

The Malta Writing Programme: School Community Development through the Writing Process

Presentation made by Sandro Spiteri, Head of the Malta Writing Programme, Foundation for Educational Services, during the national writing process conference 'Writing to Learn, Writing to Teach: Writing Process for School Community Development', 16th and 17th September 2005, Attard C Primary School, Malta EU

In this presentation I would like to focus on why there should be a Malta Writing Programme today. To do this I shall explore why we teach writing as we do in Malta. I shall then discuss how the Malta Writing Programme is a response to this reality, and what is the role of the MWP in language teaching, literacy attainment and national identity in Malta today.

I shall be arguing that the three main influences on Maltese language teaching in the 20th century were:

- The raise of the classical paradigm of Maltese in the last decades of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century, that promoted Maltese as the standard bearer of national identity;
- The raise of the new paradigm of language teaching in the second half of the 20th century, that promotes the teaching of Maltese for personal and social integration, as enshrined in the 1999 National Minimum Curriculum.
- The constant of human capital as practically the sole national resource in a small island state with finite employment alternatives, leading to the over-certification of the educational system;.

Let's start from the first. To understand why the teaching of Maltese, and of writing in Maltese, is happening as it is today, we need to understand where it is coming from. Let us look back at our history. We all know that Maltese did not always have the prestige and recognition it has today. It gained its status with great difficulty, throughout and after the language question that characterised political and educational debate from the 1880s to the first third of the 20th century. It was a time when the ecclesiastical-professional components of Maltese society identified their cultural heritage, their power and status, and their 'difference' from the English colonising power with the Italian culture and language. The emerging public service, merchant and commercial groups, on the other hand, identified their increasing material wealth and upward mobility with English, the language of the hand that fed them.

The status of Maltese was forged in the heat and pressure that resulted from half a century of clashes between these two opposing interpretations of personal and national identity. This struggle for the status of Maltese was further complicated since it became identified with the attempt by the English to introduce the Protestant faith in ultra-Catholic Malta through the translation of the bible in Maltese by Mikiel Anton Vassalli, the father of the Maltese language, and the championing of Maltese by Manwel Dimech, a patriot and social reformer who was considered a dangerous political agitator by the British and died in exile.

The response to all this by those who championed the cause of Maltese and its role as standard bearer of our national identity was to promote the gradual legitimisation of Maltese by going down the two royal roads already travelled in other countries, such as Italy, with the rise of nationalism in the 19th Century. The first was the creation of ‘great’ literature, to counter the claim that Maltese was little more than ‘the language of the kitchen’, incapable of expressing the deepest sentiments of humanity. So we see a flowering of romantic literature in Maltese largely mirrored on that of the Italian, with perhaps the clearest example being the debt that Inez Farrug by A.E. Caruana owes to Alessandro Manzoni’s I Promessi Sposi.

The other was the scientific diachronic investigation of the language, that is in terms of its roots and its history in comparison with other languages. This was characterised by prolonged and heated debate as to whether Maltese had predominantly Semitic, Phoenician or Romance roots. It was far more than an abstruse academic argument – it was a function of the tug of war to ‘own’ Maltese and its role as a powerful marker of national identity by the pro-Maltese, pro-British and pro-Italian camps. This is why there were no less than 32 different alphabets of Maltese before the one we use now was adopted in 1934. And the way these alphabets differed from each other gives a fascinating insight into the politics of language over time.

A good example is that of the letter **Q**. Panzavecchia in his second edition the ‘Grammatika della Lingua Maltese’ published in 1851 saw no reason to include the letter ‘q’ in the Maltese alphabet, but decided to retain it anyway “... per cortesia, diciam così, verso il sistema italiano” (Pg 53 libro Quarto); as a courtesy, so to speak, towards the Italian Language!

The point being made here is that what we now know as standard Maltese grammar and Maltese spelling is not only a linguistic construct, but a social, cultural and political one too. Let me give some practical examples:

- The decision to teach (not simply to describe) the structure of semitic verbs as having 10 forms, one of which is extinct and others degenerating;
- The decision to retain the **gh** and **h** soundless consonants that results in incredibly complex conjugations of verbs (*nilghab* – I play BUT *nilaghbu* – we play) and affixing of verbs with direct and indirect pronouns (*nilagħbuhom* – we play it {e.g. the game} for them);
- The decision to teach (not simply to describe linguistically) the taxonomy of nouns; indeed the most school syllabi teach 15 different types: *animat*, *inanimat*, *determinat*, *indeterminat*, *ewlieni*, *verballi*, *denominattiv*, *infinittiv*, *wahdieni*, *participjali*, *attirbuttiv*, *mimmat*, *diminuttiv*, *astratt* and *kwalifikattiv*, with further subdivisions;

All these decisions are not based on the linguistic and communicative needs of the language users themselves – us Maltese – but upon the nationalistic imperative to describe Maltese in terms of its roots in other languages, to reinforce its function as national identity marker.

