

The teaching of Spanish in Maltese secondary schools: an overview of the current state and needs

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This contribution looks at the teaching of Spanish in Maltese secondary schools. However, before looking more closely at its establishment and development in Malta, it is probably desirable that we review the growth of Spanish in the world. In this manner we will be in a position to better understand the specific context of the teaching of Spanish in Forms III, IV and V in Maltese secondary schools.

Spanish, a growing phenomenon

The world-wide growth of the Spanish language is unquestionable.¹ In the United States there are 24.2 million Spanish speakers (1990 national census). This means that the US is the fifth largest in terms of the number of Spanish speakers after Mexico, Spain, Argentina and Colombia. Spanish is in fact the most widely-spoken language in the US after English and in some southern states it is spoken all over.² We shall not concern ourselves here with the type of Spanish which is produced as a result of the contact with English or the socio-cultural implications of speaking Spanish or *chicano* in the US,³ but it is clear that with more than 350 million speakers, the language of Cervantes is the second most important after English as a world language. Most specifically, it is the second most chosen language amongst students who study more than one foreign language.

One of the reasons for this growth is undoubtedly the increasing commercial importance of Spanish America, particularly for its neighbours to the north and to the east. Brazil seems on the verge of designating Spanish as a compulsory second language at secondary school level. This would seem to be the message of a recent declaration by the Brazilian Deputy Minister of Culture in which she declared that Brazil would soon be needing more than two hundred thousand teachers of Spanish "to attend to the educational needs of the country in view of the establishment of Spanish as a near compulsory subject".⁴

The *Instituto Cervantes* was established in 1991 to cater for the increasing demand for Spanish around the world. In the academic year 1993/94, this institution had 19,300 students in thirty centres and is currently in the process of opening new centres in Bremen, Chicago and San Antonio in Texas. The *Instituto Cervantes* concerns itself not only with the teaching of Spanish and the development of new methods for this task,⁵ but is also engaged in the organisation of a wide variety of cultural activities as part of its mission to develop Hispanic culture.

In Spain, teachers of Spanish as a foreign language are organised in a variety of professional associations⁶ such as ASELE (Asociación para la Enseñanza del Español como Lengua Extranjera), APE (Asociación de Profesores de Español), and AESLA (Asociación Española de Lingüística Aplicada) which every year convene conferences and publish journals and proceedings. In addition teachers of Spanish can count on institutional support from the *Instituto Cervantes*, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as from publishers specializing in material for the teaching of Spanish such as SGEL, DIFUSION, SANTILLANA, EDELSA/EDI 6, EDINUMEN, etc. The teaching of Spanish as a foreign language is clearly undergoing considerable growth in all its facets.

Spanish in Malta

Malta has not been immune to this increasing world-wide interest in Spanish, and the *Círculo Hispano-Maltés* has provided a range of courses at various levels to which an increasing number of students have been attracted over the last ten years, although it must be said that Verdala International School had been offering Spanish from as long ago as 1977. A year ago, the European Community School joined Verdala in the teaching of Spanish and both schools now prepare their students for the International General Certificate of Secondary

Education with the former also offering students the possibility of sitting for the American Advanced Placement examination.⁷

As far as the state sector is concerned, Spanish was introduced into Form III of the secondary schools in scholastic year 1988/89 with an initial intake of 55 students. In order to attend to the anticipated demand for teachers, the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta started offering Spanish as one of the options available within the B.Ed. (Hons.) course in 1991, with students choosing this option during the first three intakes being able to do so without the customary A level in the subject. The first intake of teachers of Spanish graduated in academic year 1994/95. Another 12, 5, and 2 teachers should be graduating in 1996, 1997 and 1998 respectively, and this pool of thirty qualified teachers should adequately cater for the projected demand in this initial phase. As a consequence, emphasis within the University has shifted away from what was clearly the most urgent task, namely teacher training, to a somewhat wider role.

This has taken the shape of the establishment in 1994 of a Hispanic Studies Programme within the University's Mediterranean Institute. The primary function of this programme at present is the provision of a range of credits/courses in Spanish language and Hispanic culture in general, to both day and evening students. Numbers participating increased from 141 in the first year to over 200 in 1995/96. This latter figure includes 49 students who participated in a Spanish Studies Certificate organized by the Hispanic Studies Programme in conjunction with the University Radio. This course was the very first Distance Learning experiment by the University.

