



A Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo



MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Contents

2	Preface
4	Bilingual Education in the Early Years
6	Child Development and the Social Context
8	The Sociolinguistic Context
10	The Home Environment
12	Early Years Educators
14	Managers of Early Years Education Settings
16	Early Years Teacher Educators
18	Conclusion
20	Glossary of Terms
22	Appendix 1: The role of language mediation in classrooms
24	Appendix 2: Consultative meetings
26	References



2

Preface



The Policy promotes the bilingual development, in Maltese and English, of young children (0-7 years) in Malta and Gozo. It is intended to provide national guidelines for bilingual education. Schools are to be supported to develop their own language plans and strategies to meet the needs of their learners within the framework of the Policy.



THE POLICY STRIVES TO PROVIDE LEARNERS WITH OPPORTUNITIES TO:

- have 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 BILINGUAL EDUCATION TO:

- parents and caregivers;
- Early Years educators;
- managers of Early Years education settings;
- Early Years teacher educators.

Bilingualism in the Early Years



Early Years education is important for bilingual development and positive attitudes towards languages. Bilingual education provides children with increased metalinguistic awareness, mental flexibility and creative thinking (Serratrice, 2013). Knowledge of two or more languages provides an advantage in language learning (Jessner, 2008; Castro et al., 2011). A high level of proficiency in the languages of schooling is a valuable asset. The learning of languages offers increased opportunities for communication in both local and international contexts (Baker, 2000), an appreciation of different cultures, and multicultural awareness (Eurydice, 2009).



Maltese and English are to be introduced and developed in tandem in the Early Years. Early Years education settings should provide an environment for children to develop age-appropriate concepts and language skills. All children should have ample opportunities to practise and consolidate their languages in the Early Years. Language development depends on the quality of the provision; including the language skills of staff, and meaningful interaction.

6

Child Development and the Social Context



Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides a theoretical framework for the influence of the child's environment on development. The child develops within a multi-layered system of relationships. This framework can be applied to the bilingual development of the child in the Early Years context.

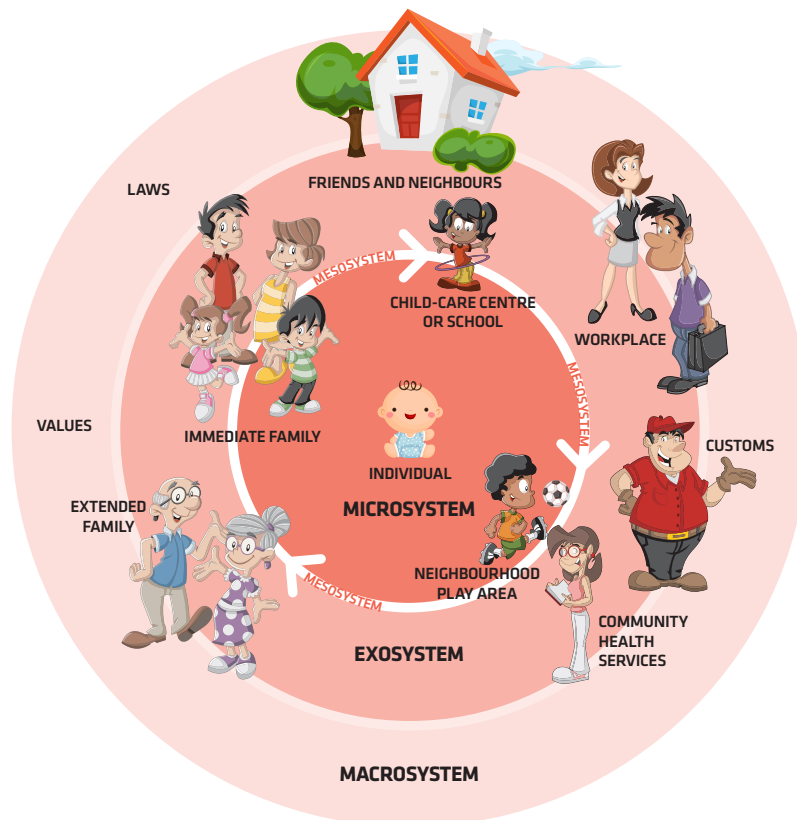


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (in Berk & Roberts, 2009, p.28)

As shown in figure 1, the child is embedded in:

- The microsystem which refers to the child's family, family, school, and community. It is in the microsystem that the most direct interactions take place, for example with parents, peers and teachers;
- The mesosystem describes how the different parts of a child's microsystem interact, such as the home-school relationship;
- The exosystem refers to the external environments which influence development;
- The macrosystem is made up of the larger socio-cultural context.



