

Communication as Education: A Study about the Experiential Factors that Contribute towards Low Maltese Language Examination Performance amidst Cultural Contradictions between Curricular Priorities and Teaching Practice

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Abstract

This work gives a description of an on-going study that sets out to investigate the root causes of poor performance in formal Maltese Language examination by fifteen and sixteen years old pupils. As reported in recent years in the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC 2015, 2016, 2017) examination reports, results show that there has been minimal improvement in performance amongst pupils who sit for this Secondary Examination Certificate (SEC). These exam performance results are important on a National scale because they have a direct influence on the pupils' progression into higher education and other career streams. Lack of pupils' performance in the (SEC) Maltese Language Examination raises substantial amount of discourse within the Maltese learning community on how this subject should be taught, developed, managed and examined. To this effect, this study sees lack of pupils' performance in this specific subject as a phenomenon that warrants a case study to investigate key factors that contribute towards the low performance results. It enquires about the nature of the current problem and why this is happening. The information gathered may seek to build foundations for future and further enquiries. The objective of this study is to go beyond the scope of the examiners' statistical reports and to learn about the nature of this problem from the experiential views of the pupils and other learning stakeholders (parents/teachers/examiners) of this specific SEC examination. The intended outcome of this study is to propose a series of action points that might help to improve pupils' performance in the SEC Maltese Language examination.

Keywords: Underperformance, Systematic, Qualitative, Experiential, SEC

Introduction

For years, there has been many concerns about the need to bridge the gap between formal learning ideology and multifaceted learning needs and abilities in Malta (Bezzina, 1991; Sultana, 1992; Cutajar, 2013). Since the emergence of the 21st Century learning framework, new learning challenges were introduced to Malta's education system in which such a framework brought a shift in the rethinking of traditional teaching, learning and assessment models.

Different local and international published reports seem to agree that the driving forces in the bridging of the gap between formal learning ideology and multifaceted learning needs and abilities of fifteen and sixteen years old pupils in Malta (PISA 2015) refer to the lack of opportunity for pupils to exercise constructive type of learning in formal education environments. This is important data. However, the published reports do not give us a first-hand systematic analysis to understand the root causes that prompt such a lack of performance. This research will explore factors that lead to pupils' poor performance. These factors can range from pupil-intrinsic factors, such as the learning experience, emotional impact and reading motivation, to pupil-independent factors, such as instructional practice, curriculum demands, assessment procedures and traditional learning ideologies. From the results of this exploration, the aim is to enrich the understanding of what stops pupils from performing well in this specific formal stage of education by performing a systematic analysis of underlying the causes that motivate this poor examination performance.

This on-going study is seeking to understand the nature of this problem by focusing on the SEC Maltese Language examination as a case study. This study applies a methodology that looks at the problem from various perspectives through a qualitative systematic analysis. In this paper, the methodological approach of this study shall be explained. Moreover, this paper shall also include a sample from the initial findings of this study, including themes that emerged from a systematic analysis of the first three-year sample (2003-2005), from primary literature that is available in the public domain.

In the following sections, the stages of a specific qualitative systematic analysis will be discussed, along with how the initial findings are informing the development of a theory-building exercise about the nature of the problem enquired in this study. Moreover, a short summary of the initial findings and a discussion of what has emerged so far will also be given.

Method

This study is an on-going case study that sets out to explore what might be the factors that motivate poor performance amongst pupils who sit for the SEC Maltese Language examination. The objective is to analyse and code topics from a sample of

available primary literature that describe key factors that contribute towards poor performance in this specific examination. Through a thematic analysis of different types of primary literature, this study is looking for common patterns, contrasting and recurring concepts about pupils' performance to help understand (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006) the key features that describe the nature of the problem from experiential perspectives. Differently from other thematic studies, this research does not see this enquiry being based on a set of prescribed research questions, but an enquiry that evolves as the study progresses.

In other words, a conventional systematic review would require specific research questions to be formulated *a priori* of a review. This could be limiting for this study, since factors that challenge pupils' performance can also be personal and subjective, and hence, subject to change. Moreover, there may also be contradictions and different views of the problem from different stakeholders, and factors leading to the problem in question may be several and multifaceted.

