

The Teaching of Maltese as a Foreign Language in Malta and Gozo¹

CHARLES DANIEL SALIBA

When Malta joined the EU in 2004, Maltese became an official language of the EU. Due to this accession and for other reasons, such as economic prosperity, political stability, and archipelago safety, an ever-increasing number of foreign people have opted to live on the islands. Most Maltese are bilingual and speak both Maltese and English, so foreigners who speak English have little difficulty in practical communication. However, many foreigners who cannot speak Maltese feel disadvantaged, and prefer to learn the language to integrate into Maltese society. For foreigners who do not speak English, the need to learn Maltese is greater as Maltese is the dominant language. Still others may want to learn Maltese for specific occupational or academic purposes or simply to improve their communication skills. All these reasons lead to a demand for Maltese language courses, which is not always met, as such courses are not always available, especially in Gozo, or may not be in accord with a learner's aims.

The Directorate for Lifelong Learning courses (DLL) offers Maltese as a Foreign Language (MFL) courses of various types and levels around Malta and Gozo. For my doctoral research I investigated whether the MFL level 1 and MFL level 2 courses offered by the DLL in 2012-2013 met the learners' and teachers' expectations in terms of the course syllabi, teaching methods and learning materials as well as the training of MFL teachers. This was done to evaluate the entire system, and pinpoint what should be amended.

In this study, the two primary sources were the learners and teachers of both courses at the DLL. This research simultaneously employed quantitative and qualitative methods, with

limited interactions between the two sources of information during the data collection stage, but the findings complemented each other at the data interpretation stage. The needs analysis was conducted with two sets of instruments; in the first stage a questionnaire for teachers and another for learners was administered, and for the second stage the questionnaires were complemented by semi-structured interviews.

Questionnaires were administered to all the teachers and learners. There were 12 groups of MFL-1 learners, comprising 60 learners and nine teachers, who all participated except for two learners. When the study commenced, there were two groups of MFL-2 learners, totalling nine students, and three teachers who all participated in the study. When conducting interviews, in the case of learners, stratified random sampling was used, where in the case of MFL-1, a learner from each group was interviewed; for MFL-2, two learners from each group were interviewed, since the former course had 12 groups, whereas the latter only had two groups. Although the aim was to conduct interviews with all the teachers, two teachers from each group did not wish to participate.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the nominal and ordinal data in the questionnaires. Open questions had their statements coded, grouped by similarity, and a theme was identified. This made comparison possible between what the learners or teachers had and what they perceived they needed. Data from the interviews was presented as per individual responses. These were then amalgamated or contrasted with what emerged from the questionnaires' tables and the responses to the open questions.

¹The research work described in this publication was funded by a Malta Government Scholarship Scheme Grant. A research paper based on this doctoral research, conducted under the auspices of the University of Sheffield, was published by the same university in May in the book, 'Informing Educational Change: Research Voices from Malta' edited by David Hyatt with Peter Clough and Cathy Nutbrown. For more information, please visit: <https://sites.google.com/sheffield.ac.uk/alumninews2017/publications>

The research findings from various sources and research instruments revealed discrepancies in the syllabi, teaching methods, learning materials and teacher training between the MFL-1 and MFL-2 courses and the learners' and teachers' perceptions of their needs. The teachers and learners were aware of the problems, and their needs analysis showed that, in most cases, they shared similar desires concerning improvement. The main issues pinpointed for amendment are as follows: problems related to the vast scope and difficulty of the syllabus; lack of a specific syllabus for MFL-2; speaking skills deficits in both courses; the need to focus less on grammar (except MFL-2 teachers); the need for learners to copy less from the whiteboard; problems with the portfolio; desire for teacher training; need for more resources to teach and learn Maltese, and the necessity for needs analyses and course evaluations.

It is evident that a policy of needs analysis and course evaluation is an essential step in every language course so the learners' needs can be identified and translated into learning objectives. Furthermore, teacher trainees and teachers need to be trained in second language (SL) areas.

Once aware of certain issues in the MFL courses, I was ethically bound to address these shortcomings so that future courses would have better resources and syllabi. With the information gathered and new input from the learners and teachers, three syllabi were created for MSL courses based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), together with learning materials.

Intensive MSL courses based on the CEFR levels should be organised all year round under the direction of a university. This is important for foreigners who want to learn Maltese within a short time, including Maltese-Australians, refugees and those who want to learn it for occupational or academic purposes. For these reasons, Malta requires a Centre for Maltese as a Foreign Language with specialists in the MSL/MFL field under the sponsorship of a university to offer expert advice; train teachers in SL areas; conduct further research on other MSL/MFL areas; offer intensive courses; guide other Maltese institutions in the creation or use of available syllabi; and offer courses online or abroad.



Charles Daniel Saliba presenting the Maltese per Stranieri series to the Minister for Gozo Hon. Justyne Caruana.

These recommendations hint at further research to achieve the following: obtain feedback on the needs of teachers and learners in other MSL courses held in Malta; create the other levels of CEFR or other syllabi for specialised courses; review all MSL/MFL published books and publish these reviews so they are accessible to everyone; develop a checklist to analyse existing course books; produce a glossary of words for each syllabus level; and create a register of student error analysis.

If this promising field is given the necessary attention, it will attain the professional status it deserves. In turn, this recognition will promote Maltese culture and language worldwide, thus attracting more participants to the sector, which will generate the necessary revenue for advanced research in this area of specialisation.

Charles Daniel Saliba, PhD (Sheff.) UK, lectures on Maltese linguistics and literature at the intermediate and advanced levels at the Sir M. A. Refalo Sixth Form. He is also a visiting lecturer at the MCAST University College and a practicum visitor with the Institute for Education. Saliba has published over 40 books on the Maltese language. Saliba won a prize for his book *Realtà in the Prose for Adolescents* category at the National Book Awards in 2007. He specialises in teaching Maltese as a foreign language. He has presented his research at several international conferences and was invited as keynote speaker on a number of occasions. For more information, please visit www.charlesdanielsaliba.com.