

# A Change in the Language Policy for School Geography: Breaking Barriers or Creating New Ones?

**Glorianne Borg Axisa**

glorianne.borg-axisa@um.edu.mt

## Abstract

Geography as a core entitlement subject in senior schools, is one of three components that make up the umbrella subject Environmental Studies. The other two subjects are History and Social Studies. In 1999, the National Minimum Curriculum recommended that the language of instruction for a number of subjects, including Social Studies and History would be Maltese. This created an anomaly for the umbrella subject 'Environmental Studies' since the language of instruction of two of its components is Maltese whereas Geography was being taught in English. Logistics issues related to examination purposes raised the question whether Geography should be taught in Maltese. In 2012 there was a general shift to use Maltese as the language of instruction for Geography in State Schools. This change in policy took place in a period when the number of 'non-Maltese learners' in classes was on the increase, with the risk of creating an education barrier to them. This possibility was researched through a multi-method approach among teachers of geography in state schools. The pragmatic method includes a survey among 89 percent of geography teachers, interviews with 40 percent of the teachers and 2 focus group discussions. Geography teachers have different positions on the 'language issue'. Some teachers feel that teaching geography in Maltese is a sign of disregard towards non-Maltese learners, whereas others feel that shifting to Maltese as the language of instruction is facilitating those who find English more demanding. The teachers' position reflects the context in which they operate. Irrespective of their standpoint, the teachers' main concern is how this change in policy may in some circumstances create, rather than eliminate education barriers. The participating teachers feel that the lack of flexibility determined by a centralised system undermines their professionalism and the students' educational paths.

**Keywords:** school geography, language barrier, non-Maltese learners<sup>1</sup>

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1 'Non-Maltese' is the term used in official documents of the Ministry for Education and Employment to refer to new-comers who are not of local origin.

## Introduction

Within the Maltese education system, geography is a core entitlement subject for students in secondary education under the Humanities as a Learning Area, meaning that all students from Year 7 to Year 11, have Geography in their timetable.

Within the state schools sector, in both Year 7 and Year 8 Geography is offered as an individual subject but in the upper secondary years, it is offered under the umbrella subject referred to as Environmental Studies, which include also History and Social Studies. Each component is taught separately by the respective subject teachers. Several attempts have been made to merge the disciplines and present them to students as one subject, but this was resisted by the teaching professional body of the three subjects, even since the University of Malta does not provide teachers' training for the subject merging the three components. In some Church Schools and Independent Schools, Environmental Studies is presented as a single subject with all components taught by one teacher.

The core entitlement of geography, which is currently presented under Environmental Studies is often referred to as Geography General, to distinguish it from the Geography Option that is offered as an elective in the upper secondary years of schooling. The programme of work of the Geography Option is much more detailed than that of Geography General, primarily because this is allocated four (4) lessons a week and it is meant to lead the student to a EQF Level 3 SEC certificate in the subject independently from other subjects as in the case of Geography General which is combined to History and Social Studies to sum up as Environmental Studies.

In 1999, the National Minimum Curriculum (1999) recommended that the language of instruction for Maltese, Social Studies, History, Religion and PSD would be Maltese and since then History and Social Studies have been taught in Maltese. This created an anomaly for the umbrella subject 'Environmental Studies' since the language of instruction of two of its components is Maltese whereas until 2012 Geography was being taught in English. This raised a logistics issue for examination purposes since students had to opt to express themselves in one language for the examination even if they were taught the subject content for that same examination in two different languages; Maltese for History and Social Studies, English for Geography. In view of this, and independently from the changing heterogeneous context of classes with an increase of 'non-Maltese learners' in schools, since 2012, there has been a shift to use Maltese as the language of instruction for Geography.