A Critical Interpretative Synthesis (CIS) approach allows the exploration of diverse types of arguments from available primary literature and the translation of meanings as themes in relation to the philosophical principles that are central to this study. "We suggest that using CIS to synthesize a diverse body of evidence enables the generation of theory with strong explanatory power" (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006, p.2). For this specific case study, research questions need to be subject to modification in response to search results, findings and discussion of the analysed documents. Eakin and Mykhalovskiy suggest that in such cases "the research question functions more as a compass than as an anchor, and is sometimes not really known until the end of the research." (Eakin and Mykhalovskiy, 2002, p.190)

Critical Interpretative Synthesis (CIS)

In 2015, Malta's official examination board (MATSEC) called out for further studies that aim to research further into the nature of the problem of pupils' underperformance by eliciting 'lived experiences' in this specific study area.

"Why is this happening? Is it because of the boys' low esteem? Low expectations? Other reasons? Only systematic qualitative research, which is beyond the scope of this report, can answer these questions." (MATSEC, 2015).

MATSEC's call for action communicates the strong message that factors leading to pupils' low performance can be independent from institutions and hard to elicit from statistics and quantitative reports. There are various types of methods that one can employ to achieve a qualitative systematic analysis (McInnes, 2011). CIS gives the reviewer the opportunity to view the problem from multiple perceptions and

from diverse types of literature to provide the basis of new and reflective meaning of the available data. (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006).

There are numerous studies that enlighten us about quantitative and qualitative methods of research that focus on teaching and assessment strategies to improve pupils' performance. Every research method approaches central problems in different ways and works with innovative methodologies that fits the study's educational settings and circumstances. Other researchers have explored factors that impact pupils' performance in education (Kern, 1989; Alfassi, 1998; Lau & Chan, 2003; Dreyer & Nel, 2003; Cutajar, 2003; Van Keer & Verhaeghe, 2005; Boakye, 2017; Ibqal et al., 2015; Gilakjani 2016; Lau, 2017). Different results have been achieved, depending on the scope and the underpinning philosophies of each research method.

In the absence of specific data that describes the nature of the problem that motivates pupils to underperform in the SEC Maltese Language examination, this research attempts to develop a theory that describes an understanding of the problem, based on various experiences, perspectives and interventions that took place in recent years. CIS is different from other synthesis methods, because it allows this study to:

1. synthesise diverse types of literature
2. address broad research areas
3. generate theory from diverse literature
4. understand each article in relation to itself
5. translate studies into one another
6. compare translations in terms of what is agreed and not agreed
7. generate synthesised reflections
8. deliver a synthesised argument of topics (McInnes, 2011).

As Dixon-Woods suggested, using CIS allows the opportunity to be flexible in the selection of the literature sample. The analysis can be based on '... the credibility of the evidence, to make critical judgements about how it contributes to the development of the synthesising argument.' (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006).

Synthesised arguments are key to the generation of themes that describe the nature of the problem from various perspectives. This approach helps this study come to the realisation that there is no one singular reality to this problem. This approach also helps this research to identify ways that can help to establish what pupils and learning stakeholders perceive as good pedagogic initiatives that can help towards improving their own learning experience in preparation to their formal Maltese Language examinations. Thus, the result shall seek to contribute towards the development of a theory that describes an understanding of the current problem, developed from a critical and reflective understanding of the nature of issues that impact the pupils' performance in the SEC Maltese Language examination. An initial overview of data from available literature will be discussed in the initial findings sections.

Background

From an initial familiarisation process of the available primary data, one can see that several factors that demotivate pupils' performance exist within an examination culture that strives to understand and to communicate its role in Malta's educational landscape. Sultana (1999) suggests that the introduction of a Maltese independent education system prompted an on-going investigative journey that seeks to establish the meaning of salient milestones that characterises pupils' educational development.

"A stratified and selective state school system which practices intra and inter school streaming from primary school onwards, and which is intent on channeling students to different educational spaces offering different curricular diets, creating a hierarchical system of prestige for both teachers and taught" (Sultana, 1999, p.146).

Pupils' low performance in education has been studied in the past (Sultana, 2010; Borg et al., 1995; Bezzina, 1991; Cutajar, 2013; Zammit Mangion, 1992). However, fifteen years ago, in a study by Cutajar (2003), it has been pointed out that the problem of low performance, specifically in the SEC Maltese Language examination, goes beyond pupils' lack of language and orthographic skills.

