

# Speaking their language

Opinion

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The home-grown curricular programme is being soft launched in two schools: Maria Regina College Girls' Secondary School, Mosta and St Ignatius College Boys' Secondary School, Handaq (above). Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

Towards the beginning of last May, when I was invited for a meeting by the Minister for Education and Employment to discuss foreign language teaching and learning at secondary State and non State schools, we soon realised that the situation was quite worrying.

Unfortunately, the number of school leavers who have no accredited certification in foreign language skills as well as in English and Maltese is on the increase. This notwithstanding the fact that they have studied these languages for a number of years, both at primary and at secondary level.

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“Mastery in foreign languages is considered an instrument enabling workers to considerably improve career prospects”

In fact, in the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examination session of May 2013, 38.5 per cent of the 1997 cohort of students (who turned 16 in 2013) failed to register for any foreign language at SEC level, 19 per cent failed to register for English language and 23.7 per cent did not apply for Maltese. Besides, one must also take into account another 12-15 per cent of students who either register but fail to turn up for the examinations or do not make the grade.

This means that about half of the students aged 16 fail to obtain any kind of accredited certification in at least one foreign language and about 30 per cent do not obtain certification in either English or Maltese.

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This is very sad, more so in view of the fact that Malta's economy is dependent on human resources and foreign trade, driven by financial services and tourism. Mastery in foreign languages is considered, in today's world, not just an excellent tool to bridge gaps between people coming from different countries and to create strong sentimental and professional relationships, but, above all, an instrument that enables workers to considerably improve their career prospects.

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Multilingualism is today considered to be one of the key elements for a modern Europe, given that learning foreign languages permits citizens to enrich their lives, grasp new ideas and benefit from the European cultural diversity.

“In the global marketplace that we now live in, languages have become crucial across all sectors. From law to finance, from tourism to technology, from marketing to administration, most businesses today need workers who can speak different languages, not just to permit communication across the globe, but also to understand different cultural realities and needs” (Pace M., 2013. ‘The teaching of foreign languages for specific purposes: the way forward’ in *The Educator. A Journal of Educational Matters*).

This is further confirmed by the CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey 2013: “Seven in 10 (70 per cent) businesses value foreign language skills among their employees, particularly in helping build relations with clients, customers and suppliers”.

A pertinent question worth posing and considering here is: why are so many students quitting languages at school?

There may be various answers. Among the most common are:

(i) the perception that learning a language can be an important prerequisite for just a few. Suffice it to say that, at the university, the only two faculties in which foreign languages can be studied are the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Arts (apart from some elective credits and Degree Plus); at Mcast, the presence of foreign language teaching is negligible whereas at ITS foreign languages are not compulsory for all students;

(ii) students very often see very little connection between what is taught in class and real life situations, especially in view of the fact that we still have a system of assessing languages based almost entirely on writing skills;

(iii) students who in their first years of studying a language fail to grasp the basic concepts, find it very difficult, if not impossible, to keep the pace with the other students in their year group.

The subject proficiency assessment (SPA) programme just introduced keeps all this in mind and has the intent to set up a home-grown alternative assessment based on subject proficiency at levels 1, 2 and 3 of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF). It se

provide a clear description of what individuals 'can do' with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context.

The programme presents three levels of proficiency and describes what an individual can and cannot do with language at each level, regardless of where, when or how the language is acquired.

In the light of this, the above-mentioned home-grown certified proficiency exam in all languages and, eventually, in other subjects at levels 1, 2 and 3 (MQF) is being proposed. This programme, which will eventually be offered on a national basis, will initially target those students who normally would be considered to be at great risk of not obtaining a level-rated certification at the end of compulsory schooling.

The intention is to offer these students the possibility of obtaining proficiency qualifications and certificates as an alternative route concurrent with that of SEC. This home-grown curricular programme is being soft launched in two schools, namely, Maria Regina College Girls' Secondary School, Mosta and St Ignatius College Boys' Secondary School, Ħandaq.

Form 3 students will be offered a special programme of studies for Italian at level 1 (MQF). It is envisaged that, in September 2015, there will be a purposeful national roll out which will start addressing all languages, including English and Maltese.

It is being proposed that, while allowing for contingencies, in September of the coming year, the programme will be extended to five other languages, namely, French, German, Spanish, English and Maltese in a number of identified schools.

The SPA national implementation will also proceed in 2016 as complementary to the traditional SEC.

Form 3 students are being offered this programme on the basis of their demonstrated performance in the subject. Students will choose between SEC and SPA in consultation with their parents and teachers.

Although one track does not necessarily exclude the other, those students who opt for SPA will start a level 1 programme of studies in the particular language and, at the end of the scholastic year, they will sit for SPA level 1 (MQF) exams.

The examinations, which will be set at the national level, will consist of four different papers, one for each basic language skill, namely, reading, writing, speaking and listening. Each paper will receive a separate mark and students will have the opportunity to obtain a certificate indicating the marks and the level obtained for each of the skills for each language being studied annually.

Students who reach proficiency level and obtain a pass mark in at least two of the four skills, will, at Form 4, proceed to SPA Level 2 (MQF) whereas those students who fail to do so, will, at Form 4, continue to follow SPA level 1 in that particular language. This means that the teaching and learning process will be rendered more personal and relevant to the students' needs with particular attention targeted at the level, motivation and ability of acquisition of students taking SPA.

Another important difference will be that, due to the nature of the SPA programmes of study, there will be no traditional half-yearly examinations because these will be replaced by continuous assessment.

In fact, these home-grown curricular programmes, which shall be drawn up within the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) working groups, should be considered as a general guide rather than a prescriptive instrument and do not provide a single method for applying them.

In this way, the programme avoids being prescriptive by defining the moment when particular grammar points and/or vocabulary lists need to be taught and how. That will be left to the discretion of the teachers who will decide when and where will these be included in the teaching programme and the methods they should employ, depending on the academic level and the needs of their particular students in class.

It is expected that the SPA programme will lead to a reduction in the number of students with no accredited certification in languages on leaving compulsory schooling, while offering an alternative route to obtaining certification in language/subject proficiency at levels 1,2 and 3 of MQF

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