

Foreign Languages within Post-Compulsory and Tertiary Institutions. What future?

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Abstract

An important sub-objective of the Lisbon Strategy states that there is a need to improve foreign language teaching at all levels of education throughout Europe. This is seen to be a key means of giving expression to the multilingual nature of the European Union. In the 21st century, foreign language competence and proficiency and intercultural understanding are no longer considered as optional but have become an essential part of being a citizen. Countries in the world have become more and more interdependent, and new technologies have erased many existing borders giving rise to an ever-increasing need for good communication skills in foreign languages. This has brought in turn new efforts aimed at improving foreign language education with many countries introducing well-articulated curriculum frameworks that motivate and guide the development of an effective system of foreign language education even at post-compulsory and at tertiary level. The same cannot be said, unfortunately, for Malta where the number of students studying foreign languages at post compulsory education is on the decline with the result that in the 3 most important institutions in Malta that offer tertiary education, the presence of foreign languages is negligible. This brings us to a very pertinent question. Do we need modern language graduates in a globalised world? Or better, do we need graduates who are also proficient in one or more foreign languages?

Keywords: Foreign languages; Tertiary education; multilingualism.

An important sub-objective of the Lisbon Strategy states that there is a need to improve foreign language teaching at all levels of education throughout Europe. This is seen to be a key means of giving expression to the multilingual nature of the European Union. Pace (2017) argues that foreign language competence and proficiency and intercultural understanding are no longer considered as optional but have become an essential part of being a citizen. Within a global economy, the ability to understand and communicate in other languages has become an increasingly important characteristic that contributes to the cultural and linguistic richness of our society whilst promoting global citizenship.

Over the past two decades countries in the world have become ever more interdependent and many existing borders have been erased. Multilingualism, or

proficiency in more than one language, is internationally gaining positive support and is viewed as an educational goal by many countries (McPake, Tinsley & James 2007). This has brought about a situation where foreign language teaching and learning has become more necessary than ever not simply for linking with the rest of the world but above all for producing active citizens able to function in today's ever-shrinking world. Good communication skills in foreign languages has never been so important and necessary. Around the globe, parents struggle to ensure that their children, whatever their age, achieve a good command in a number of foreign languages and consequently, a large number of opportunities to learn languages have been provided in many different ways. As a result, in various countries across the world new efforts have been made aiming at improving foreign language education with the introduction of well-articulated curriculum frameworks that motivate and guide the development of an effective system of foreign language education even at post-secondary and at tertiary level (Pace 2015 and 2017).

The purpose of this paper is, firstly, to provide a clear and accurate picture of the current status of the teaching of modern foreign languages (MFL) at Post-Secondary and Tertiary levels in Malta. Secondly, to reflect upon the value and role of these languages for employees and graduates and, thirdly, to make a proposal of possible measures that could be taken to improve foreign-language teaching at Post-Secondary and Tertiary Level.

During these past few years Malta has seen various initiatives, at all levels of compulsory education, with the scope of enticing more students to study MFL. September 2018 saw the introduction of the Foreign Language Awareness Programme (FLAP) offered to primary school pupils aged 8–11. FLAP puts a special focus on students in multilingual classrooms, as its introduction comes at a time in which the linguistic landscape of the country is becoming increasingly complex due to a growing multilingualism, resulting from both migration as well as globalisation. The Secondary school level saw the introduction of the Subject Proficiency Assessment (SPA) programme, with the intent to set up a home-grown alternative assessment based on foreign language proficiency at levels 1 and 2 of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF). As Pace (2015) emphasises, “the main scope of the programme is to enable learners acquire and develop a communicative competence which allows for an effective and meaningful interaction in diversified social contexts” (p.612).

MFL teaching has been a traditional staple of secondary and post-secondary education for decades, with the most common languages taught in schools in Malta – Italian and French, followed by German and Spanish – remaining consistently popular. The introduction of the SPA programme made MFL learning more relevant to the students' needs in the hope of reverting the negative trend of the last decade which saw a decrease in the number of students sitting for end of compulsory schooling exams in foreign languages, (resulting in a decline in the number of post-secondary students studying MFL), a clear indication that the interest in MFL learning among

students in Malta is waning and that a large number of students complete their studies at Secondary Level without obtaining any form of certification in a foreign language (Pace, 2015). However, notwithstanding all efforts done, an overall decline in the popularity of MFL learning in post-compulsory education in Malta has been apparent since the beginning of the new century, reaching alarming proportions in the last decade. This has raised concerns about the generally low proficiency level in foreign languages among youth at the end of compulsory education as well as about the future of languages in education from all leading sectors, among which employers, the teaching professionals and politicians.

Unfortunately, at the post-secondary and tertiary level, this decline began when it was decided to make languages optional at SEC level, at a time when educators and decision makers believed that students would automatically want to carry on studying foreign languages at the end of compulsory education. Since then, foreign languages started being perceived to be difficult and less important, especially in the context of an education system which was very much exam oriented with students, teachers and parents not only focusing their attention and efforts on the compulsory subjects but also being orientated towards other subjects like sciences and IT. The result of such a decision is that today there exists a language deficit in the teaching of foreign languages when it comes to key vocational and academic areas and consequently there exists a dire need to broaden the range of students taking foreign languages at different levels¹.

At Post-Compulsory level, the number of students studying MFL is alarmingly low and if we were to have a look at the number of students furthering their studies in foreign languages at Post-Secondary level in the past two scholastic years, we soon realise that the situation is, to say the least, distressing. In fact the total number of 1st year Sixth Form students studying a foreign language at Advanced level is steadily decreasing. This includes all 1st year students studying Italian, French, German, Spanish and Arabic in any post-secondary educational institution in Malta and Gozo (See Figures 1 & 2 below).

"A" level - 1st Year	Italian	French	Spanish	German	Arabic	Totals
G.F. Abela J. C.	33	20	13	12	-	78
GCHSS Naxxar	48	9	9	5	2	73
Sir M.A. Refalo Gozo	10	5	2	2	-	19
St Aloysius College	4	11	-	-	-	15
De La Salle College	1	3	-	-	-	4
TOTALS	96	48	24	19	2	189

Fig. 1: Scholastic Year 2016–17. 1st year foreign language students at "Advanced" level.

1 In Malta, English is not considered a foreign language.

"A" Level - 1st Year	Italian	French	Spanish	German	Arabic	Totals
G.F. ABELA J.C.	32	25	11	9	-	77
GCHSS Naxxar	35	5	4	11	3	58
Sir M.A. Refalo Gozo	4	2	3	3	-	12
St Aloysius College	2	4	-	-	-	6
De La Salle College	6	2	-	-	-	8
St Martin's College	2	-	-	-	-	2
TOTALS	81	38	18	23	3	163

Fig. 2: Scholastic Year 2017–18. 1st year foreign language students at "Advanced" level.

Consequently, as shown in Figure 3, a very low percentage of post-secondary students and adults opt to sit for a foreign language at "Advanced" or "Intermediate" level.

	No. of registered students for "A" level.	No of students who sat for at least 1 foreign language at "A" level	% of students who sat for at least 1 foreign language at "A" level	No. of registered students for "INT" level.	No of students who sat for at least 1 foreign language at "INT" level	% of students who sat for at least 1 foreign language at "INT" level
2017						
May session	3374	171	5.1	3298	218	6.6
September session	1140	30	2.6	2255	115	5.1
Total	4514	201	4.5	5553	333	6.0

Fig. 3: Post-Secondary students and adults who opted to sit for a foreign language at "A" and "INT" levels. Source: MATSEC.

At Tertiary level the situation is not any better. Suffice it to say that within the 3 most important institutions in Malta that offer tertiary education, the presence of foreign languages is negligible. At the University of Malta (UM), only two Faculties are involved in the teaching of foreign languages, namely the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Arts, together with the Department of Interpretation and Translation Studies. The Faculty of Arts also offers the possibility for UM students coming from different faculties to follow a foreign language proficiency course throughout their years on campus but the number of students opting to follow these courses is extremely low, around 90 in all. And unlike many other universities around

Europe, there exists no Foreign Language Centre or Institute at the UM. At the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), foreign language teaching has only been introduced on a voluntary basis as from academic year 2017-18 with the introduction of the SPA programme in Italian, French and German. Over 110 students from different levels across all Institutes opted to start learning a foreign language in addition to their current programme of studies, with lessons being held in the evenings and on a voluntary basis. On successful completion of the course students are certified for the acquired language skills at the level obtained and are offered the opportunity to further their language proficiency skills throughout their years at the College. Finally, at the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS), foreign language proficiency courses are still not compulsory for all students.