"These exams not only serve as a benchmark for attainment of 16+ candidates taking them, but are also highly prized by educators, parents and students..." (Cutajar, 2003, p.95).

Cutajar's (2003) study claims that pupils' performance, particularly in the SEC Maltese Language examination, can improve if pupils and learning stakeholders could identify with the importance of what they are learning. Cutajar's comprehensive work addressed key factors that limited pupils' performance in the SEC Maltese language examination. The study recommended;

"All stake holders must feel the need to inculcate a love of the language in students..." (Cutajar, 2003, p.110).

Cutajar's work focused on an analysis of examination perspectives by pupils and other learning stakeholders between 1997 and 2003. Through a quantitative inquiry, this study communicates significant concerns by teachers, pupils and parents about the need for change in the examination process. In the past fifteen years, various interventions took place in an attempt to address the need for change, mainly by introducing learning assessment initiatives such as the General Certificate of Education Exam (2002), the SEC Vocational Subject Examinations (2014) and the Learning Outcome Framework (on-going). However, these interventions prompted several ideological concerns amongst the educational community about how these curricular actions might have an ideological impact on Malta's educational landscape.

The Examination Pass Rates

The statistical results of the SEC examinations published every year seem to communicate different interpretations on student performance. This concern raised questions about a communication misalignment between MATSEC and the National Minimum Curriculum (NMC).

“... despite the many good points of the national minimum curriculum (NMC)... the SEC and MATSEC examinations still do not reflect as well as they ought to the standards of the NMC.” (Times of Malta, 2003).

This misalignment is perceived as an important factor that drives towards a controversial discourse amongst different educational stakeholders. Moreover, this misalignment creates pressure amongst pupils and learning stakeholders to prioritise work preparation specifically for the SEC examination and to pass this examination. This pressure emerges when specific targets were introduced during the preparation stages to make sure that teachers and pupils cover what is necessary to complete and pass the examination.

“... blind faith in ‘past papers coaching’. Basing the students’ preparation solely on these and ignoring the syllabus instils a misguided sense of complacency, which could be shattering on examination day.” (Times of Malta, 2003).

To counteract this misalignment, it was also suggested to formalise a forum of key education stakeholders to normalise communication issues between the MATSEC board, NMC and the education division and to find alternative solutions to improve pupils’ performance; this problem, according to MEDE, creates a high probability of underperformance among pupils in key SEC examinations. This forum consisted of members from the MATSEC board, several heads of schools and teachers.

“For this reason, the Ministry of Education should carefully consider the recent suggestion by a leading educationist for the creation of an alternative to SEC for which he, and presumably his colleagues, suggest the old familiar name of General Certificate of Education.” (Times of Malta, 2003).

The SEC Maltese Language examination has an important role in this discourse, since it is considered as a core subject for pupils to enrol in most post-secondary institutions. In general, more than 30% of the candidates do not qualify with at least a pass grade, making the Maltese language examination to be perceived as a high-stake examination. This statistic prompted a qualitative report, spearheaded by MEDE in 2003, to identify how pupils’ learning performance is being evaluated in schools. This research highlighted the dominant types of assessment that feature in secondary schools during the preparation stages towards the SEC examinations. This study puts light on factors that explain why most schools opt for summative types of

assessment practice, including annual tests and exams, as the most popular format of recording a pupil's progress (64% of participating schools). Moreover, others opt for a half yearly test and exams (59% of participating schools), class/homework (57% of participating schools) and classroom tests (50% of participating schools).

“Other forms of assessment such as practical work, class presentations and fieldwork do feature but at a very minimal percentage namely at 1% of participating schools.” (Grima & Chetcuti, 2003).

This report also highlights the lack of school participation in this study and the lack of schools with an official school assessment policy. It was also highlighted that there seems to be a common interest amongst the teaching community (this study consists of perspectives given by teachers and heads of schools only) to give pupils a “true picture” about where they stand academically.

“... helps students to know where they stand. There are few illusions about the ability of the students.” (Grima & Chetcuti, 2003).