This continual diversification and growth in activity surrounding Spanish and Hispanic Culture in general reflects the interest of the Maltese in a culture which together with English dominates the world stage.

Spanish in Maltese secondary schools

Setting aside the presence of Spanish in the recently created Junior College which in any case falls within the jurisdiction of the University of Malta, we now propose to concentrate on the primary focus of this contribution, namely the teaching of Spanish in Forms III, IV and V of State secondary schools.

First of all, it is important to keep in mind that the primary objective of the teaching of Spanish is to

prepare students for the Secondary Education Certificate, in two years as far as secondary schools are concerned and in three years in the case of Junior Lyceums. It is not our purpose here to analyse the appropriateness of this exam in contrast to more internationally recognised examination boards, but it is important to note that this final objective has a determining effect on the curriculum and the materials used in the teaching of Spanish, and there is no doubt that the ever-increasing numbers choosing Spanish – 277 in the current year – will require us to study these methods in greater detail.

On the other hand, and not unrelated to what we have just said, it is important to keep in mind that if the Ministry of Education in Malta decides to place Spanish on the same level as other foreign languages, then it will be necessary to determine the appropriateness of the existing structure for lower-aged pupils.

We now propose to attempt an initial analysis of certain aspects of the teaching of Spanish in Forms III, IV and V starting with a look at *Español en directo*, the text book currently in use.

Español en directo

The 1991 report entitled *La situación del español en Malta*⁸ declared that "to the problem of teachers one must also add the problem of the structuralist text book used in the schools which is unattractive to students and difficult for a teacher to develop lessons from. At this time it does not seem possible for this book to be replaced owing to the government having acquired a ten year supply of it". The lack of teachers in the short and medium term has now been resolved, but the problems inherent in the use of old fashioned text books out of line with present-day communicative methodologies may be more difficult to resolve owing to the fact that the decision to retain or withdraw the book is an administrative one. Maltese teachers of Spanish are fully aware of the drawbacks of this text book.

According to Aquilino Sánchez Pérez, the situational structuralist model prevailing in Britain in the seventies constituted the basis for *Español en directo*, the first complete course along these lines for the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language. According to Sánchez Pérez, *Español en directo* consists of three levels, with levels one and two being further subdivided into another two levels. This means that there are in fact five text books. He nevertheless points out that "a detailed analysis of the book shows the presence of elements of

the direct method such as the frequent recourse to diagrams to assist the association of word with object, as well as echoes of the grammatical approach in the presentation of certain grammatical points".⁹

Book 1A, written by A. Sánchez, M. Ríos and J. Domínguez was published in 1974, while Book 1B, by the same authors, was published in 1975. Books 2A and 2B by A. Sánchez, M.T. Cabré and J.A. Matilla were published in 1975, while Book 3 was published in 1982. In Maltese secondary schools, Books 1A, 1B and 2A are used in Forms III, IV and V respectively.

Each unit in Books 1A and 1B consists of the following:

- The first page contains a dialogue which simulates a situation in daily life. Comprehension of the text is assisted with the inclusion of a number of pictures which, though not particularly attractive, can be of use to the teacher, especially if associated with the communicative approach.¹⁰
- A table setting out the grammatical structures of the unit, without any accompanying explanation, followed by structuralist-type exercises to permit the assimilation of the elements or structures being presented. These exercises tend to be fairly monotonous and lacking in creativity and as a consequence are low in motivation.
- Two pages with diagrams to assist the acquisition, via oral practice, of the structures and vocabulary.
- Two pages with transformation, substitution or repetition exercises to consolidate the structures introduced in the lessons.
- A final page in which a situation similar to the one introducing the unit is used to apply the structures and vocabulary learnt.

In addition to the students' text book, there is also a Practice Book for homework, cassettes and slides. In Malta, only the first is used.

Book 2A follows the same format plus a new section entitled *Lo que usted debe saber*, in which printed materials from real life are utilized to introduce the students to Spanish culture. Maltese pupils are therefore not exposed to real life texts and elements of Spanish culture until they are in Form V.

