about our experiences.... When a class becomes a community, its members learn to help and model for each other.”* (Graves, 1983:51) This serves as a helping tool for the children to formulate their ideas into sentences.

Concrete and pictorial visual aids are more likely to stimulate the children's imagination and creativity. Another captivating method suggested by a couple of interviewees was that of the 'fantasy trip'. The pupils find this technique quite intriguing because they feel lost in a world of fantasy, which leads them to produce qualitative

writings in their native language. In such tasks, teachers should take the role of facilitators and listen to the children's intentions and ideas. At this stage, teachers should forward their advices regarding the work presented, but then, it is at the discretion of the children to either accept or refuse the ideas suggested. Group discussions regarding children's work are meant to provide positive feedback and feedforward from both parties i.e. the teachers and group mates. This approach is likely to improve the quality of children's writings. Improvement may also be achieved through revising their work. *"When a piece is revised so that it may be highlighted (or published), the student will be more interested in getting it right. Highlighting will make the writing real to the students, no longer a barren exercise just to be turned in to the teacher."* (Proett & Gil, 1986:30). The authors suggest that teachers should display children's work in the classroom or school's corridor in order to be appreciated by viewers. Such work can also be published in the school or class newsletter.

In our native language examinations, the Comprehension component is another task used to assess children's linguistic ability. Therefore, all teachers give many exercises of this kind to the children in order to consolidate their reading, comprehension and writing skills. Educators could deliver Comprehension lessons in various ways. Vocabulary can be explained through a discussion held before the distribution of the text. During this discussion, the teacher should introduce the 'new words' in an attractive way through overstressed gestures and tones of voice. From past teaching experiences, the authors have learnt that this accelerates children's interest and understanding of the texts. After the reading and understanding of the text, the teacher may elicit the main points including the new vocabulary on flashcards which later may help the children to interpret an appointed character from the passage in front of the whole class.

5.1.4 Spelling

"Spelling is much more than a courtesy to one's reader; understanding how words are spelled is a means to a more efficient and proficient of writing and reading."

(Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton and Johnston; 2000:223)

Since the authors deem discovery learning to be the most effective pedagogical implication within the classroom environment because it sets children to think and reflect upon their work (Bruner, 1966), they regard children's experimentation with spelling as the first step towards correct usage of orthography (Haynes, 1992).

The researchers think that games are excellent resources which help young children to master correct spelling. The authors practised such an approach and they prove that it is effective. Most of the teachers who participated in the interviews also demonstrated the advantages of teaching through play. Some of the games employed in pedagogy were hang man, quizzes, crossword puzzles, and word searches. Correct orthography may also be achieved by stimulating children to spell a word correctly in order to be able to initiate playing a traditional game like ‘hopscotch’. Children need to spell a word appropriately every time they have a turn. This procedure may also be used as an alternative to that of throwing a dice when playing board games. Many interviewed teachers felt that Maltese Language software is lacking in the classrooms. Indeed, they suggested the use of interactive Maltese spelling games like those often used in English.

An element, which is widely practised in order to help children improve spelling, is the working out of exercises. Teachers employ such elements in their pedagogy because they believe that these would enhance the children’s skills of spelling correctly. However, the authors believe that the use of such items is important as long as they contain words in context as accentuated by the fourth interviewee amongst others. The meaning of words may be taught through sentences e.g. “**Mort id-dar fit-tmienja.**”¹² and “**Ghandi dahri juġagħni.**”¹³ Another way of helping children to acquire the correct meanings of particular words and how they are spelt is to encourage pupils to use the dictionary. It is important that teachers show the children how to use a dictionary and a thesaurus well.

Exposing the children to environmental print in the Maltese Language could also enhance spelling. Educators may consolidate this by displaying traffic signs in both languages. This helps children to link their instruction with real life experiences.

All the interviewed teachers agreed that they should be provided with new updated books to guide them in conveying grammar, Comprehension, and Creative writing lessons in an effective way. The third interviewee suggested that the Education Division should hold seminars aimed at helping teachers to understand how children’s mistakes could be minimised.

¹² I went home at eight o’clock.

¹³ I have a backache.

5.1.5 Assessing children's writings

"Grading is a fact of life in all school systems...I want grades to help, not hinder." (Graves, 1983:57). Therefore, assessment should be based on the whole process of writing rather than on the outcome. Hence, teachers could follow a set of criteria (grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, paragraphs and content) when grading pupils' work.