This quote is a direct quote from one of the heads of the participating schools. Examination type of assessment is believed by teachers and heads of schools in general to be the “fairest” and most “reliable” form of assessment to evaluate pupils' performance.

Moreover, this MEDE report also indicated that pupils and parents/guardians were not interested in feedback or how pupils can improve their performance. Pupils and learning stakeholders, according to the participating teachers and heads of schools, were only interested in their final results. It is important to point out once again that these views were communicated from just the teachers' views on the problem.

In reflection, there has been general concerns about ways how pupils are being examined for quite some time. However in MEDE's 2003, the report outlines specific factors that describe perceptions about the uses of assessment. Factors that lead to these concerns are mainly rooted to what every individual learning stakeholder perceives as a fair judgement of a pupils' ability to demonstrate their learning. Issues of preoccupations relating to high student dropouts and the pupils' performance also seem to be a priority in the policy makers' agenda. Nevertheless, specific perceptions that emerged in the 2003 report show that fair judgement and pupils' performance should be evaluated and achieved within a wide variety of factors. Although such concerns seem to agree about the fact that a change is needed in the assessment process and the policies helping pupils to progress, on one hand, concerns seem to focus on factors related to assessments' suitability for the pupils, while on the other, there seems to be a focus on factors that relate to assessment practicality and objective targets.

Discussion

So far, the CIS approach is resulting to be an effective data analysis tool and it is allowing this study to provide reflective discussion of controversial views about factors that can lead to pupils' underperformance from diverse types of communication. From the reflective contributions so far, several codes and themes are being generated with the scope to enrich the understanding of what might disallow pupils to underperform in the SEC Maltese Language examination.

From an initial survey of the available primary data, one can sense a tension in people's perceptions, specifically about the SEC process, as ideological in nature. This ideological tension seems to be based on continuous preoccupations that contrast between idealist and pragmatist philosophical views about what stops pupils from performing well and what should be done to improve the problem. This tension is mainly evident by those who voice their concerns about the examination, the examining body or any other element that contribute towards the pupils' performance in this SEC examination process. This tension is apparent in the primary literature and can be distinguished as an underlying influence that motivates a controversial discourse about the nature of this problem.

A parallel or a similar conflict of ideologies could be drawn between the scholarly arguments and the learning philosophies of Bertrand Russell and John Dewey. Similarly, perceptions from the available literature seem to prioritise an obligation towards thriving in instilling an 'educational culture in pursuit of excellence' (Mintrom, 2014) for everyone and within the confines and practicalities of the SEC examination system and Malta's National interests. From an initial overview of the available literature, one can sense this ideological tension between idealist and pragmatist perspectives about how to achieve excellence. Conflicting, dichotomous views emerge, such as the concept of 'organizational culture' (Schein, 1990) and 'the notion of excellence as a moral category' (Mintrom, 2014).

This dichotomy shares similar principles to Russell and Dewey's ideological conflicts of education, because the discourse about achieving excellence found in the primary literature, specifically about the SEC examinations, seems to be challenged by a division of views about how the ideal education should be. The initial findings of this case study highlight these conflicting concepts. From these concepts, this study aims to further investigate and elicit more concerns in pursuit of discovering what is the nature of poor performance in the SEC Maltese Language examination.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explained how components of this study fit within the broader scopes of identifying the nature of factors that drive poor performance in the SEC Maltese Language examination. The initial findings of this study have

established a version of the type of problem that needs to be investigated in order to subsequently establish the study's main research questions. The initial findings serve as data to help in the development of the foundations of what this study needs to ask to unveil relative information about the nature of what motivates underperformance. CIS was described as a method that allows this research to get close to different sources of information and to perform a reflective synthesis of diverse types of primary literature that describe the problem from various perspectives. This method of analysis has been discussed in terms of how each stage of the process shall attempt to connect patterns of information elicited from different sources and how each stage links with one another to establish the philosophical underpinnings of this research. Finally, a sample from the initial findings has been given to show the reflective process of analysis and how various topics of research are being generated through this process to identify the nature of factors that can lead to pupils' underperformance in the SEC Maltese Language examination. Through these topics, a theory can eventually be established, a theory that can potentially serve as a foundation to be able to articulate what might be the nature of this phenomenon.

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Bio-note

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