8

The Sociolinguistic Context

The sociolinguistic situation of Malta is one of a diffuse societal bilingualism with official and de facto bilingualism in Maltese and English (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015). The bilingual education policy of Malta is outlined in the National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo (2014). This Strategy has as its main objective a policy of bilingualism and biliteracy in Maltese and English. It promotes an early bilingual start for Maltese children and recommends a methodology where Maltese and English are used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content:

“A Bilingual Policy: One of the essential elements of a bilingual country is the ability of its people to switch easily between languages. This capability is valuable because it allows people in Malta, wherever possible, access to both Maltese and English and other languages. Such a policy enables also access to a wide and varied linguistic heritage and provides learners in Malta with a head start in literacy skills that can be further developed and applied to European and world languages. Increasingly we need to refer to plurilingual individuals, as promoted by the Council of Europe, who have competence in more than one language and can switch between languages, according to circumstances.

An early start in language learning is essential for young children to gain appropriate levels of competence and for shaping children’s overall progress. It means that learning can take place over a longer period, ensuring more permanent results in language learning and an enhanced capacity to learn languages. *The National Literacy Strategy for All* focuses on the range of literacy skills required to ensure competence in Maltese and English. In order to develop dual literacy skills, where learners can switch freely between the Maltese and English languages, learners need to be provided with specific learning opportunities that will help to ensure proficiency in both languages. They should also have access to learning materials in both languages to engage in meaningful tasks and within a range of subject-specific contexts as appropriate. *The National Literacy Strategy for All* supports dual literacy and seeks to ensure that it is fully embedded within the education system in Malta.” (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014: 28-29).

The Language Education Policy Profile for Malta (2015:41) issued by the Council of Europe recognised that: “Malta has in practice adopted the immersion pedagogical method. The characteristics of this approach..... can be summarised as follows: beginning bilingual education at an early age and continuing over time, using two languages to learn subject content and ensuring the contribution of bilingual education to the development of not only language but also cognitive competences.”

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 language and cognitive skills to be able to make progress in the learning areas. All children should have the opportunity to develop these two languages, whenever possible.



The Home Environment





The home and school settings are linked. The relationships that children have in each setting affects how they grow and develop. Parents and caregivers are the child's first language teachers. There is an intricate relationship between a child's languages, culture and personal identity. The role of parents and caregivers is central to the child's language learning. They serve as models for the child's use of language and attitudes towards languages.

PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS ARE TO:

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



12

Early Years Educators



Children are to feel secure, accepted and happy in Early Years settings (Baker & Prys Jones, 1998). These are the basic principles guiding this Policy. Early Years educators are to provide an enriching and engaging environment that supports and extends language learning for their learners. They should be fluent in Maltese and English and provide learners with opportunities to engage with language. They are also to convey positive attitudes towards the use of both languages, and to reinforce the children's self-esteem as bilingual learners.

There are different strategies of bilingual education like language separation and more flexible use of languages. In a language separation model, Maltese and English are separated by time, person, place and activity. In a more flexible use of languages, mediation strategies may be adopted to facilitate language learning. Examples of such strategies include using gestures and nonverbal communication, pictures, simplified language, and repetition of words and routines. When adopting language mediation, the teacher can also switch from one language to the other. This is done to scaffold instruction so that children can make sense of language learning (García & Sylvan, 2011). It is important that children are exposed to both languages consistently.