The struggle for legitimation of Maltese could not but leave its mark on the teaching of the writing. As happened to English in the 18th, 19th and early 20th century, the study of Maltese literature in the pre-independence period was tied to the memorisation and regurgitation of selections of the ‘great’ texts, and writing was mainly about learning the minute details of dry grammar rules and aping the flowery styles upheld in canonical literature. It was the price that had to be paid to promote Maltese as the standard-bearer of national identity. This has been called the classical paradigm of language teaching.

When Maltese finally did achieve its rightful status, in 1934, it was as a Trojan horse for English to the detriment of Italian, in controversial circumstances and a highly charged political atmosphere that included the repeal of the 1921 Constitution. Maltese went on to become the national language of a sovereign state in 1964. But by that time the die had been cast; the teaching of Maltese still bore the psychological scars of its struggles for status over the decades.

For example, an analysis of the new 1965 syllabus for Maltese for the Lyceum and the Girls’ Grammar Schools in the different types of secondary schools at the time reveals that:

- Maltese was still being taught and had the status of a second or foreign language;
- the main language teaching aim was grammatical knowledge and correct spelling;
- the main writing tasks were the copying of literary styles and rhetorical exercises.

And classroom texts mirrored this orientation. A good example is Tagħlim Prattiku fil-Kitba Maltija by A. Zarb, published in 1968. This is a typical grammar exercise:

‘KIF ISIR TAGĦRIF GRAMMATIKALI FIL-MALTI (1)

Jekk tridu tagħtu Tagħrif grammatikali tajjeb jew dak li l-grammatika

Ingliża ssejjahlu parsing imxu fuq dan: P.D.F.C.F.

Part of speech of word given. Derivation of word given.

Form of verb, if any, from which word given is derived.

Class (għamla) of verb, if any, from which word given is derived.

Function of word given.

(Zarb pg 92)

Note that:

- Zarb’s was not explicitly a grammar text but meant to teach good writing; so, decontextualised grammar teaching is still being presented as the road to writing;
- this particular grammar skill, called parsing, is being taught in English!

From the 60’s onwards Maltese started to undergo the problematisation of the classical paradigm, in literature and later in the scientific description of the language. It was as if we realised we no longer needed to ‘man the barricades’ and to fight the good fight of national identity, at least in terms of a colonising physical presence in Malta. In Maltese literature and linguistics, we finally realised that that particular battle had been won.

Syllabus design in Maltese also improved steadily, as this quick look at Maltese state secondary school syllabi attests:

- the 1981 Maltese syllabus was the first to distinguish between oral and written Maltese;
- the 1989 syllabus included, for the first time, a preamble that explained the aims of the syllabus and the intended methodology, which were clearly inspired by the communicative approach to language teaching;
- the 1994 syllabus was the first to mention the concept of audience;
- the latest state syllabus, of 2000, includes a wide range of knowledge, attitudes and skills in a communicative context, and is the first to include the concept of self-assessment.

As the 2000 state secondary syllabus acknowledges, this change was crystallised in the National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) of 1999. In this seminal document, The National Minimum Curriculum places the need for literacy attainment in a prism of contexts; literacy is fundamental for the development of a sense of self (pg 51), to communicate with the world around us as consumers (pg 57) and through the media (pg 58), and to participate fully in the world of work (pg 61). The development of communicative competence (pg 67) is, indeed, central to the requirement of the NMC for schools to develop their own language policies (pg 79).

