

Some views about the Maltese Language SECE

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Examinations should not be seen as an isolated activity. They are an essential element of the teaching and learning processes in schools as they provide a framework in which educational objectives may be set and pupils' progress charted and expressed. Language tests can be an asset because they provide relevant feedback on the strengths of language teaching programme (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Because of the communicative nature of language use 'language teaching has developed enormously in recent years ...' (Underhill, 1987: 5).

This development has also been seen locally with the inception of the new SEC System of external examinations run by the MATSEC Examining Board of the University of Malta. These exams serve as a benchmark and assess the attainment of 16+ candidates taking them. One such exam is the Maltese SECE and, like all other SEC Exams, certifies achievement in the Maltese Language according to the student's competence. As this external national exam is considered extremely important by those students seeking post-secondary and tertiary education views of teachers (in State, Church and Private Secondary Schools), lecturers and assistant lecturers, syllabus and paper setters, markers and the chairperson of the Maltese SECE could very well contribute towards the enhancing of the Maltese Language 16+ SEC exam.

The collected data is the product of semi-structured interviews. The interviewees responded to questions that addressed the investigative question: **How realistic a picture (or accurately a perspective) is the Maltese SECE giving of the students' language and linguistic competence in the Maltese Language?** The responses demonstrate the opinion of the interviewees about:

1. The format/Context,
2. Input/Content and level of the Maltese SECE; that is, whether the aims and objectives of the Maltese SECE, as set by the Syllabus Panel, are being reached when one considers the level of the Maltese Language of the Post-Secondary and University students.
3. Process – the Backwash Effect of the new SEC Examination System in the classroom situation. The time constraints, if any, the teachers have to work within in teaching the Syllabus of the Maltese SECE
4. Reliability of all the components of the Maltese SECE (especially the Oral, the two-

level paper choice and Paper 2) as a means of measuring the achievement of pupils

Context

The interviewees' responses express their views regarding the rationale of the whole local examination set-up that strives to reach all candidates, regardless of their abilities, and whose philosophy is to stress positive achievement rather than failure (SECE - **The New Format**, 1994). They also demonstrate the interviewees' views about the format of the two Papers, the Syllabus of the Maltese SECE, and the rationale of the two differentiated paper system vis-a-vis the Maltese Language.

Aims and Objectives of the Maltese SECE

Responses demonstrated a diversity of opinion in certain areas, and consensus on other aspects. Very often disagreement was the result of the different roles the interviewees played vis-a-vis the Maltese SECE. There was lack of consensus between the members of the Syllabus and Paper Setters Panel and the interviewees who teach Maltese at Secondary, post-Secondary and tertiary level, as to whether the aims and objectives of the Maltese SECE, so stipulated in its syllabus, were being reached or not.

Three of the four aims of the Maltese SECE concern themselves with the communicative, conceptive and appreciating skills, while the fourth addresses the literary analysis skill. The objective of the exam is to serve as a means of bench marking which is supposed to show that the candidate has a command of the language (in both the written and spoken medium) and that he/she is able to communicate his/her thoughts in good grammatical Maltese. A certificate in the Maltese SEC is therefore intended to show the candidate's ability in Maltese.

Interviewed lecturers and assistant lecturers of the Maltese Department at the University Junior College and University contend that in many cases the aims and objectives of the exam are not being reached. They are in fact surprised how a substantial number of first year University Junior College and B.Ed. students hold a SEC and a MATSEC Certificate, in the Maltese Language. The interviewees claim that:

- These students make gross morphological, syntactical and orthographical mistakes.

“How realistic a picture (or accurately a perspective) is the Maltese SECE giving of the students' language and linguistic competence in the Maltese Language?”



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- They lack the ability to communicate their thoughts coherently in grammatically structured Maltese.
- Many of them find fail to communicate in good Maltese because they come from an English-speaking environment. They allege that:
“The bottom line is that these students have somehow managed to outwit the system. The interviewees believe that the Maltese SECE is somehow failing to give us a realistic perspective of the students’ abilities in Maltese.”