This scenario is, to say the least, very worrying and in sharp contrast with the European Commission Council's Explanatory Memorandum (2018) which states that "Improving the learning of European languages contributes to mutual understanding and mobility within the Union and helps to increase productivity, competitiveness and economic resilience" (p.1). Furthermore, Malta's economy is dependent on human resources and foreign trade with the two most important employability sectors being tourism and digital gaming for which foreign language skills are an integral and indispensable component in the provision of a high standard of service. In the tourism industry there exists a strong link between excellence in tourism services and excellence in language skills while several research studies show that a variety of languages are required on international markets and that the most quoted barrier to intra-European mobility remains lack of foreign language skills. In the world of work, language skills are becoming always increasingly important in organisations and businesses who want to remain competitive on an international level. The Report from the thematic working group "Languages for Jobs" European Strategic Framework for Education and Training (ET 2020) highlights the rising demand for foreign languages and communication skills on the European labour market and underlines the need for the development and dissemination of new methods of teaching languages which are more learner-focused, practically oriented and more applied to professional contexts in order to reduce the gap between supply and demand of language skills and to increase the motivation of learners. And it is no surprise that language skills are considered by employers as one of the ten most important skills for future graduates. This was confirmed by a recent Eurobarometer study where 40% of recruiters in the industry sector highlighted the importance of language skills for future higher education graduates. And yet, based on the first European Survey on Language Competences², despite investment in language learning and teaching, education systems are still struggling with improving language competences.

2 The European Survey on Language Competences was conducted in 2011. Its findings were published in June 2012. http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/languages/library/studies/executive-summary-eslc_en.pdf

In Malta unfortunately, we have reached a point where even those who do achieve an end of compulsory schooling certification in one or more foreign languages do not necessarily find opportunities to further improve their language competences given that their field of specialisation at post-secondary and tertiary level often does not provide the opportunity to do so. And this is further confirmed by the fact that, whereas at Post-Secondary and Tertiary Levels the number of enrolled students studying a foreign language is extremely low, an opposite trend exists when it comes to adult learners. In fact, the last couple of years saw a dramatic increase in the number of adults enrolling to study MFL at the Lifelong Learning Centres (LLC)³ found around the Maltese Islands which goes to show not only that the scenario and the need for educational opportunities at post-secondary and tertiary level have changed considerably in the last decade but above all that there is an urgent need for a review of the future of post-secondary education in Malta, especially with regards to MFL, which will hopefully bring about the necessary changes to address the needs of all young persons seeking to further their language proficiency on completion of compulsory education. In fact, the number of adult learners who have applied to learn a foreign language at a LLC during the year 2018/19 has reached a staggering 1054, of which 453 are foreigners⁴.

Lifelong Learning 2018-2019	Arabic	Spanish	Chinese (Mandarin)	French	German	Japanese	Turkish	Greek	Russian	Italian	TOTAL
No. of adult learner applications	27	402	25	104	127	36	14	19	20	280	1054

Fig. 4: Scholastic Year 2018–19. No of adult learners who applied (until mid-August) to learn a foreign language at a LLC. Numbers are set to increase as applications close in September. Source: DCLE.

It is clear that in Malta MFL today require a new market, and that language teaching and learning must go well beyond formal compulsory schooling, which does not necessarily always provide the best context to motivate students to learn languages. It is only natural that students are willing to work harder at something if and when they connect what is being learned in class to the outside world and when they realise that they can apply it to real life. So, although the teaching and learning of MFL does need to take root in schools, it can only flourish if students are motivated by the provision of the right opportunities at post compulsory level

3 At the Lifelong Learning Centres, MFL teaching and learning will gradually follow the SPA programme starting from 2018-19.
 4 At the time of writing this paper the number of applicants for foreign languages at the LLC stood at 1054. However there was still 1 month left for the closing date of applications.

offering them the possibility to further enhance their proficiency in the various language skills. And this explains perfectly why in Malta the market of MFL learning and teaching is improving steadily among adults, through the LLCs, but decreasing at post compulsory and at tertiary levels.

This brings us to another very pertinent question. Do we need modern language graduates and/or employees in a globalised world? Or better, do we need graduates and employees who are also proficient in one or more foreign languages? Apart from the huge benefits of foreign language learning like the acquisition of vital cognitive skills and intercultural awareness, graduates and employees with high levels of language competence find it much easier to engage effectively with the rest of the world, giving them a cutting edge over their colleagues and/or competitors when it comes to research collaborations, trade, diplomacy, etc. As the Reflection Paper on ‘Harnessing Globalisation’ (2017) states rightfully, “(a) more connected world has brought with it new opportunities. Nowadays, people travel, work, learn and live in different countries. They interact with each other on the web, sharing their ideas, cultures and experiences. Students have online access to courses run by leading universities across the world” (p.7). But language competences are key features in order to have access to these new opportunities, in order for our youngsters to make the most of these new opportunities and to “connect” with their counterparts across the globe. If we really believe in this, we need to move away from a “one size fits all” system at post-secondary and tertiary institutions. At present, the only option for students who would like to further their studies at post-secondary in any particular foreign language is to either go for an “A” level course or for an “Intermediate” course as part of the MATSEC certificate, with a lot of emphasis being on grammatical accuracy, literature and culture rather than proficiency in the target language. Although the value of literature is undisputed and should be promoted for the cultural benefit of students, young people who would like to improve their proficiency in the basic foreign language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing in view of future job prospects and/or requirements, feel frustrated at the fact that to date there exist no such language proficiency courses at post-secondary level.

In view of these scenarios, there have been, over the past four or five years, various efforts and initiatives aimed at improving the current situation in Malta by creating the possibility of offering an alternative way of obtaining certification in foreign languages apart from MATSEC involving various stakeholders including the Ministry for Education & Employment (MEDE), various Embassies, UM, MCAST, and industry bodies among others. As already mentioned, a first step to address this situation in post compulsory education has been the introduction on a voluntary basis of foreign language proficiency courses to students following full time and/or part-time courses at MCAST and UM. The main aim of such courses is to give our youngsters the opportunity to acquire fluency in one or more foreign languages while studying to obtain their MCAST or UM certificate.

Another initiative in the same direction, undertaken by MEDE in collaboration with MCAST, will be the introduction of a Foreign Language Proficiency Course at MQF level 3 & 4 which will focus on communicative competence and which will offer accredited certification in each of the four basic language skills separately. These courses, to be offered as from October 2018 (Level 3) and from 2019 (Level 4) respectively, will be offered at both post-secondary and tertiary institutions, among which the Giovanni Curmi Higher Secondary School in Naxxar, Sir M.A. Refalo Sixth Form in Gozo, the LLCs around the Maltese Islands and MCAST. The rationale behind the introduction of these 2 courses is that given the fast rate with which the labour world is changing and the way employment scenarios change within a very short period of time, and given that our students are usually asked to choose their subject options when they are still 13 years old (Year 9 Secondary), provisions need to be taken for those students or employees who, during their years at a post-secondary or tertiary institution or in employment, would like to improve their proficiency in a foreign language to MQF levels 3 or 4. Such a provision will surely benefit not only the large number of students who only decide to opt for a particular course at University after the end of compulsory schooling but also anyone willing to upskill his/her foreign language proficiency skills for employment, promotion or mobility purposes given that limited foreign language competences remain one of the main obstacles for young people to benefit from the opportunities offered by the European education, training and youth programmes. This is just a first step in the right direction but a lot more needs to be done if, as a country, we want to attract more youngsters to further their studies in MFL at post compulsory and at tertiary levels. At UM, although the introduction of offering combined degrees even with foreign universities was definitely a bold and wise decision which in itself might, directly or indirectly, motivate undergraduates to improve their proficiency in one or more foreign language, maybe the time has come to introduce combinations of foreign languages to other subjects. Such a formula is proving to be quite popular in various countries with Ucas figures for 2015⁵ showing, for example, how in British universities 8 out of every 10 students are opting to combine a language with another subject. And the combination of subjects to MFL do not simply vary from humanities to social sciences and to business studies, but also to maths, physics, engineering or natural sciences.

The writing is on the wall. As far as MFL teaching and learning at Post-Secondary and Tertiary levels is concerned, there is an urgent need for a planned, sustained commitment to a programme of change. During these past years, a lot has been written, said and discussed, but what is urgently needed is pragmatic action. If not we are risking to witness a diminishing supply of young, home-grown linguists available

5 The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is a UK-based organisation whose main role is to operate the application process for British universities. Ucas figures are available at: <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-analysis-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports>

to businesses wishing to work internationally or to train as teachers, which in turn could create long-term difficulties for our country. This sense of urgency becomes even more pronounced in view of the European Commission Council's Explanatory Memorandum statement (2018),

Language competences are at the heart of the vision of a European Education Area. With increasing mobility for education, training and work inside the Union, increasing migration from third countries into the Union, and the overall global cooperation, education and training systems need to reconsider the challenges in teaching and learning of languages and the opportunities provided by Europe's linguistic diversity (p.11).

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Bio-note

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