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

Among them, more than 10 million (98.8%) 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 95.6% 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 exposure of students to foreign language learning in Malta is waning and that around half of the young students 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 studying foreign languages at Post-Secondary level, we 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, Spanish and Arabic in any post-secondary educational institution in Malta and Gozo.

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.

Dr Mario Pace is a Resident Senior Lecturer at the Department of Humanities & Languages within the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta. He is one of the local leading experts in foreign language teaching and learning and is currently working in very close collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Employment. He is the coordinator of the SPA programme, responsible for its design and implementation, as well as coordinator of the new FLAP programme for primary schools.

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