It is clear that since the seventies there have been many different types of courses for the teaching of

Spanish coming onto the market. This phenomenon reflects the developments in methodology effecting the teaching of foreign languages, particularly the Council of Europe's Threshold levels. An up-to-date review of these methods is undertaken by Aquilino Sánchez¹¹ in the above-mentioned book, and is complemented by the recent contribution by M^a José Rueda, which analyses recent developments.¹²

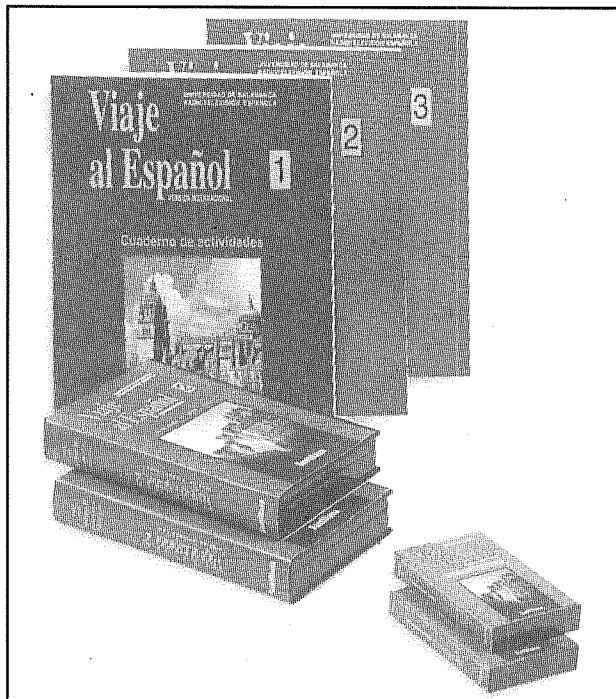
In an effort to compensate for the deficiencies of *Español en directo*, the University of Malta's Faculty of Education offers a series of credits to equip students with the capacity to develop their own teaching materials based on the communicative or task approach.¹³ The very first B.Ed. Spanish dissertation in fact dealt with the preparation of complementary material for use in Forms III, IV and V.¹⁴ This seeks to bridge the gap until such time as the current text book is replaced.

In search of an alternative: *Viaje al español*

The search for the best method for specific levels of teaching such as Forms III, IV and V is not an easy task for several reasons. Even the specialist finds him or herself overwhelmed by the vast range of alternative courses available. There is also an increasing amount of books and support materials which, if properly used, can enable the user to overcome the deficiencies of any particular aspect. But even this requires a guide.¹⁵ It is also worth pointing out that much of this material is increasingly open and eclectic and gives the user greater discretionary power over the course. Much will of course depend on the purpose for which one is learning Spanish but it is probably still advisable for both pupils and teachers in secondary schools to continue adopting a set text book particularly in view of the fact that the former are coming into contact with the language for the very first time.

Keeping in mind the above-mentioned factors, we would like to propose *Viaje al español* as a possible replacement for use in Maltese secondary schools. The international edition of this text book for classroom use is an adaptation of the bilingual teach-yourself publication of the same name.

The text book is the result of the collaboration of several institutions: the Spanish Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture, Radio Televisión Española, and the University of Salamanca. The novelty of this course, when compared to others, is the importance given to the use of video in the class as an integral part of the course. In addition to using a medium with which



students are already familiar, the video narrates a story which is presented in a "soap opera" format. In order to maximize motivation¹⁶ the video weaves the didactic elements within a voyage of discovery of the geography and culture of Spain. It is nevertheless true that the construction of the course around the video leads to the creation of a measure of dependence as access to video-viewing facilities is a *sine qua non*.

As the introduction clearly sets out, the aim of the course is not merely to satisfy general communication needs, but also to develop other skills required for day to day survival such as reading, writing and the decoding of images. It is divided into three levels each of which consists of a student's book and an activities book which systematically exploit the contents of the video; two audio cassettes; a video for level one, and two for each of the subsequent levels; and a teacher's book.