One questions how this change in policy, motivated by logistics matters, is contributing to the teaching-learning experience in Geography classes particularly to non-Maltese speaking learners: Is the change in the language of instruction from English to Maltese creating or breaking barriers for learners? This matter was discussed directly with teachers of Geography as part of a broader study focusing on the role of school geography in intercultural dialogue. This paper highlights the teachers' position with regards to the change in policy based on their professional

experience since they started teaching Geography in Maltese. This paper is divided in three main sections. The first part contextualises the issue since it provides an overview of the change in policy related to the language of instruction for Geography in view of the changing class room contexts with the increasing numbers of non-Maltese speaking learners. The following section explains the research methods adopted to generate the data that is discussed in the final section. This research is based on practices in the State Schools since it is the larger sector and since a number of church and independent schools debatably consider the three disciplines: Geography, History and Social Studies as one subject.

### **The Change in the Language of Instruction for Geography within a Changing Scenario**

The Maltese Islands are described as bilingual since both Maltese and English are used in the same domain (Camilleri-Grima, 2000). Actually, Malta has two official languages: Maltese and English are both languages of instruction and compulsory throughout obligatory schooling, yet the increase in number of 'non-Maltese' nationals in the Maltese islands have increased the number of languages spoken in Malta (COE, 2014). Even, the Maltese education system is considered bilingual (COE, 2015) since the people of Malta are exposed to the English language from a very early age. Most textbooks and examinations of various subjects are in English at every level, due to the limited market for textbooks in Maltese (COE, 2014). The Language Education Policy Profile for Malta (COE, 2015), states that English-Maltese code switching is extensively used in the classroom of state schools, especially due to the growing numbers of migrant children.

As indicated above, the National Minimum Curriculum (1999) recommended that the language of instruction for Social Studies and History among other subjects would be Maltese. This created an inconsistency for 'Environmental Studies' as an umbrella subject since Geography was being taught in English. In view of this, since 2012, there has been a shift to teach Geography in Maltese. The policy has not been imposed on the schools. It is the prerogative of each individual school to choose the language of instruction depending on what teachers of the three subjects agree on as the common language of instruction. On paper the policy allows for flexibility but in practice it turns out to be complicated. Since two out of the three subjects are taught in Maltese, by default most Geography teachers ended up teaching the subject in Maltese even if the options of on-line audio-visual teaching resources in Maltese are very limited when compared with those available in English. Since the drive to shift to Geography in Maltese a glossary of geographical technical terms in Maltese has been made available to teachers and students. Moreover, a set of textbooks, in Maltese, has been published to use in General Classes.

In view of this reform, to adjust for examination logistics, the language of

instruction for geography throughout compulsory schooling in state schools is as listed in Table 1:

<b>Year Groups</b>	<b>Language</b>
Primary school Geography as a component of Social Studies	Maltese
Lower Secondary School Year 7 and Year 8	English but teachers are encouraged to switch to Maltese
Upper Secondary School General Year 9 to Year 11	Maltese
Upper Secondary School Option Year 9 to Year 11	English

**Table 1: The language of instruction for Geography in State Schools**

The change in policy took place in a period when the classes were becoming more heterogeneous with the increase in the number of non-Maltese learners who are more likely to know English rather than Maltese. This reform created an educational barrier to an increasing cohort of students, non-Maltese speaking who are usually the ones who need more assistance to settle in a system with which they may not be familiar.

When Malta signed the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 1995, which was ratified in 1998, it declared that there were no national minorities on its territory (Euromosaic, 2004). However, since then demographic figures and the social context changed considerably particularly after Malta's accession in the European Union in 2004. It is now estimated that the approximate 'non-Maltese' residents add up to 6.7% of the population out of which 3.6% are from non-EU countries (Camilleri and Falzon, 2014). The numbers are expected to rise (NSO, 2017). The majority of the newcomers are between the 20 to 34 age cohort and hence the school population is more likely to be culturally heterogeneous.

Figures from the Ministry of Education and Employment (MEDE) show an increase in 'migrant learners' in secondary schools. The largest number of 'non-Maltese' students from EU countries is from the United Kingdom, Bulgaria and Italy. The origin of Third Country nationals is mainly from Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia and Syria (COE, 2014). The state sector requires payment of fees for non-nationals to attend, however, EU citizens, Third-Country Nationals with long terms residence status and beneficiaries of international protection and asylum seekers may ask to be exempted from the fee.

During scholastic year 2014-2015, the number of 'non-Maltese' students in state schools added up to 1109 (DQSE). This is considered a relatively high number considering the size of the Maltese Population. Yet the number of 'non-Maltese' students is greater in independent schools rather than the state sector even if the number of independent schools are fewer (DQSE). According to the Independent

Schools Association, one reason why this larger number of non-Maltese nationals opt to attend paying independent schools is the prevailing use of the English language as the language of instruction (COE, 2014). This contrasts with the change in policy related to the language of instruction for Geography. This 'reform' to address examinations logistics created a language barrier to a cohort of learners, limiting their access to quality education.

### **The Data Generation Framework**

The data generation supporting this study is based on part of the multiple-methods of data collection employed in the broader research related to geography education, namely:

- a. A survey among teachers of geography in state schools
- b. Interviews with 22 geography teachers.
- c. 2 focus groups discussion with a total participation of 11 teachers.

The pragmatic approach adopted for this study starts from a large population through a survey with all the teachers of geography in the state sector, then focuses on individual practices and positions of a sub-set of teachers through the interviews, and eventually corroborating these positions through the focus groups discussions.

A survey, in the form of a questionnaire, was conducted with all teachers of geography in the state secondary schools. The aim of this exercise was to obtain a baseline study on the state of school geography from the teachers' feedback. The survey was a means to trace any possible educational barriers students might be facing in geography classes. The targeted response rate was of 40% but eventually the survey was answered by 89% of the teachers of geography. Teachers may have responded willingly to the survey since it was distributed personally in all the schools once the necessary authorization was obtained from the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) at the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE). This presented the opportunity to meet personally the respondents and hence facilitate communication. At the end of the questionnaire, teachers could fill in their contact details and indicate whether they were available to participate in the follow-up interview.

The interviews were held with 22 teachers of geography, equivalent to 33 percent of the whole population in state schools. The interviews were held in a venue convenient for the participants. The interviews were more of a conversation and the duration was generally of 1 hour, although occasionally, when the participants felt comfortable enough to talk on other points that they would have liked to raise, the interview took as long as 2 hours. It has been observed that most of the teachers who participated in the interview were working in isolation and this interview was

an occasion for them to voice their concerns related to the school structure and educational set-ups. In order to facilitate the data generation and the course of the interview, the meeting was audio recorded, subject to the respondent's consent.

The teachers participating in the interviews were invited to participate in a focus group discussion. The invitation to the focus group discussion was expressed with the same teachers who participated in the interviews in order to build up familiarity and facilitate more active participation in the focus group. This allowed a more profound discussion of points mentioned during their interviews and to cross-refer the interlocutors' position on the issues raised. Eleven participants agreed to take part in the focus group discussion. Two Focus groups were held independently, one with 6 and the other with 5 participants, and myself as the discussion moderator. The participants agreed that audio-visual recordings of the Focus Groups could be taken, for ease of reference and to transcribe the discussions. Each focus group discussion took approximately 2 hours.

All the focus group participants were relatively young graduated geography teachers with the maximum number of years of teaching experience of about 10 years; some of whom have a Masters degree in geography or in related areas of research. Extracts from literature were prepared before the meetings and read to the participants as a means to help them focus on the theme of the discussion: 'Understanding Geography Education' and 'The Curriculum' to address the objectives of the focus groups. However, the discussion occasionally drifted towards limitations in the system they are operating in that were repeatedly referred to in the interviews. This reflects the teachers' concerns and frustration that their role as educators is often hindered by situations beyond their control creating education barriers to the learners in their care.

## Data Analysis

All the teachers participating in the interviews expressed independently their concern about the educational barriers they and their students have to address. They referred particularly to the dilemma regarding the language of instruction, the heavy loaded syllabus and the examination oriented system.

As evident from the response provided in the survey, illustrated in Figure 1, most teachers prefer to use English as the language of instruction, mainly because they are used to the technical terms in English. However, as reported in the graph, it is obvious that for the teachers the language issue is not a matter of personal preference but a matter of the students' access to education. Most of the teachers feel they should consider the best practices to accommodate the students' needs. One teacher wrote: *"Language should not be a barrier for this subject"*.

From the interviews and the focus groups it was possible to have a more indepth consideration of the teachers' position. Various arguments were expressed in favour

and against the change in policy, each pointing out aspects for the best interest of the students.

Most of the teachers who participated in the interviews and the focus groups discussions commented that the decision related to the choice of language of instruction puts them in a moral dilemma since the change in policy took place in a period when the classes were becoming more heterogeneous creating an educational barrier to the increasing non-Maltese speaking learners. Teachers ask whether they should follow the policy and instructions provided by the administration or focus on the individual needs of the students. Whether they should take into account the needs of the majority or try to accommodate even the few in class who have a language barrier. Some teachers explained that before shifting to Maltese as the language of instruction they used to deliver the explanation in Maltese but any notes or reading was done in English. Through this strategy they used to accommodate both those who were more confident in Maltese and those who could not understand Maltese. The National Minimum Curriculum and the National Curriculum Framework stress the importance of flexibility and teacher autonomy (COE, 2014), but now that Maltese is officially the language of instruction in most schools even the notes and the readings are in Maltese. Teachers feel that even due to time limitations they cannot be flexible to choose the language of instruction they feel is more suitable for their students because they are bound with a policy that on paper allows for flexibility but in practice turns out to be complicated. Most participating teachers were concerned that due to this policy non-Maltese learners would be facing another education barrier. Some were ready to accommodate the students by providing notes in English, and code switching during the lesson.

Nevertheless, few teachers participating in the interviews and focus groups agreed with the change in policy even because they find it difficult to teach geography in Maltese, since they were used to the technical terms in English. Nevertheless they feel that this change eliminated the language barrier to the Maltese students who struggle in English. These teachers noted that they had students who knew the geographical content but were not able to express themselves in English and hence they prefer Maltese especially for examination purposes. Yet, other teachers explained that even Maltese students who prefer the lessons in Maltese have difficulty to learn the technical terms in Maltese as this is not part of their everyday language, whereas they might already be familiar with the terms in English as for example 'waterfall', as this is the term used in every-day communication. It was also pointed out that students would have already been exposed to certain technical terms in English through other subjects such as General Science; for example 'the hydrological cycle' or aspects related to ecological systems. Others argue that it is actually because Maltese students find English difficult because they are not familiar to it, that geography should be taught in English, as geography would indirectly expose these students to the English language. This would be another means to

improve the level of English among Maltese students, which has been described as ‘of great concern’ by the MATSEC examination board <sup>2</sup>.

In view of these comments, one has to evaluate whether the shift to the Maltese language, with the use of archaic words as technical terms is actually eliminating or creating a language barrier to the Maltese students themselves.

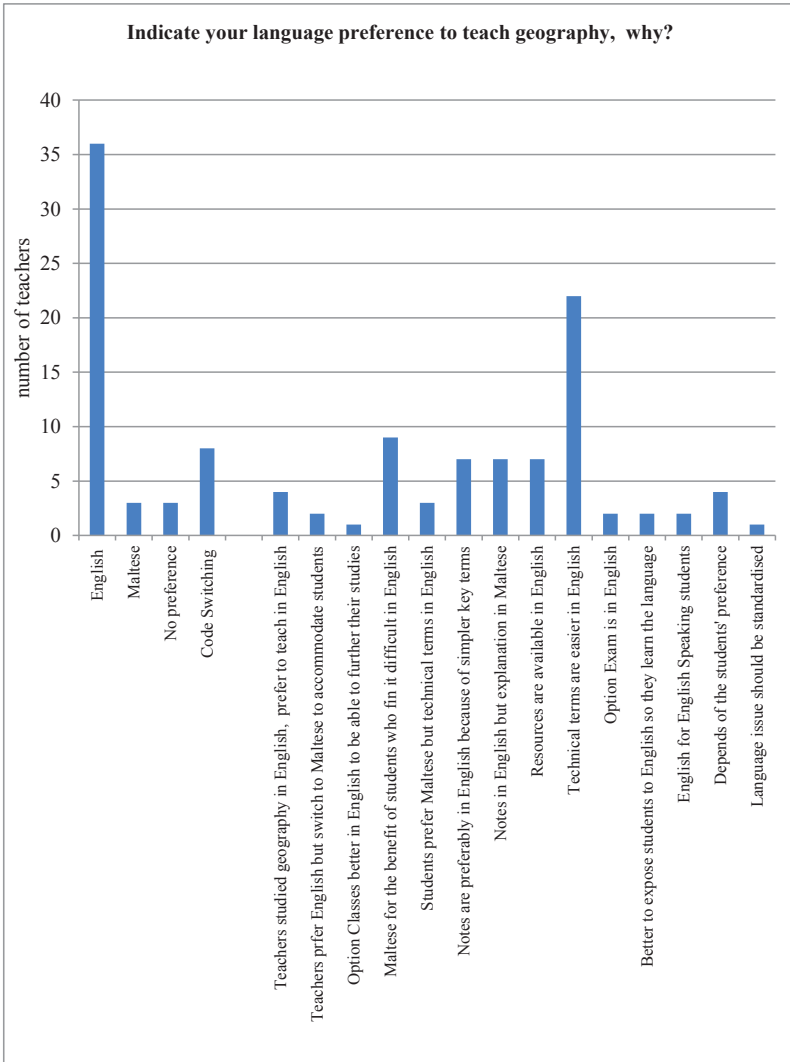


Figure 1. The teachers’ language preference to teach geography.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.um.edu.mt/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/229847/SECENGL.pdf](https://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/229847/SECENGL.pdf)



## Conclusions

The teachers' positions vary depending on the various context they are experiencing in different schools. The teachers in favour of the shift to Maltese are those who teach students who suffer with English as the language of instruction and hence want to eliminate the barrier for the Maltese students. However the teachers who are used to teach the subject to students who have no difficulty with English, find that this change has created a language barrier to the 'non-Maltese' learners. When considering both positions, the creation and elimination of an educational barrier is the main concern of the teachers. Notwithstanding the different positions, the fulcrum of the discourse is how to use the language of instruction to make it easier for the students to engage with geography and benefit from its broader educational value; yet the lack of flexibility imposed by the system is restricting the teachers' professional decisions.

Moreover, from the interviews and the focus group discussions, it turned out that most of the teachers do their utmost to accommodate the students of non-Maltese origin even if they admit that this leads to extra work for them. Most of the teachers are ready to prepare notes and worksheets in both Maltese and English and to code-switch between the two languages in the lesson to involve all students in class. In case of language barriers, they even try to explain with the use of images and sign language. It was evident from the interviews that teachers work more comfortably and are more willing to accommodate the students when their initiatives are appreciated by the school administration and the students themselves.

Throughout the interviews and Focus Group discussion, whilst talking about teaching strategies and contexts it becomes increasingly evident that the participating teachers' understanding of their role as educators does not stop at delivering the subject content. They negotiate through their conditions of work to accommodate the most vulnerable students; whether Maltese students with a problematic social background, or Maltese students who have difficulty to cope in class with the use of English as the language of instruction, or non-Maltese learners who have language barriers or difficulties to adjust to the new system, notwithstanding their helplessness about the lack of flexibility determined by a centralised system, which they feel creates barriers and undermines their professionalism and the students' educational paths.

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## Bio-note

**Dr Glorianne Borg Axisa** was awarded a B.A. (Hons) from the University of Malta, and holds a Post Graduate Certificate in Education and a Masters Degree in Geography (Melit). She completed her doctoral studies at the Institute of Education, University of London, in Intercultural Education and Geography Education. She is Subject Coordinator for Geography, History and Music at the University of Malta, Junior College and lectures Geography at the University of Malta, Junior College and Geography Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Malta. She contributed to the Learning Outcomes Framework at the Ministry for Education and Employment as a Local Curriculum Expert. Glorianne Borg Axisa is a founder member and currently president of MAPSSS (Maltese Association of Parents of State School Students). She has published a number of papers in international fora; her research interests include Landscape Ecology, Geography Education, Global Education and Intercultural Education.