Spiteri (as cited in Mifsud, 2000:203) suggests that, *"Each criterion can be assigned 5 points and according to, for instance, how correct the learner's grammar is, and a mark out of 5 is awarded. This is then added to the marks achieved on the other criteria to give a composite mark that is recorded."* However, teachers could alter this suggestion according to the objective/s of particular lessons. Correcting children's writings, may take the form of conferencing. This may be carried out by encouraging the children to try and identify the wrongly spelled words or other types of mistakes. Through this, teachers may introduce the idea of self-diagnosis to children (Graves, 1983). Such revision by the pupils themselves, leads the teacher to understand the needs of pupils individually. Educators could discuss which mistakes they intend to focus upon whilst correcting children's work. This helps pupils to concentrate more on the concerned elements, thus, leading them to err less.

5.2 Final Comment

This dissertation should guide teachers to introduce novel pedagogical approaches, which may improve pupils' spelling difficulties. The persons concerned may understand that there is a need for a revised collection of textbooks in our native language that could be used for classroom instruction. The authors believe that if these recommendations are taken into account, they lead towards better spelling in the Maltese Language. This dissertation may inspire future researchers to work on a similar but longitudinal study over the Junior Years. They can also research whether or not boys and girls make such quantity of mistakes under examination conditions. This can be done by assessing children's abilities in the Composition and Comprehension components in a less stressful atmosphere.

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Appendices

Appendix 1


Approved


Agius Maria
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Borg Pauline
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5th October 2001

Miss Anne Borg
Director of Planning
Education Division
Floriana

Madam,

We the undersigned, who are proceeding to our third year in the B.Ed.(Hons.) Primary track course, are requesting permission to visit a number of local Primary State Schools to collect a sample of year 4 scripts of the Maltese annual examination 2001.

We require these scripts to make a detailed analysis of the Composition and Comprehension component. The collected data will be used by us for our end of course dissertation.

The objective of our study is to find out whether there exists a correlation between the pupils' month of birth and the type of quantity of ortographical mistakes. We also plan to find out whether there is gender dominance on these mistakes.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours Sincerely,



Agius Maria



Borg Pauline

Appendix 2

Mistoqsijiet għall-intervista ma' l-ghalliema li jgħallmu r-raba' klassi fl-iskola Primarja

- 1) Il-metodoloġija li tużaw għat-tagħlim tal-Malti hija b'xi mod jew iehor differenti minn dik li tużaw waqt it-tagħlim ta' l-Ingliż?
- 2) Fl-iskola tiegħek hemm xi proċeduri speċifiċi li intom mitluba tużaw waqt il-lezzjonijiet tal-Malti?
- 3) Tużaw xi linji ta' gwida għal-lezzjonijiet ta' Fehim it-Test u tal-Kitba Kreattiva?
- 4) Mill-esperjenza tiegħek ta' tagħlim, liema huma l-aktar żbalji ortografiċi komuni li jagħmlu t-tfal fl-eżercizzji tal-Kitba Kreattiva u ta' Fehim it-Test?
- 5) Għaliex taħseb li jsiru dawn it-tipi ta' żbalji ortografiċi?
- 6) X'azzjoni qed tiegħu biex tghin lit-tfal jegħlbu dawn l-iżbalji ortografiċi?
- 7) Mir-riċerka li għamilna, sibna li t-tfal qed jagħmlu dawn l-iżbalji ortografiċi (uri r-riżultati miksuba). X'taħseb li għandu jsir biex jonqsu l-ammonti ta' żbalji ortografiċi li qed jagħmlu t-tfal?

Appendix 3

Translation of the Questions asked to Year 4 Primary School Teachers

- 1) Do you use the same methodology for the teaching of Maltese and English Creative Writing and Comprehension lessons?
- 2) Does the school you teach in adopt any specific procedures that you are asked to use when teaching the Maltese Language?
- 3) Do you follow any guidelines when delivering Comprehension and Creative Writing lessons?
- 4) From your teaching experience, which are the most common orthographical mistakes made by children in these tasks?
- 5) Why do you think children make such mistakes?
- 6) How are you helping children to err less?
- 7) In our research we found out that children make these mistakes (show results). What do you think should be done to minimise such errors?