The interviewed members of the Syllabus and Paper Setters Panels of the Maltese SECE disagreed completely with these views. They claimed that:

- The aims and objectives of the Maltese SECE are being reached as both Papers address language skills.
- As it is a known fact that in Malta a substantial percentage of the population does not give the Maltese Language the priority it deserves, because they frequently converse in English, the aims and objectives of the exam cater for such individuals because the students have to communicate in Maltese both orally and in writing. So if they hold a certificate in Maltese SEC this is enough proof that they have reached the required standards set by the paper setters and markers’ panel.
- They also point out that since 1995, the number of candidates sitting for the Maltese SECE has been showing a steady annual increase. The 1998 Maltese SECE population was 4302, an increase of 25 percent on the 1995 candidates. If so many are sitting for the exam, the implication is that so many are keeping abreast with the language and its literature.
- They also based their arguments on the fact that the large cluster of passes lies between Grade 3 and Grade 5.

“These grades are an indication that the bulk of successful candidates are of average ability. In being successful they are underpinning the fact that the objectives of the Maltese SECE are being reached”.

Finally they stated that although the results show the success of the exam, in no way do they imply that the exam is not open for improvement.

The Differentiated Paper System

Again this was an issue that led to a diversity of opinion. Many of the interviewees (especially lecturers and assistant lecturers) disagree with the differentiated papers because they believe that a good number of students, who hold a Grade 4 or a Grade 5, assume that they are good enough to study Maltese at ‘A’. They contend that a student who holds a Grade 4 or 5 in Paper 2B or a Grade 4 in Paper 2A

should not be allowed to study Maltese at ‘A’ level, especially if the student obtained a pass mark after a September re-sit. Their opinion is based on a twofold argument:

- a) “We believe that there are too many factors (Oral, Comprehension and Paper 2 marks) that are contributing to a pass mark and a final successful Grade.”
- b) “Furthermore, according to Section 12 of the Matsec Examination Board (1994) publication that Paper IIB ‘is designed for the less academically able candidates’ (SEC Brochure – The New Format, 1994: 8) we feel that a Paper 2B certification is too low a standard for anyone aspiring to further his studies in the Maltese Language.”

It is a known fact that a percentage number of the candidates study Maltese at ‘A’ Level because it is an entry requirement into the law course and not because they have any interest in cultivating and preserving this national heritage. The end result is that these students do not study Maltese but rote learn material to regurgitate it in the exam and manage to obtain the much needed grade. The effect, as pointed out and underlined by Achille Mizzi, is felt years later when these individuals are practising law:

“... the shortcomings in the use of Maltese at University is nowhere more evident than in the law courts where our younger lawyers are discarding Maltese legal terminology...”

“... Maltese is hardly being used by some lecturers in imparting legal jargon to law students...”

(Mizzi, June 25, 2000: 36)

A few of the interviewed members of the relevant boards of the Maltese Language exam support the two tiered-paper format of the Maltese SECE. They contend that this format forms part of the 16+ external examination system that makes the SEC exams accessible to a much larger population than did its preceding G.C.E. exams. The implication is that in making the Maltese SECE accessible to more candidates, Maltese literature is getting the required exposure and contact with about 80 percent of the eligible population of the 16+ exams, rather than with the top 20 percent of the 16 year olds finishing compulsory education (Ventura & Murphy, 1997).

Interviewees who support the two tiered paper contend that the less academically able students who obtain grades five, six or seven are achieving success in a less proportional way. The differentiation in the Maltese SECE and the awarded grades (one to seven) are enhancing the concept of positive achievement. Caroline Gipps (1987) claims that:

“by pitching questions and papers at different levels of difficulty all candidates would be enabled to show what they know, understand and can do. Assessment would



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interviewed educators. There was consensus about the existing different components of the two papers. All interviewees saw the importance of the components in examining the linguistic competence and language skills of a student.

All interviewees contend that the Oral component definitely needs to be improved in format, content and management. They think that the objectives of the Oral are not being reached because of the content material the student has to read. These interviewed teachers, who had also conducted oral exams, insist that the reading textual content should be chosen with care. It should be primarily appealing, flowing and not pedantic to a point that it will give pleasure to the student in reading it. They feel that there should be better marking guidelines for markers, and better management in examining it.

Some of the interviewees believe that the composition titles need to be more realistic and more student-friendly. They feel that certain essay titles are detached from the world of sixteen year olds. They also insist that the content material of some of the components, primarily the Composition, have an element of inequity. They claim:

"That some students are weak yet they have to sit for a core paper (Paper I) that is set for all the candidates and expect the less academically able to fare with the average and top students. If we want a realistic mark that reflects the different levels and abilities there should be either a grade Paper I or a different Paper I format and content for those taking Paper 2B."

Some other interviewees find the Comprehension (second component of Paper I) student friendly but far too short and not challenging enough. The comprehension should not include only recall questions but should include

thus be a positive achievement and motivation enhanced."

(Gipps, 1987: 76)

This philosophy of differentiation would allow all the candidates who sit for the Maltese SECE to show what they could do and also allow the inclusion of items suitable for some candidates without distorting the curriculum for others.

Format of the Maltese SECE Papers

The main structure of the Maltese SECE is that of two papers where Paper 1 is language biased (made up of language components) and is a compulsory element in the Maltese exam. Paper II is a literature paper, but the student has a choice of a harder (Paper 2A) or an easier (Paper 2B) second Paper.

Difference of opinion was again forthcoming on this issue. Those in favour of keeping the existing format the exam based their arguments on a number of reasons, such as:

- They strongly contend that one can truly say that he knows the language when one is also exposed to one of its varieties, the literary register. In understanding literary works one is learning language because a literary piece of work is presented in a grammatical, syntactical and controlled form.
- They maintain that when a student has achieved a successful grade in the Maltese SEC, the implication is that the student has acquired an awareness of Maltese literary culture.
- They strongly believe that having a literature paper integrated with a language paper is not wrong in itself. What is wrong is the way literature is taught in Secondary Schools, especially in State Schools. These interviewees do not blame the teachers, but the curriculum that creates the time constraints they have work in. Because of time constraints and having to teach a vast syllabus in so short a time to a mixed ability class of 25, the approach adopted undermines one of the main objectives of teaching literature: teaching students to appreciate Maltese literary works.

Input (Content and Level)

Questions addressing this area yielded a barrage of criticism. Even officials on the respective boards of the Maltese SECE admitted that they were not satisfied with some of the content material and how the Oral was being examined by teacher-markers engaged to conduct Orals.

The Content material of the two papers drew a number of critical views from

questions that test different skills, such as inferencing skills. The grammar section shows a step in the right direction because the questions are based on the comprehension passage.

All interviewees agreed that the aims and objectives linked to letter writing are positive. Teaching students about the different formats of letter writing (applying for a job, a letter to the editor, etc) not only prepares them for the exam but also actualizes the concept of life long education.

This consensus, among the interviewees, on the inclusion of the letter component complements the importance teachers attribute to letter writing, as demonstrated by the collected data from the questionnaire.

Finally, the questions addressing the contents of Paper 2A and 2B also drew criticism. All the interviewees agreed that the marks scored by the students for the components of Paper 2 were compensating for any shortcomings that they may have had in any of the components of Paper I. All the interviewed markers agreed that the majority of literary essays were simply a regurgitation of other people's material.

Many of the interviewed educators believed that the objectives linked to the literature paper are not being achieved. They contend that preparing students for a literature paper should not imply teaching them language through literature. The objectives of such a paper should not simply be a lesson on lexicon; that is, giving the meaning of archaic words that have fallen out of use. Students need to be taught the necessary skills of literary criticism. The educators who teach in the post-secondary sector claim that the majority of students are not equipped with literary awareness skills.

All the interviewees agreed that most of the set poems or passages that the students have to study for the Maltese SECE Paper 2 are detached from teenagers' experiences. This develops in the students a dislike for Maltese literature. Finally, almost all interviewees agreed that if literature is to remain the content of Paper 2, then changes have to be carried out to:

- a) Improve the level of the Maltese SECE
- b) Ensure that the rationale of the Maltese SECE Paper 2 will conform with the philosophy of the differentiation policy adopted for the MATSEC exams
- c) See that the contents of the papers will be testing the proper level and thus provide a realistic interpretation of the marks the students score in the exam, giving an accurate perspective of their competence in the Maltese language.

Process - The Backwash Effect

The opinions of the interviewees (especially interviewed secondary teachers who teach form V students) were concerned with how the new