Levels one, two and three are based on the functional, notional-functional and notional approaches respectively.¹⁷ *Viaje al español* is therefore very different from *Español en directo* in that it builds not on a structural or grammatical base but on the situational perspective which enables the students to attend to language needs in a specific situation. There are nevertheless instructions concerning the proper use of the grammatical structures and lexical items introduced, as well as references to a grammar section at the end of the book entitled *Rincón de la gramática* or the Grammar Corner. These notes on grammar are brief and to the point and may require the teacher's help.

Despite this initial drawback it is felt that the students should be exposed to the richness of authentic language from the very beginning and that he or she would soon be able to understand the grammar.

Yet another of the positive aspect of *Viaje al español* is the presence of a glossary or vocabulary at the end of the student's book. This follows the order established by the units and shows those words which appear in a particular unit for the first time in addition to revision sections which consolidate previously-acquired vocabulary.

Once familiar with the material, particularly the video elements of it, teachers should have no problem in making whole or partial use of it.¹⁸ A very useful extra are the suggestions on how to derive the maximum possible benefit from the material, to be encountered at the beginning of the book.¹⁹ This constitutes a useful complement to the exposure which B.Ed. students already have concerning the proper use of material.

In theory all secondary schools are now equipped with video although it is difficult to determine the level of access to this equipment in a particular school at any one time. It is nevertheless important to keep in mind that although video is a very useful and handy tool, it can be abused. The introduction to the book, fully aware of this danger, cautions against the excessive exposure of students to the video material and text.

Video is an extremely useful instrument but it is not a panacea and neither can it fully replace the teacher. It is simply a medium which, if carefully handled, can produce excellent results. The viewing of a video must only take place within the context of a properly laid out lesson plan with specific objectives. A couple of sessions devoted to the training of future or present teachers as to the proper handling of the course material is a must.

Conclusions

To sum up, the following are the most pressing changes required, in order of priority, based on the communicative approach as it is concibed by Richards and Rodgers,²⁰ Sheils²¹ or currently Álvaro García Santa-Cecilia.²²

1. That teachers complement the text book currently in use, namely *Español en directo* with material which introduces the communicative approach

and which helps retain if not actually increase students' motivation.

2. The next stage would ideally be the replacement of the current text book with a more up to date one. In this paper we have suggested *Viaje al español* as one such possibility although Spanish as a Foreign Language specialists should be consulted prior to a final decision.
3. A reform of the current system which requires the less gifted to cover in two years the same curriculum which others normally do in three.²³
4. That the SEC curriculum and examination gradually evolve to better reflect internationally recognised qualifications such as the *Diploma Básico de Español*.
5. The adoption of Spanish as one of the options available to students in Form I. This would give it equality of treatment on the same basis as French and Italian.

The gradual adoption of the above would contribute to an improvement in the quality of the teaching in Maltese schools of a universal language, Spanish, spoken by more than 350 million people world-wide.