Appendix 4

	Category	Explanation	Example
1	Aposadd	Added apostrophe	sa' → sa
2	Aposmiss	Missing apostrophe	Ma (imma trid tigi ma')
3	Volehxejn	Added euphonic vowel	Marru il-belt
4	Volehmis	Missing euphonic vowel	Mar l-belt
5	Iemis	Missing ie	Qighda → qieghda
6	Ieadded	Added ie	Sabieh → sabih
7	Ghmis	Missing gh	Imbad → imbaghad
8	Ghadded	Added gh	Raghamel → ramel
9	Misgh	Misplaced gh	Joġghob → joghġob
10	Mislett	Misplaced consonants	Nihdlu → nidhlu
11	Artsing	Hyphen in article missing	liskola
12	Misie	Misplaced ie	Niextiq → nixtieq
13	Capsnot	Omitted capital letters	ghadira → Ghadira
14	Hh	h instead of h	hallieh → hallieh
15	h	h instead of h	hadu → hadu
16	Letmis	Consonants missing	Qarnita → qarita
17	Artmis	Missing article	Tfal → it-tfal
18	Vowchan	Changed vowels	Jihodhom → jehodhom
19	Misart	Misplaced article hyphen	li-skola → l-iskola
20	Artadd	Added Article	Iz-zija → zija
21	Ieadded	Added ie	Niextieq → nixtieq
22	Dbletmis	Double letter missing	Maru → marru
23	Hadded	H added	Jismhu → jismu
24	Letadded	Added consonants	Ferhann → ferhan
25	Capsvoid	Misplaced capital letters	paPa' → papa'
26	Xtraspace	Break up of single words	Anni mal → animal
27	Homonyms	Homonyms	U → hu
28	Hmis	H missing	Tider → tidher
29	Singadd	Added article hyphen	Il-tqajt → iltqajt
30	Joinedwor	Joined words	Kinem → kien hemm
31	Pron	Assimilation of consonants	Gbir → kbir
32	Incorlet	Incorrect consonant	Naħstuh → nahsluh
33	Mish	Misplaced h	Jhisima → jisimha
34	Accent	Missing accent	Mama → mamà

**EŻAMIJET ANNWALI
TA' L-ISKEJJEL PRIMARJI
2001**

Taqsim ta' l-Assessjar Edukattiv - Diviżjoni ta' l-Edukazzjoni

Ir-Raba' Sena

MALTI (Kitba)

Ħin: Siegħa

ISEM _____

SKOLA _____

KLASSI _____

TOTAL TAL-MARKI

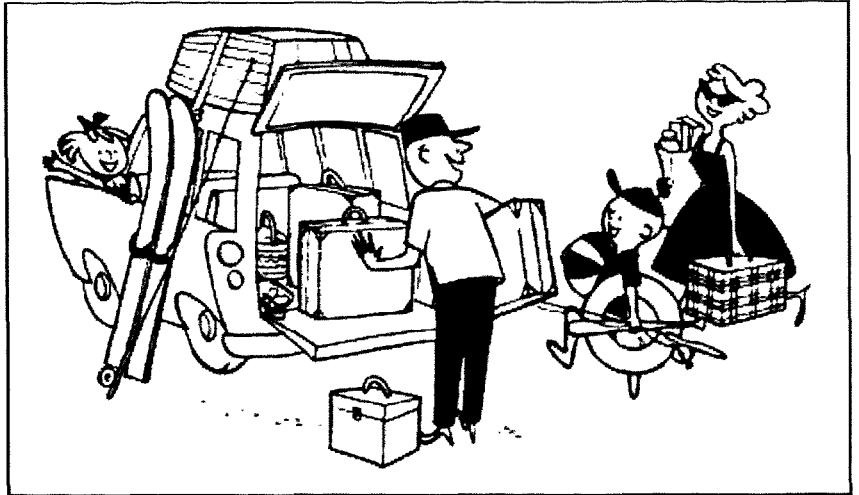


Storja

Aqra sewwa din l-istorja ta' hawn taht u mbagħad wieġeb il-mistoqsijiet dwarha.

(In-numri fit-tarf tal-paragrafi

jgħinuk biex issib it-tweġibiet. Ikteb pulit u ikkopja tajjeb.)



Harġa sa xatt il-baħar.

Kien wasal żmien il-vaganzi. Mary u Peter kienu ilhom hafna jistennew li jasl. Issa setghu jibdew imorru l-baħar u jixxalaw u jċafċfu kemm iridu .

(paragrafu 1)

Darba wahda, il-papà tagħhom qalilhom li kien se jehodhom sal-bajja tal-Ghadira biex iqattghu ġurnata hemmhekk. Dakinhar, it-tfal qamu kmieni hafna. Qabżu barra mis-sodda, inhaslu u libsu malajr. Imbagħad niżlu jiġru fil-kċina. Hemm sabu lill-mamà tlesti l-hobż għall-harġa. It-tfal tawha daqqa t'id billi lestew il-malji, ix-xugamani u l-umbrella tax-xemx. Il-papà għabba kollox fil-karozza u l-familja Borg telqet lejn l-Ghadira.