Teachers need to be sensitive to the needs of their children and adopt strategies to meet those needs. Children who are struggling may require different types of language mediation strategies. What is important is that teachers adopt “a child-centred, rather than a model-centred approach” (Schwartz et al, 2016, p. 163). Teachers should enable all children to reach the language learning outcomes, as outlined in the Learning Outcomes Framework for the Early Years.

The language practices of young children and their families in the 21st century are characterised by the use of a vast array of digital technologies. Technology has the potential to support children's creativity by combining multimedia such as sound, image and text (Kucirkova & Sakr, 2015, Marsh et al, 2015). It offers the possibility for children to participate in a rich and dynamic learning context. Parents and teachers can facilitate children's use of technology through play and exploration.

EARLY YEARS EDUCATORS ARE TO:

- foster positive attitudes towards multilingualism;
- support children to develop age-appropriate language skills in both Maltese and English (speaking, listening, reading and writing), paying 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 Maltese and English.

Managers of Early Years Education settings



Early Years education settings are to serve as bridges between families and the community. They should provide children with care and the 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:

15

- implement a school development plan that promotes bilingual education in the 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;
- support 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 Years Teacher Educators



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

EARLY YEARS TEACHER EDUCATORS ARE TO:

- prepare intending Early Years teachers to enable them to provide the required language mediation in classrooms;
- prepare teachers to support children, including migrants, with language and learning challenges.



Conclusion



The Policy recognises the importance of continuing research into the existing language education practices in the Early Years in Malta. Such research, also in the form of action research, should serve as the basis for improving policy and practice.

The language practices of individuals, in particular outside school, shape their language use (Council of Europe, 2015). The community has an important role to play in the promotion of positive attitudes towards bilingualism. Children are engaged with language and literacy also through technology and the media. The media may create further opportunities for raising awareness of the importance of both languages.





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 to be able to communicate in different contexts (Grosjean, 2010).

BILINGUAL EDUCATION broadly, refers to any use of two languages in school – by teachers or students or both – for a variety of social and pedagogical purposes. Within the local context it refers to the use of Maltese and English as languages of schooling.

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 learners to ultimately work independently. It does not rely solely on the use of language, but can also involve the use of gestures, concrete examples and repetition. The use of sound, image, digital technology may also enhance the scaffolding process.





Appendix 1:

The role of language mediation in classrooms

22

Language mediation refers to the use of two or more languages by teachers and learners to facilitate language learning (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015). 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 "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.



EDUCATORS CAN USE THE CHILDREN'S FIRST LANGUAGE/S WHEN:

- Checking understanding of concepts, text, instructions;
- Giving instructions;
- Eliciting language;
- Giving feedback;
- Focusing learners' attention;
- Informal, friendly talk;
- Translating.

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 in Maltese. 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 learners 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 learners to work on similar tasks, in groups or independently. The teacher may also encourage learners to use the second language when reporting back.

Appendix 2:
Consultative
meetings



The Language Policy in Education Committee

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

Lara Ann Vella (Coordinator of the Language Policy in Education Unit)

Daniel Cini (Senior Manager, National Literacy Agency)

The Language Policy in the Early Years Sub-Committee

Marika Farrugia, Christine Firman, Helen Grech, Anita Seguna

Delegates from the Language Policy Unit of the Council of Europe

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

Joseph Caruana (Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Employment)

Frank Fabri (Director General (Operations))

Ian Mifsud (Director General (Quality and Standards in Education))

Gaetano Bugeja (Director for Curriculum)

Joanne Grima (CEO for the Institute for Education)

Michelle Attard Tonna (Coordinator for the Learning Outcomes Framework)

Maryanne Spiteri (Assistant Director for Curriculum (retired))

Mariangela Schembri Meli (Education Officer for the Early Years Curriculum)

Tania Mangion (Education Officer for Early Childhood Education)

Rose Marie Privitelli (Former Education Officer for Early Childhood Education)

College Principals

Maria McNamara, Patrick Decelis, Paul Debono, Josephine Mifsud, James Camilleri, Victor Agius, Maria Pace, George Psaila, Keith Bartolo, Victor Galea, Anthony Sammut, Mario Testa, Carmel S Micallef.

