A Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo

A consultation document
Preface

The policy promotes the bilingual development in Maltese and English of young children (0-7 years) in Malta and Gozo. It stems from The National Curriculum Framework (2012), the National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo (2014) and the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 and is intended to provide national guidelines for bilingual education. Within this framework schools are to be supported to develop their own language strategies in the School Development Plan, to meet the needs of their students.

The Policy strives to provide learners with opportunities to:

- Foster positive attitudes towards Maltese, English and other languages;
- Develop competences in Maltese and English in different settings.

The policy offers direction in the promotion of bilingualism to:

- parents and significant others;
- early years educators;
- managers of early years education settings;
- early childhood teacher educators.
Bilingualism in the Early Years

Early years education is important for the development of bilingualism and positive attitudes towards languages. Bilingualism entails cognitive advantages, as bilingual children have two or more words for each concept and they demonstrate greater mental flexibility and creative thinking than monolinguals (Serratrice, 2013). The knowledge of two languages provides a head start for the learning of other languages (Jessner, 2008) as it enables children to think about languages (Castro et al. 2011). Since subject matter is taught by means of language, a high level of proficiency in the languages of schooling is a valuable asset. Learning more than one language also involves increased chances of communication with a wider variety of people, at a local and global level (Baker, 2000) and an appreciation of different cultures, which could lead to multicultural tolerance (Eurydice, 2009).

Notwithstanding the benefits of introducing a second language in early childhood education, the home language should also be nurtured, as it is closely tied to identity. Its use eases the social and emotional transition that occurs when children begin school and facilitates the learning of other languages (Genesee, 1994). Continued use of the home language in early childhood education settings allows children to develop age-appropriate world knowledge and vocabulary.
**The Context**

The sociolinguistic situation in Malta is one of a diffuse societal bilingualism, with the presence of the two official languages, Maltese and English, in most domains. Maltese is widespread as a spoken variety and is the mother tongue of the majority of the population, with a minimal percentage claiming English (and other languages) as their mother tongue (c.f. Sciriha & Vassallo, 2006). Code-switching is also a common linguistic practice, which often gives rise to complaints about language deterioration (Vella, 2013).

Maltese and English are the languages of schooling in Malta. It is important for children to acquire and learn these two languages to develop their cognitive skills and to be able to make progress in the subject content. All children should have the opportunity to develop these two languages.

**Recommendations**

**The Home Environment**

A child’s first language, culture and personal identity are inextricably linked. The role of parents and significant others is central to the child’s language learning. They serve as models for the child’s use of language and attitudes towards bilingualism.
Parents and significant others are to:

- foster positive attitudes towards Maltese, English, and other languages;
- engage in meaningful dialogue with children;
- seek to reinforce the home language/s;
- expose children to Maltese and English consistently;
- support school language education policies and practices.

**Early years educators**

Early years educators are to provide an enriching and an engaging environment that supports and extends language learning opportunities through scaffolding (Gibbons, 2002). They should be fluent in Maltese and English and act as models for age-appropriate language use. Bilingual exposure may involve tandems of staff using language based on the one-person-one language principle.

Early years educators are to convey positive attitudes towards the use of both languages, and to reinforce the children’s self-esteem as bilingual learners. They need to be able to adopt language mediation as a means of scaffolding instruction so that children can make sense of language¹ (García & Sylvan, 2011). Educators can adopt language mediation “to ensure that language problems of any kind should not be an obstacle to the potential for pupils to learn or to express themselves” (Council of Europe, 2015:41). This should enable all children to reach the learning outcomes, as outlined in the *Learning Outcomes Framework* for the Early Years.

¹ Language mediation involves the shifting of languages to facilitate comprehension and communication for the child. For more information on how this can be achieved refer to Appendix 1
The language practices of young children and their families are characterised by the use of a vast array of digital technologies. Technology has the potential to shape creativity by combining multimodal resources such as sound and image to text (Kucirkova & Sakr, 2015). It offers the possibility for children to participate in a rich and dynamic learning context. Digital resources may support learning through play and exploration.

**Early years educators are to:**

- foster positive attitudes towards multilingualism;
- ensure that children are developing age-appropriate language skills in both Maltese and English (speaking, listening, reading and writing), giving special attention to oracy;
- provide children with opportunities to use digital technologies to extend their language skills;
- identify and support those children, including migrants, who are struggling in either Maltese and/or English.
Managers of Early Years Education Settings

Early years education settings are bridges between families and the community. They should provide children with care and appropriate learning and language opportunities. Language education in the early years should be “integrated into contexts in which the language is meaningful and useful, such as in everyday or playful situations” (European Commission, 2011:14).

Managers of early years education settings are to:

- implement a school development plan that promotes bilingualism in school;
- work with educators to identify appropriate strategies and resources for bilingual language use in school;
- ensure that the programmes and methodologies employed include opportunities for bilingual and biliterate development;
- encourage teachers to act as appropriate linguistic models for their children;
- provide early years educators with the required continuous professional development for bilingual education and opportunities to improve their own language awareness, in both Maltese and English;
- foster and promote a bilingual ethos through for example having signs, assemblies and circulars for parents and their children, in both Maltese and English.
Early Childhood Teacher Educators

The engagement of effective early childhood educators who are fluent in the languages spoken in a community is critical for programme effectiveness. Teacher education programmes should ensure that prospective educators are equipped with appropriate language competences, knowledge and skills to deliver a programme that is developmentally appropriate for young children. Early years educators should have opportunities for continuous professional development in their own language awareness and also methodologies that promote bilingualism.

Early Childhood Teacher Educators are to:

- ensure that intending early years educators have the required proficiency in both languages, to enable them to provide the required language mediation and support in classrooms;
- prepare early years educators to support children, including migrants, with language and learning challenges, in both languages of schooling.

Conclusion

A study of the existing practices in bilingual education in the early years in Malta should serve as an impetus for improving policy and practice and the continuing professional development of those involved in early years teacher education. Research, also in the form of action research, can identify the most successful practices currently being used by educators, to be able to work with them in challenging areas and to develop new ideas on what can work best (Council of Europe, 2015).

It should also be added that although school and educational practice can do a great deal to provide a solid basis for language learning, in reality it is the linguistic practice of individuals,
in particular outside school, that shapes their language use (Council of Europe, 2015). Therefore, the community has an important role to play in the promotion of bilingualism as it influences what happens within it. Awareness raising campaigns on the importance of bilingualism in Malta should be promoted to ensure that positive attitudes towards Maltese and English are held in the broader community. Children are also in contact with language and literacy through technology and the media. The broadcasting media may create further awareness of the importance of both languages and assure the maintenance of adequate levels of quality in both Maltese and English in their programmes. In this way, the links between the family, educational settings and the broader community may be maintained.
Glossary of Terms

**Early Years Education** refers to the first years of non-compulsory schooling (Childcare centres, Kinder 1 and Kinder 2) and to the first two years of compulsory schooling (Year 1 and Year 2).

**Bilingualism** is the use of two languages (and in some cases more languages) to be able to communicate in different contexts (Grosjean, 2010).

**Language Mediation** refers to the shifting between languages by teachers and students to facilitate comprehension, communication and knowledge construction in classrooms (Li, 2015).

**Scaffolding** refers to support that is designed to provide the assistance necessary to enable learners to accomplish tasks and develop understandings (Gibbons, 2002). It is aimed at enabling students to ultimately work independently. It does not solely rely on the use of language, but can also encompass for instance the use of gestures, concrete examples and repetition. The use of multimodal resources for instance sound, image, digital technology may also enhance the scaffolding process.
Appendix 1: The role of language mediation in classrooms

Language mediation in classrooms refers to the use of two or more languages by teachers and learners (Cenoz & Gorter, forth). Recent research (Canagarajah 2011; García, Flores, & Woodley 2012; García & Li 2014) has shown how shifting from one language to the other in the classroom is actually pedagogically viable as it can facilitate comprehension and knowledge construction. Within the local context, research has shown that switching between languages is beneficial for the effective management of learning processes and teaching activities. (Camilleri Grima, 2013). The teacher has to be in a position to make use of “prudent use of code-switching” (Council of Europe, 2015:41) based on informed and judicious choices rather than haphazard ones to facilitate learners’ acquisition of language.

The following are examples of how language mediation may be used during numeracy lessons:

- Teachers may use Maltese to clarify concepts, maths operations and word problems during exposition sessions.

- They may also provide opportunities for learners to engage in student-student interactions while using Maltese. The learners may report back in Maltese. Pair-work or group work may increase learners’ level of confidence when handling tasks and when articulating responses. It may provide children with opportunities to scaffold language learning through peer interaction;

- Teachers may also draw on the learners’ use of Maltese and provide the necessary scaffolding to activate learners’ mathematical register in English, for instance by using questioning techniques such as “How do you say that?”

- When the learning is successful, the teacher may switch to the second language and encourage the students to work on similar tasks, in groups or independently. They may also encourage learners to use the second language when reporting back.
Appendix 2: Consultative meetings

The Language Policy in Education Committee

Joseph Cachia, Ray Cassar, John Degiorgio, Marika Farrugia, Christine Firman, Helen Grech, Anthony Licari, Elizabeth A. Pisani, Bernard Micallef, Charles L. Mifsud (Chairperson), Manwel Mifsud, David Muscat (Deputy Chairperson), Anita Seguna, Odette Vassallo, Pia Zammit.

Lara Ann Vella (Bilingual Resource Teacher)
Daniel Cini (Programmes Coordinator, National Literacy Agency)

The Language Policy in the Early Years Sub-Committee

Marika Farrugia, Christine Firman, Helen Grech, Anita Seguna

Heads of Department for Literacy and Literacy support teachers

Ruth Cilia, Amanda Morales, Rosanne Talbott, Vanessa Coletta Gatt, Roberta Bonnici, Michelle Camilleri, Nathalia Cachia, Claire Camilleri, Michelle Zarb, Jonathan Sammut, Daniela Callus, Nadia Zammit, Roberta Galea, Marica Gatt, Sharon Camilleri Brimmer, Kathleen Camilleri, Elaine Ciantar, Jennifer Peresso, Josette Bezzina, Alessandra Balzan, Janet Maria Cristina, Erika Medati

Delegates from the Language Policy Unit of the Council of Europe

Jean Claude Beacco, Marisa Cavalli, Lid King, Philia Thalogott

Education Officer for the Early Years Curriculum

Mariangela Schembri Meli

Education Officer for Early Childhood Education

Tania Mangion, Rose Marie Privitelli

Assistant Director for Curriculum (retired)

Maryanne Spiteri
### Dates

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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>15&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; October 2014</td>
<td>The Language Policy in Education Committee</td>
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<td>10&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; December 2014</td>
<td>The Education Officers for the Early Years</td>
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<td>7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; January 2015</td>
<td>Assistant Director for Curriculum</td>
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<td>12&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; May 2015</td>
<td>The Council of Europe Delegates</td>
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<td>Programmes Coordinator for the National Literacy Agency</td>
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<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; June 2015</td>
<td>The Language Policy in Education Committee</td>
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References


Ministry for Education and Employment, (2014). A National Literacy Strategy for all in Malta and Gozo. Available online:

Ministry for Education (2012). The National Curriculum Framework for All. Available online:


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