Notes

- 1 Cfr. *El peso de la lengua española en el mundo*, VVAA, Universidad de Valladolid, Fundación Duques de Soria, Incipe, 1995; and *El currículo de español como lengua extranjera*, Álvaro García Santa-Cecilia, Edelsa, Colección Investigación Didáctica, Madrid 1995, pages 76-77.
- 2 More on this subject in Elisabeth Subercaseaux's article "El mundo de la prensa hispana en Estados Unidos", in *Cuadernos Cervantes de la lengua española*, nº 5 (nov 1995), pp. 7-14.
- 3 Cfr. *Cuadernos Cervantes de la lengua española*, nº 2 (May 1995), articles by Isabel Campo ("Hispanic, latino, speaker of Spanish: nos queda la palabra") and Alberto Moncada ("El tratado de Libre Comercio. La proposición californiana 187 y su influencia sobre el idioma").
- 4 *Carabela* review nº 36, October 1995.
- 5 Ref. Plan curricular del Instituto Cervantes (1994).
- 6 Similar organizations are AEPE (Asociación Europea de Profesores de Español) in Europe, or AASTP (American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese) in USA.
- 7 *Ven* (Edelsa/Edi 6, Madrid 1990-93) is the method currently used, although *Viaje al español* is used at times.
- 8 By Lourdes Jerez Amador de los Ríos, Linguistic attachée, Embassy of Spain, Malta, October 1991.
- 9 Aquilino Sánchez Pérez, *Historia de la enseñanza del español como lengua extranjera*, SGEL, Madrid, 1992, pp. 394-5.
- 10 The book can also be modified as Encina Alonso suggests in her chapter about programming in *¿Cómo ser profesora y querer seguir siéndolo?*, Edelsa/Edi 6, Madrid, 1995.
- 11 He analyses *Entre nosotros* (Sánchez, Ríos, Matilla, SFEL, Madrid, 1982), notional-functional method; *Para empezar* (Equipo Pragma, Edelsa/Edi 6, Madrid, 1984), communicative method, "more a notional-functional and structural method than a communicative one"; and *Antena* (Equipo Anavce, SGEL, Madrid, 1986), which he believes is the first communicative method in Spain.
- 12 In *Carabela* review nº 35 and 36, she describes the following communicative methods: *Intercambio* (L. Miquel y N. Sans, Difusión, Madrid 1989-90); *Ven* (F. Castro, F. Marín, R. Morales; Edelsa/Edi 6, Madrid 1990-93); *Curso intensivo de español para extranjeros* (L. Busquet, L. Bonzi, ed. Verbum, Madrid 1993); and *¿Qué tal amigos? Curso introductorio completo de español* (1989); *Entre amigos* (1990-92); *Orbita* (1991-92), and *Cumbre. Curso de español para extranjeros* (1995), all of them from the same publisher of the review, SGEL (Madrid).
- 13 TSP 20, Design of didactical units working with tasks; TSP 21, The Theoretical basis of the communicative approach; TSP 22, Applications of the communicative approach, respectively.
- 14 "Propuesta de material complementario para los Form IV-V siguiendo el enfoque comunicativo", by Ruth Sabino (1994). An unpublished B/Ed. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta.
- 15 For example, the book before mentioned of Álvaro García (op. cit. footnote 1), specifically chapters 1 (apdo. 3), 7 and 8, following a communicative approach.
- 16 Motivation as it is said by Álvaro García (op. cit. page 149): "el factor operativo en el proceso de aprendizaje de la lengua, si bien se trata de un factor complejo que engloba aspectos distintos como el deseo de alcanzar unos objetivos y el esfuerzo que se dedica a lograrlo".
- 17 This method is not a specifically communicative one, so the lack of information gap exercises can be remedied by recourse to books such as *De dos en dos*, Ed. Difusión, Madrid, 1992. Related to the relationship between the notional-functional and the communicative approach are these words of Álvaro García (op. cit. page 41): "se puede ser notional-functional sin ser comunicativo, y comunicativo sin ser notional-functional".
- 18 For the next academic year (1996/97) a new unit will be available in the Spanish B.Educ Programme about the use of the video in the Spanish lesson (TSP 25: The use of video material in the class of Spanish and preparation of tasks for oral production).

- ¹⁹ Vid. also: *Video y enseñanza*, Santiago Mallas Casas, Universidad de Barcelona, 1985; *Aplicación didáctica del vídeo*, Salvador Bauzá, Alta Fulla, 1991.
- ²⁰ *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*, Oxford University Press, 1986.
- ²¹ *Communication in the modern languages classroom*, Project nº 12: Learning and teaching modern languages for communication, Council of Europe, Estrasburgo 1988.
- ²² Op. cit. page 222: "conjunto de ideas y principios que constituye un modo particular de entender la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera a partir de los siguientes rasgos generales: importancia del uso de la lengua con fines

comunicativos; consideración del alumno como eje del currículo; énfasis en el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa; consideración de las necesidades y expectativas del alumno con respecto al aprendizaje; énfasis en la negociación de significados en el uso de la lengua; importancia del desarrollo de la autonomía del alumno; importancia de la dimensión sociocultural relacionada con la lengua; desarrollo de la enseñanza y del aprendizaje mediante la potenciación de la capacidades de los alumnos". Vid. also *El enfoque comunicativo de la enseñanza de la lengua*, VVAA, Paidós, 1993.

- ²³ To develop this point and the next one, we must follow the above-mentioned *Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes* and *El currículo de español como lengua extranjera*.