With the NMC we achieved a paradigm shift, at least conceptually. The classical paradigm implied language teaching ‘from the outside in’, as it were, from an inflexible stance of Maltese as standard-bearer of national identity that percolated down to language policy and language teaching. On the other hand, the NMC perspective implies language teaching ‘from the inside out’; it gives primacy to the development of the self, that leads to a unique yet integrated social and cultural identity of each individual in community. The old paradigm taught the language, and all students were given the same tools, and the same teaching, to promote, guard and defend it; the new paradigm teaches the students, and all language teaching becomes a function of the communicative needs and the learning styles of the different learners. The NMC recognized that the classical paradigm was degenerating, and proposed a radically different perception of language teaching in line with contemporary native and modern language teaching in many other Western countries.

So much for the discourse, the paper curriculum and the paper syllabus. We know that, sadly, the reality on the chalk face is different. If one looks at the whole picture of native language syllabus design and delivery, teaching and learning, and assessment, one realises that the picture is far from clearly or unambiguously confirming the paradigm shift heralded in the NMC.

We know that there are still linguists, educationalists, teachers in their classrooms and parents around the kitchen table that insist that children should first learn correct grammar and faultless spelling, and that this somehow leads to writing. They still insist that children should limit their contact with the wonderful world of sparkling words and

crystal perception that is literature to the deadly regurgitation of second-hand appreciation of canonical texts, right up to the end of compulsory schooling.

Notwithstanding their positive developments already outlined, the primary and secondary school syllabi over the years have in effect tried to be all things to all people. So, up to today you will still find in the state syllabi for Maltese:

- explicit reference to set lists of idioms and phrases to be learnt by heart, as if Maltese was a foreign language;
- explicit lists of literature texts without much scope for personal choice;
- a preference for ‘best of’ selections of canonical literature rather than real whole books from a range of authors;
- an overwhelming amount of content;
- explicit reference to decontextualised grammar.

In real terms, the new paradigm of language teaching championed by the NMC is still struggling with the decaying classical paradigm in the syllabi for Maltese. Why is this? Apart from the ubiquitous presence of the classical paradigm, another major reason is the prevalence of testing in the certification culture that underpins schooling in Malta. The constant of human capital as practically the sole national resource in a small island state with finite employment alternatives leads almost inevitably to the over-certification of the educational system. And yet it is true that we are testing our children to death. Although, say, the Junior Lyceum examination papers, a benchmark for testing at the 11+ level, are well constructed and have a sound pedagogical foundation, the ‘teaching to’ these tests leaves much to be desired; in certain ways the nightmarish pages of the Great Examiner in Charles Kingsley’s 19th century children’s classic ‘The Water-Babies’ come to mind.

Perhaps the following example will serve to exemplify the negative consequences that the mania for testing has on teaching, and in our case the teaching of writing. The quotation is taken from the introduction of a pupils’ text that, up to some time ago at least, used to be very popular in preparing students for their 11+ exams:

Hafna mit-tfal, minkejja li jkunu
intelligenti, ġieli jsibuha bi tqila biex
jiktbu komponiment. U billi din hija haġa
li l-istudenti ma jistgħu jahirbu minnha,
jagħmlu sew li jhejju ruħhom tajjeb f’ din
ix-xorta ta’ kitba. (KCM 1986:1)

*Many children, although they will be
intelligent, often find it difficult to write
essays. And since this is something they
cannot avoid, they do well to prepare
themselves thoroughly for this kind of
writing.*

The message being given by this text, and by the way we very often assess and evaluate writing, is that writing is like bitter medicine: necessary but the least possible, and the quicker it is over and done with the better.

The justification for the existence of the Malta Writing Programme (MWP) today lies precisely in the struggle between the classical and the new paradigm for language

teaching, in the dichotomy between the discourse in the documents and the teaching and learning in the classroom. Simply put, the *raison d'être* of the MWP is to promote and support the infiltration of the new paradigm in teaching and language teaching in Maltese classrooms.

I would argue that the MWP is uniquely suited for this task. Its 'overt' functions, so to speak, are to train and support teachers in the implementation of language learning with special focus on writing, and you can learn more about these activities in the MWP website. But at the core, it is about forming and supporting a community of reflective practitioners who are active agents of change and innovation in their school communities. Writing is the tie that binds, the common currency of the teachers and parents who are part, in different ways, of this community. Writing is our centrifugal force, which sends us back into our homes and schools to be quiet agents of peaceful, extraordinary change.

