

How well can Year 2 pupils in Malta read in Maltese and English?

Josephine Milton & Charles Mifsud

“Virtually every child in the country born in 1992 was tested in both Maltese and English”

This was the subject of the first ever National Literacy Survey in Malta, carried out in March 1999. The project was carried out by the Literacy Unit of the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta, in conjunction with the Curriculum Department of the Education Division.

Virtually every child in the country born in 1992 was tested in both Maltese and English. Complete data were gathered on 4554 children in State, Church and Private Independent Schools.

The test employed to measure English literacy was the *Literacy Baseline*, within the series of the *Reading Progress Tests*. This test is standardised and designed to measure pre-literacy and initial literacy skills that are usually associated with later success in learning to read. A parallel version of the *Literacy Baseline* was devised for Maltese.

Main Findings

Pupil variables:

- The average score on both tests was quite high. The average score for Maltese was significantly higher than that for English; but the difference was not large, and therefore most pupils were making good progress in literacy in both languages.
- The tests also clearly identified pupils with literacy difficulties.
- Girls achieved significantly higher average scores than boys in both languages.
- As would be expected, pupils in the upper half of the Year 2 age range had higher average scores in both languages than those in the younger half of the year group.
- Pupils whose first language was Maltese (90 per cent of the sample) achieved a higher average score on the *Maltese* test than those whose first language was English. On the *English* test those whose first language was English achieved a higher average score than those whose first language was Maltese.
- Children who had had less than two years' preschool education had significantly lower average scores in both languages than those who had had more preschool education.



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- Pupils who had Special Educational needs and/or were receiving Complementary Education had significantly lower average scores in both languages than other pupils.

Home variables:

- Pupils whose mothers and/or fathers were better educated, and those whose fathers had more middle-class jobs, achieved significantly higher average scores than others.

School variables:

- The number of Year 2 classes in the school had little relationship with pupils' attainment. Thus small and large primary schools appeared to be equally effective.
- Pupils in Church and Private Independent schools achieved significantly higher average scores than pupils in state schools.
- Schools in South Eastern Malta had the highest average scores, and those in Inner Harbour the lowest.

Implications

Most Year 2 pupils were making good progress in literacy in both Maltese and English, and this bilingual and biliterate outcome was a very positive finding. However, in both languages there was a 'tail' of pupils with literacy difficulties and these would need to be addressed through intensive individual attention or through monitoring and extra support maybe in small groups. Schools of all sizes seem to be equally effective in teaching early literacy.

Main Recommendations

The standardised scores of all pupils should be fed back to their schools.

Children having severe difficulties should be given intensive individual support and those who are struggling with literacy should be monitored and support provided perhaps in small groups. We also have to ensure that boys do not fall behind in this important life skill.

Moreover, state education should be improved and regional differences investigated.

junction with the Complementary Education Section of the Education Division.

The results of the National Literacy Survey have been published by the NFER and the University of Malta in:

Mifsud, C., Milton, J., Brooks, G. & Hutchison, D. (2000) Literacy in Malta, NFER, UK.

Copies of this report may be purchased from the Faculty of Education, Room 319.

In May 2000 a follow-up study dealing with the School Effectiveness and Value-Added implications of the National Survey is to be published.

Alfred Cauchi

The way ahead... first steps

The Literacy Unit has already visited many primary schools to discuss their performance and has already been invited to hold staff development meetings focusing on literacy in various schools. The Literacy Unit intends to foster closer ties with schools where literacy is thriving, so that this positive outcome is encouraged. Schools where a substantial amount of students are struggling or having severe problems with literacy will be offered assistance and plans for intervention will be drawn up to address the particular needs of the students and school in con-



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