(paragrafu 2)

Malli waslu, it-tfal telqu jiġru lejn il-baħar. L-ilma kien frisk u ċar daqs il-kristall. Ir-ramel abjad tar-ramla kien diġà jahraq bix-xemx. Il-papà waqqaf l-umbrella waqt li l-mamà harġet l-affarijiet. Imbagħad il-familja kollha niżlet fil-baħar.

(paragrafu 3)

Kemm qabżu t-tfal. Kemm lagħbu bil-ballun. Mary qagħdet tibni l-kastelli tar-ramel bil-pala u l-barmil. Peter libes il-maskra biex jara qiegh il-baħar. Kien hemm hafna hut ta' daqsijiet differenti. Huta minnhom qagħdet thares ċass lejh u ma harbitx bħall-ohrajn. F'rokna ta' blata, wara ffit ċaġħak, kien hemm qarnita kemm kemm tidher.

(paragrafu 4)

Kif tar il-hin. Meta saru s-sitta ta' filghaxija, il-papà ghabba kollox fil-karozza u lkoll flimkien telqu lejn id-dar. It-tfal kienu ghajjenin hafna wara ġurnata l-baħar. Imma huma kienu ferhanin ghax tassew kienu ħadu gost dak il-jum l-Ghadira.

(paragrafu 5)

A. Wieġeb il-mistoqsijiet b'sentenza shiha.

1. X'kienu ilhom jistennew Peter u Mary? (paragrafu 1)

2. Fejn kien se jehodhom il-papà? (paragrafu 2)

3. X'kienet qiegħda tagħmel fil-kċina l-mamà? (paragrafu 2)

4. Kif kien il-baħar tal-Ghadira? (paragrafu 3)

5. X'qagħdet tagħmel Mary fuq ir-ramel? (paragrafu 4)

6. X'ra Peter f'rokna ta' blata taħt wiċċ il-baħar? (paragrafu 4)

7. X'hin marru lura d-dar? (paragrafu 5)

8. Ghaliex kienu ferhanin it-tfal meta marru lura d-dar? (paragrafu 5)

Aghmel sing taħt il-kelma t-tajba.

9. Il-papà ghabba kollox fil- (vann, karozza, trakk). (paragrafu 2)

10. Il-kulur tar-ramel tal-Ghadira kien (abjad, isfar, ahmar) (paragrafu 3)

11. Peter kellu (tromba, maskra, nuċċali) biex jara qiegħ il-baħar. (paragrafu 4)

Imla l-vojt billi tagħzel il-kelma jew kliem mil-lista ta' taht.

12. qabżu barra mis-sodda

13. tawha daqqa t'id

14. ċar daqs il-kristall



(ghenu, nadif u sabih, qamu jiġru,)

(14-il marka)

15. Imla l-vojt biex tkompli l-istorja.

Darba Peter u Mary marru ġurnata _____. Dakinhar huma qamu _____. Malli waslu, marru jiġru biex jaqbżu fl-_____, frisk. Mary qagħdet tibni _____ bir-ramel. Bil-_____, Peter ra qarnita . Meta marru d-dar, it-tfal kienu _____ hafna.

(6 marki)

B. Żid il-kelma n-nieqsa

Eżempju: Peter qabeż qabża minn fuq blata gholja.

1. Mary haffret _____ fonda fir-ramel.

2. Il-mamà xorbot _____ friska għaliex kienet bil-ghatx.

3. Il-papà qabad _____ hut bil-qasba.

4. Peter dar _____ bil-maskra biex jara qiegh il-baħar.

5. Il-familja Borg hadet gost hafna meta harġet _____ sa xatt il-baħar.



(5 marki)

Ċ. Aghżel l-aġġettiv li jaqbel l-aktar mal-kelma b'sing taħtha.

Eżempju: It-tfal kielu l-hobż frisk hdejn il-baħar.

1. Peter u Mary xtraw ġelat _____.
2. Kien hemm hafna dgħajjes fuq il-baħar _____.
3. Ix-xemx kienet tisreġ minn sema _____.
4. Il-papà fetah umbrella _____ minħabba x-xemx.
5. It-tfal qagħdu jaqbzū minn fuq blata _____.

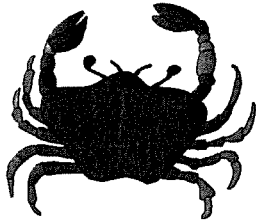


(5 marki)

D. Imla l-vojt bil-verb fl-imperfett (preżent)

Eżempju: Il-ħabib tiegħi, Simon, imur dawra bid-dgħajsa. (mar)

1. It-tifla _____ il-barmil u l-pala minn fuq ir-ramel.
(ġabret)



2. Is-sajjed _____ hafna ħut bil-qasba twila li għandu. (qabad)

3. Il-luzzu _____ fil-port minħabba l-maltemp.
(daħal)

4. Il-granċ _____ minn ġo toqba fonda. (hareġ)

5. Mary u Peter _____ hafna fil-baħar. (qabzu)

(10 marki)

E. Ara min jagħmel dawn ix-xogħlijiet.

Eżempju: jaqbad il-ħut - sajjed

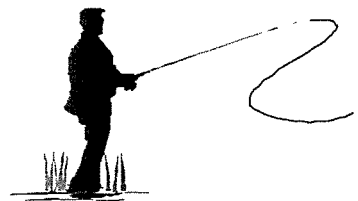
1. ibajjad id-djar

2. tittajpja l-ittri

3. iżomm it-toroq nodfa

4. jahdem l-għamara

5. tikkura l-animali morda



(mastrudaxxa, bajjad, tajpista, veterinarja, kennies)

(5 marki)

F. Qabbel il-maskil mal-femminil

(ikteb l-ittra fil-kaxxa l-vojtta. L-ewwel waħda hi lesta għalik.)

i. raġel tajjeb	d	a. tiġieġa sewda
ii. tifel twil		b. mogħża hoxna
iii. barri kbir		ċ. tifla twila
iv. žiemel abjad		d. mara tajba
v. serduk iswed		e. baqra kbira
vi. muntun oħxon		f. debba bajda

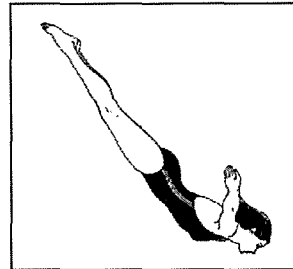
(5 marki)

G. Ikteb dawn is-sentenzi fin-negattiv

(Ikteb pulit u ikkopja tajjeb.)

Eżempju: Pietru hareġ bid-dghajsa

Pietru ma hariġx bid-dghajsa



1. Marija qabżet il-baħar mill-ġholi

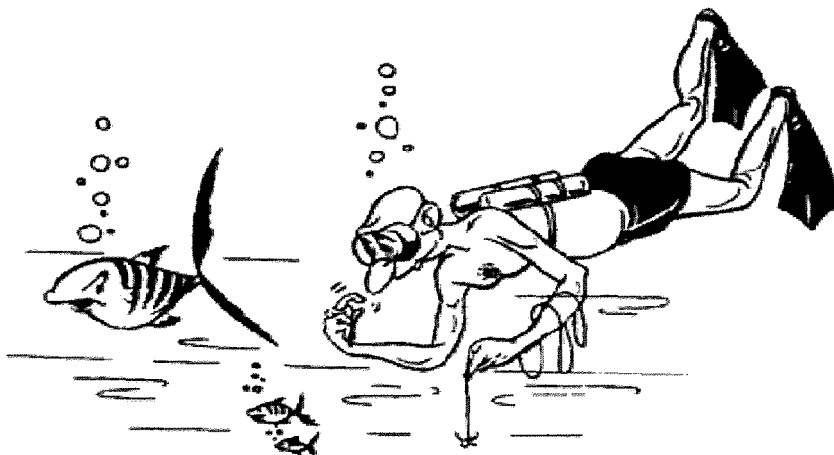
2. Il-baħar kien imqalleb hafna.

3. Il-mama fethet il-flixxun tal-luminata.

4. Is-sajjied xtara luzzu sabiħ.

5. Wara l-harġa, it-tfal raqdu kmieni.

(10 marki)



**G. Ikteb il-mamma u l-gherq ta' dawn il-verbi li ġejjin.
(Ara l-eżempju qabel tibda tikteb)**

VERB	MAMMA (hu x'għamel?)	GHERQ
1. Xorbot	xorob	X - R - B
2. Kisru		
3. nahbat		
4. tisirqu		
5. ġbidna		
6. johorġu		

(10 marki)

**Għ. Komplidawn is-sentenzi
(Ikteb pulit u ikkopja tajjeb.)**

1. Malli bdew il-vaganzi _____

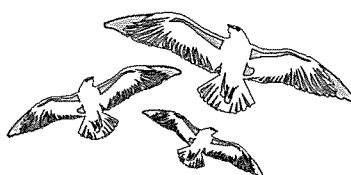
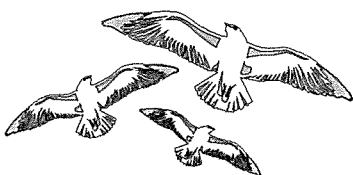
2. Il-vapur dahal fil-port għaliex _____

3. _____
_____ ghax ra huta kbira.

4. Kemm hadt gost _____

5. Meta marret sa xatt il-baħar _____

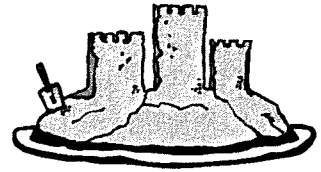
(10 marki)



H. Komponent.

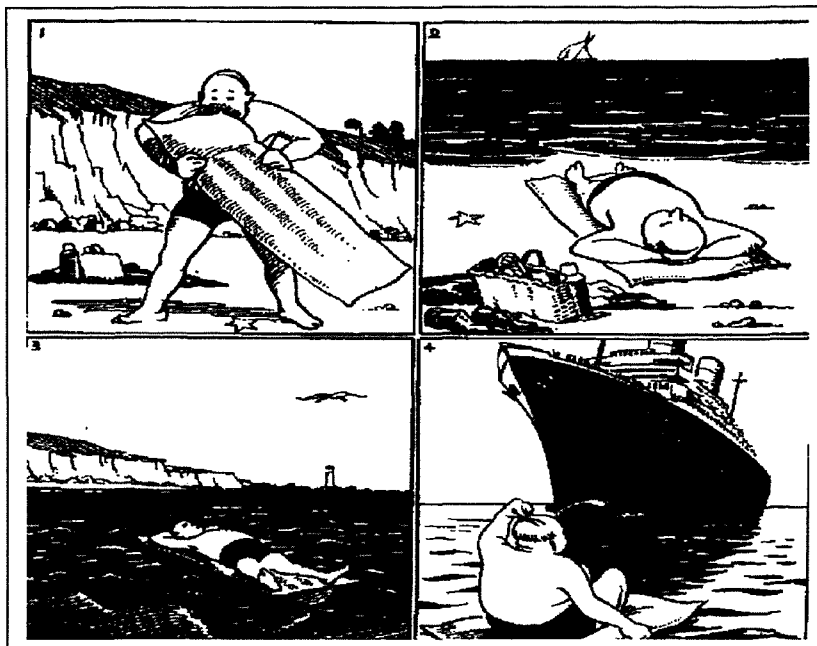
(Ikteb 10 sentenzi fuq WIEHED minn dawn. Ikteb pulit u ikkopja tajjeb.)

1. Kieku kont huta.
2. Annimal li nhobb hafna
3. Dawra bid-dghajsa taz-ziju
4. Jien u sejjer l-iskola



5. Hares sewwa lejn dawn l-istampi u ikteb storja dwar x'tahseb li ġralu dan ir- raġel.

(20 marka)



Appendix 6

Agius Maria
"St George's Hse"
N/S in Wied il-Ghajj Street,
Zabbar ZBR 06

Borg Pauline
"Shamrock", flat 1,
Tempesta Street,
Qrendi ZRQ 07

Head of School

25th September 2001

To the Head of School,

We, the undersigned, are proceeding to our third year in the B.Ed. (Hons.) Primary track course. Hence, we have decided to write you a letter to inform you that your school is one of the few which we have chosen so as to carry out our dissertation. The latter is to include a deep study concerning an analysis of the orthographical mistakes in the comprehension and composition components made by pupils in their year 4 Annual Maltese examination 2001.

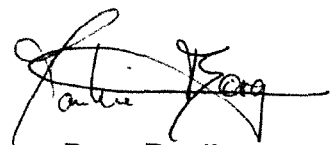
Moreover, we are pleased to inform you that the Director of Education of the Primary Sector has given us permission to carry out the above-mentioned study in your school.

We hope that it is not of any inconvenience to you and your staff if we make use of your year 4 Annual Maltese Examination 2001 scripts. Lastly, we are to guarantee privacy and confidentiality at all times.

Thank you for your co-operation and we are looking forward to having your approval as soon as possible.

Sincerely,


Agius Maria


Borg Pauline