Very briefly, the MWP started as an off-shoot of the National Writing Project. The National Writing Project has a thirty-year history of teacher professional development through writing all over the United States. It is considered the most effective and efficient continuous professional development and school improvement model of its kind in the States, and to date has trained over two million teachers in over 180 regional sites. Its strength lies in its 'Teachers Teaching Teachers' model, which fosters communities of master teachers who:

- share their best practice;
- develop as reading, writing, and reflective practitioners;
- sharpen their understanding and skills in teaching language as a communicative tool, with writing at the heart of learning, and
- become foci of change in their classrooms and school communities.

The first contact of the MWP with the National Writing Project was in August 2000, and in June 2001 the first intensive three-week training programme was carried out with the help of American tutors. It was initially housed in the Institute of Linguistics, University of Malta, then in 2003 the MWP was incorporated in the Foundation for Educational Services and partly refunded by Education Division. To date it has trained over 140 teachers, 20 of which as teachers trainers, and provided professional development and creative writing opportunities for many hundreds of teachers and families. The MWP is presently aiming to becoming soon the first International Affiliate Site of the NWP in Europe.

I strongly believe that the National Writing Project Model, as we have adapted it in Malta, is crucial to help facilitate the ongoing paradigm shift in language teaching in Malta that I have been discussing. It is a profoundly empowering model for teachers, who in turn reconceptualize – 're-view' – their role as language teachers and teachers-through-language in terms of their students' real needs, not only for communication and certification, but also for social, cultural and economic integration in their community and in society, in line with the vision of the NMC. The MWP is a concrete way of implementing NMC principles in terms of:

- enhancing teaching and learning for differentiated learning

- the focus on the learners' diverse needs;
- the formative/summative mix of assessment;
- the language policy, and
- parental involvement in learning.

The MWP can therefore be a useful tool not only to enhance literacy attainment especially in writing. It can also effectively address the renewal of language teaching national identity in Malta today, to bring the new paradigm enshrined in the NMC to fruition.

I would like to close with an excerpt from 'Stedina', an exhortation to the Maltese people written in 1827 by Mikiel Anton Vassalli, grammarian, translator, patriot, Illuminist and the Father of the Maltese Language:

*Ktibna mill-ewwel għandu jkun bi
lsienna...malli taqra u tikteb b'ilsienek
thossok minnufih tithenna, u bħallikieku
tistenbaħ, billi tiftaħ għajnejk u tara dawl
gdid, dinja oħra, u hemm mbağħad tagħraf
f'qed tgħid u x'qed tagħmel...tifhem u
ttiēghem, u tista' tixtarr kollox minnufih u
minnek innifsek.*

*We should write first in our own
tongue...when you read and write in your
own language, you are immediately filled
with happiness, and it is as if you have just
woken up, since you open your eyes and
see a new light, a different world, and it is
then that you truly understand what you
are saying and what you are doing...you
understand and savour, and you can reflect
on everything immediately and on your
own.*

*...Hollu jdejkom, iktbu għall-ewwel kif
tistgħu, u bil-ftit il-ftit tibqgħu sa ma kollox
jigikom sewwa, u tidraw u ddarru. La
taqtgħux qalbkom.*

*Give writing a try; write at first any way
you can, and slowly but surely your writing
will improve, and you will get used to it
and it will become a habit. Do not give up.*

Vassalli understood that writing and reading were the key to enlightenment, to self-actualisation, to a personal and social identity, to independence and interdependence. He, our first real grammarian, knew that writing was not primarily about grammar and correct spelling, but about self-expression and exploration, about the author. His primary focus was steadily on the writer, not the writing. Indeed, Vassalli had intuited the new paradigm. He was well before his time, and he paid the price for it – he was reviled in his lifetime and scorned at his death. Even when Dun Karm himself, our National Poet and a sacred cow, wrote his famous sonnet in praise of Vassalli, he was warned not to be a traitor.

I strongly believe that we as a nation are called to take up Vassalli's legacy, and to take the NMC to its full fruition. We must let go of the vestiges of the old paradigm, of anachronistic ways of thinking about the role of our language and of teaching. We must

embrace, not just in our discourse but in our daily practice, as teachers and parents, the new paradigm of language identity and language teaching. We must teach the learner in all his and her diversity, not the language, to try and preserve it as some unchanging monolith. We must focus our teaching on the living, not the dead.

And the Malta Writing Programme, the teachers and schools and families who are forming communities of practitioners in many different ways, has a key role to play in this transformation. It is incredibly exiting to be at this present stage of development, to be contributing to this transformation – and it's fun ! What more could we ask for ?
