

EDITORIAL - SPECIAL ISSUE

Bilingualism in Education in Malta

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The Maltese public education system has been bilingual, and at times trilingual, since its beginnings in the nineteenth century (Sultana, 1992; Zammit Mangion, 2000). When Malta became a British colony in 1800 the language of the Maltese educated elite was Italian while Maltese was the language spoken by the common people. English eventually found a place in schools but Italian remained the most important language of education until the Second World War. After the War, Italian was relegated to a language subject at secondary school level while Maltese and English were taught as subjects and used as media of instruction across the curriculum, throughout the primary and secondary years. This practice continues to this day.

For decades, Maltese and English were present in the classroom *de facto*, but research on how and why they were, and still are, adopted by teachers and learners across the curriculum only started in the early nineteen-nineties (Camilleri Grima, 2013). The division of labour between the two languages lies in the main part in the spoken/written distinction, so that English has retained an almost exclusive role in reading and writing, while Maltese fulfils fundamental pedagogical functions in classroom interaction. For instance, the teacher uses Maltese to explain concepts and to make sure the learners can follow the lesson, to elicit answers, to establish rapport with learners, to manage discourse and for classroom management. For the learners it is essential that they are allowed to answer and to ask questions in Maltese and to fully participate in the day-to-day classroom activities. Naturally, the continual shifting from one language to another to satisfy social and pedagogical conditions results in translanguaging, or the drawing on all of one's linguistic resources. Most of the articles in this Issue explain in detail how this functions in Maltese classrooms

Carrying out research in classrooms is not an easy task. For instance, teachers and educational administrators are rather suspicious of allowing researchers to record lessons because there lingers the belief that a bilingual speaker ought to function as a monolingual one, in any context or situation, especially so in the classroom. At the same time, all bilingual speakers, including teachers, acknowledge that often when they focus on some specific content they use the medium that best relates that message, be it due to the need of accommodating the interlocutor or as a result of other factors, such as reading and writing, examination or other pressures. Therefore, despite ethical clearance, the researcher has difficulty accessing the classroom discourse for linguistic study.

With this background in mind, it is with great pleasure that I am able to present this Special Issue of the MRER that includes six research papers dealing with language issues at both primary and secondary levels, and in subjects such as science, mathematics, English, Italian and French.

The first three papers focus on the primary classroom. Josephine Milton presents an interesting longitudinal study of how a student teacher of English changed her beliefs regarding a bilingual medium of instruction as a result of her own experiences, and how this teacher came to believe in the importance of both languages to mediate learning, and to negotiate meaning and understanding. The classroom is a social setting and hence a healthy rapport between the teacher and the learners is essential. As many teachers in Malta can tell, this social reality requires the use of a bilingual medium. Josephine Milton succinctly illustrates this in her study.

Esmeralda Zerafa tackles the issue of whether language makes a difference in the achievement of Year 3 primary children in word problems. She discovered that the pupils found word problems more challenging than non-verbal computations and concluded that this was due to the language component. Moreover, Zerafa concluded that when problems were in the children's first language they understood and recalled the problems better and solved them using the correct operation.

Marie Therese Farrugia looks into the teaching and learning of mathematical language, which includes subject-specific vocabulary. In a study carried out in two Maltese primary classrooms wherein mathematics was taught through the students' L2 (English), and a teacher-directed 'whole-class' approach was used, it was noted that three conditions for vocabulary use - frequency, significance and clarity - appeared to be necessary for teaching new topic-related vocabulary.

The other three papers in this Special Issue deal with bilingualism at secondary school level. Frank Ventura discusses the implications of a number

of studies that correlate achievement in science with language proficiency. According to Ventura language plays an important role in science achievement by Maltese bilingual students, and Ventura unravels a rather complicated scenario in this regard.

Camilleri Grima and Caruana carried out an in-depth analysis of the medium of instruction used during Italian lessons. Taking a sociocultural discourse analysis approach, this contribution shows how Maltese learners of Italian and their teachers interact bilingually to fulfil pedagogical requirements such as the assimilation of grammar points, explaining new vocabulary items, and shifting from formal to informal language. The argument is supported by examples of how the teacher guides the learners in interaction toward target language approximation.

Anne-Marie Bezzina investigates Maltese teachers' attitudes and classroom practices in relation to translanguaging in the French classroom. Her paper is based on a questionnaire distributed to all teachers of French in Malta. Bezzina explains that language competence does not consist of the total mastery of each language in a person's repertoire. Rather, bilinguals need to build proficiency by developing abilities in the different functions served by different languages.

This new understanding clashes with the pedagogical tradition that theorizes competence in terms of monolingual norms, and hence that advocate exclusive use of the target language in the foreign language classroom. As argued by Milton, Farrugia, Camilleri Grima and Caruana, and Bezzina, there can be no hard and fast rules about translanguaging in a bi- or multi-lingual classroom environment because it is the social and pedagogical demands that dictate which linguistic resources should be tapped at any point in the lesson.

Each of the articles in this Special Issue offers much food for thought. It is my hope that you enjoy reading them and find them enlightening and stimulating.

References

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