Heads of Department for Literacy and Literacy Support Teachers

Josette Bezzina, Roberta Bonnici, Michelle Camilleri, Elaine Ciantar, Vanessa Coletta Gatt, Michelle Zarb, Nadia Zammit, Kathleen Camilleri, Janet Maria Cristina, Amanda Morales, Jonathan Sammut, Alessandra Balzan, Roberta Galea, Rosanne Talbott, Nathalie Cachia, Claire Camilleri, Daniela Callus, Sharon Camilleri Brimmer, Jennifer Peresso, Erika Medati, Ritianne Giordimaina, Audrey Buhagiar, Suzanne Stellini, Marcon Galea, Anabelle Azzopardi, Ruth Cilia, Marica Gatt.

Natalia Kucirkova (Senior Lecturer, Manchester Metropolitan University)

Nadia Vassallo (Foundation Programmes and LSU Co-ordinator at MCAST)

Josette Pulis (Institute Co-ordinator for Early Childhood Education at the Institute of Community Services at MCAST)

Rita Micallef (Manager of the Speech and Language Services within the Ministry of Health)

Valerie Sollars (Expert in Early Childhood and Primary Education)

Maria Camilleri Calleja (Director International Development, Economic Affairs & European Institutions)

References



Baker, C. (2000). A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism, Multilingual Matters.

Baker, C. & Prys Jones, S. (1998). Encyclopedia of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education. Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Berk, L.E. & Roberts, W. (2008). Child Development. Pearson Education Canada.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Castro, D. C., Ayankoya, B., & Kasprzak, C. (2011). The new voices/Nuevas voces: Guide to cultural and linguistic diversity in early childhood. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

European Commission (2011, July). Language Learning at Pre-Primary School Level: Making it Efficient and Sustainable. A Policy Handbook. Brussels: European Commission. Available Online: http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/language-policy/documents/early-language-learning-handbook_en.pdf

Eurydice (2009). Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities, Available Online: <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/about/eurydice/documents/098EN.pdf>.

Garcia, O., & C. Sylvan. (2011). "Pedagogies and Practices in Multilingual Classrooms: Singularities in Pluralities." Modern Language Journal, 95(3), pp.385-400.

Kucirkova, N. & Sakr, M. (2015). Child-father creative text-making at home with crayons, iPad collage & PC. Thinking Skills and Creativity, 17, pp.59-73

Marsh, J., Plowman, L., Yamada-Rice, D., Bishop, J. et al (2015) Exploring Play and Creativity in Pre-Schoolers' Use of Apps: Final report, available at www.techandplay.org

Ministry for Education and Employment, (2014). A National Literacy Strategy for all in Malta and Gozo. Available online: <http://education.gov.mt/en/Documents/Literacy/ENGLISH.pdf>

Ministry for Education (2012). The National Curriculum Framework for All. Available online: <http://curriculum.gov.mt/en/resources/the-ncf/pages/default.aspx>.

Ministry for Education and Employment (2014). Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024. Available online: <https://education.gov.mt/strategy/Documents/BOOKLET%20ESM%202014-2024%20ENG%2019-02.pdf>.

Ministry for Education and Employment (2015). Country Report. Council of Europe. Available Online : https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Country_Report_Malta_EN.pdf.

Schwartz, M. Wee Koh, P., Xi Chen, B. Sinke, M. & Geva, E. (2016). Through the lens of teachers in two bilingual programmes: a look at early bilingual education, Language, Culture and Curriculum, 29(2), 141-168.

Serratrice, L. (2013). The Bilingual Child. In Bhatia, T.K. & Ritchie, W.C. (Eds). The Handbook of Bilingualism & Multilingualism, Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 87-108.

The Council of Europe (2015). Language Education Policy Profile. Malta. The Language Policy Unit. Available online: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Profile-Malta_final2015_EN.pdf.

Comments are to be sent to:

Lara Ann Vella
The National Literacy Agency, Ministry for Education and Employment,
National Curriculum Centre, Joseph Abela Scolaro Street, Hamrun, HMR 1304.

t: 2598 2992 **e:** lara.ann.vella@ilearn.edu.mt



MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT