

Comment

Losing out on foreign languages ... can we afford it?



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According to data issued recently for the year 2015 by Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, "learning a foreign language at school is very common in the European Union (EU), with more than 17 million lower secondary school pupils (or 98.6% of all pupils at this education level) studying at least one foreign language in 2015.

Among them, more than 10 million (58.8%) were studying two foreign languages or more." Most often, pupils enter lower secondary education at the age of 11 or 12, which corresponds to our entry point to secondary school, and the end of this level coincides with the end of compulsory education. English is by far the most studied foreign language, followed by French, German and Spanish. The report also states that students in countries like Luxembourg, Finland and Italy are on top for learning two or more foreign languages.

How does this compare to the situation in Malta? Unfortunately, the number of school-leavers who have no accredited certification in foreign language skills is alarmingly high. Statistics show a decline in the number of students sitting for SEC exams in foreign languages. Suffice it to say that if we compare the 2015 Eurostat statistics referred to above with the 2015 SEC statistics for foreign languages, we find that 34.6% of our 16-year-olds failed to even apply to sit for a foreign language exam at SEC level. To these one has to add another 15-20% of students who either did not turn up on the day of the exam or failed to make the grade. This indicates clearly that the interest in foreign language learning in Malta is waning and that around half of the youngsters who complete their studies at Secondary Level do so without obtaining any form of accredited certification in at least one foreign language. To make matters worse, if we were to have a look at the number of students furthering their studies in foreign languages at Post-Secondary level, we soon realise that the situation is, to say the least, distressing. In fact the total number of first-year Sixth Form students studying a foreign language at Advanced level is a meagre 189. This includes all first-year students studying Italian, French, German, Spanish and Arabic in any post-secondary educational institution in Malta and Gozo.

This is very sad, even more so, in view of the fact that Malta's economy is dependent on human resources and foreign trade, and that the two most important employability sectors on these islands are tourism and digital gaming. Furthermore, several research studies show that a variety of languages are required on international markets and that the most quoted barrier to intra-European mobility remains lack of foreign language skills. And yet, unfortunately in Malta, we have reached a point where even those who do achieve SEC certi-

fication in one or more foreign languages do not necessarily find opportunities to further improve their language competences given that their field of specialisation at tertiary level often does not provide the opportunity to do so.

This brings us to a very pertinent question. Do we need graduates who are also proficient in one or more foreign languages? Apart from the huge benefits of foreign language learning like the acquisition of vital cognitive skills and intercultural awareness, graduates with high levels of language competence find it much easier to engage effectively with the rest of the world, giving them a cutting edge over their colleagues and/or competitors when it comes to research collaborations, trade, diplomacy, etc. In fact, an important sub-objective of the Lisbon Strategy states that there is a need to improve foreign language teaching at all levels of education throughout Europe. This is seen to be a key means of giving expression to the multilingual nature of the European Union.

All this explains why locally, over the past three or four years, all efforts are being made to diversify the local foreign language teaching and learning strategies and processes across all levels of our educational system, from primary to post-secondary, including tertiary education. At the primary level many schools in Malta and Gozo are today facing challenges that were formerly unknown to them, the greatest of which is the student population which has become much more heterogeneous than ever before. Although this development is on the one hand a major step towards a truly international educational environment, on the other hand it presents challenges that the school administrators, teachers and parents have not previously had to address before.

Given these social changes in schools in the Maltese Islands due to major mobility in Europe and Africa, the need was felt to develop a new Foreign Language Awareness Programme, FLAP, in State Primary Schools. This programme is in line with the proposals for language education heralded by the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001), in which the primary focus of language education is shifted from achieving mastery of a single target language to developing proficiency (of varying degrees) in several languages and experience of several cultures. FLAP recognises the importance of linguistic diversity and supports language



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learning as a lifelong task, essential for economic competitiveness and inclusive societies.

Furthermore, the wish to foster plurilingual and intercultural competences in the Maltese students at such an early age is also a response to European linguistic and cultural diversity and an increasing need for mobility and employability. This new FLAP programme, currently being piloted in collaboration with the Foundation for Educational Services (FES) in a number of *Klabb 3-16* centres, will be introduced in State primary schools in Year 3 as from September 2017. It focuses on helping Maltese learners develop a better knowledge of languages, skills to learn them, and positive attitudes towards linguistic diversity.

This scenario has also led to the introduction, as from September 2014, of the Subject Proficiency Assessment (SPA) programme in Secondary schools in Malta. The programme has the intent to set up a home-grown alternative assessment based on subject proficiency and seeks to 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, which is now offered on a national basis in Italian, German, French and Spanish, presently targets students who normally would be at great risk of not obtaining a level-rated certification in the language/s at the end of compulsory schooling. Today there are about 800 students following the SPA programme in for-

foreign languages at Secondary level and the results obtained so far exceeded all expectations.

At post-secondary and tertiary level, there exists a language deficit in the teaching of foreign languages when it comes to key vocational and academic areas and there exists a great need to broaden the range of students taking languages at different levels. The first step in this direction will be the introduction, as from September 2017, of foreign language proficiency courses to students following full time courses at the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). Furthermore, discussions about the possibility of having courses in foreign language proficiency offered to students studying at Sixth Form level have already started. The idea is to give our youngsters the opportunity to acquire fluency in one or more foreign languages while studying to obtain their MATSEC certificate.

Although a lot is already being done to encourage and entice more young people to acquire proficiency in foreign languages, one surely cannot sit back and relax. And although we have already seen a marked improvement in numbers in the span of a couple of years at Secondary school level (the percentage of 16-year-olds who did not sit for any foreign language at SEC level went down from 38.5% in 2013 to 30.7% in 2016 plus another 800 students who are following the SPA programme) there is still the need of a more concerted effort at post-secondary and tertiary level. It is imperative that all major stakeholders, be it the various Ministries, MCAST, ITS, University, Employers' Associations become strategic partners in the promotion of foreign language proficiency among students and employees by providing the necessary opportunities, schemes and settings within their institutions to enable them to become better equipped for the challenges they will have to face in an ever more globalised world.

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