

MALTA

Ministry of Education and Employment

Language and Literacy

At the end of 2014, the population of Malta was approximately 427,000, with 94 percent being Maltese. Malta has two official languages: Maltese (the national language) and English. The National Curriculum Framework considers bilingualism as the basis for the education system and defines bilingualism as the effective, precise, and confident use of the country's two official languages. Students must be functionally bilingual by the end of their school experience. The National Curriculum Framework encourages teachers at the primary level to use English when teaching English, mathematics, science, and technology. At the secondary level, the curriculum requires Maltese and English to be taught in each respective language and recommends that foreign languages be taught in those languages. The subjects of social studies; history; geography; religion; and personal, social, and career development are taught in Maltese, while other subjects are taught in English. Bearing in mind the National Curriculum Framework recommendations, classroom teachers decide which language best facilitates student development and concept acquisition.

The National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo 2014–2024 was launched by the Ministry for Education and Employment in June 2014. (Gozo is the second largest island in the Maltese archipelago.) This strategy, which promotes a policy of bilingualism and biliteracy in Maltese and English, is based on the premise that one of the essential elements of a bilingual country is the ability of its people to switch easily between languages. This competency is valuable because it allows people in Malta access to Maltese, English, and other languages. The National Literacy Strategy for All seeks to ensure that biliteracy is fully embedded within the education system in Malta.

Overview of the Education System

The Ministry for Education and Employment is responsible for education in Malta, with equity and inclusion underscoring the government's objective of providing high quality education for all. Commitment to these principles is demonstrated by inclusivity at all levels and by the provision of free public school education to all, from kindergarten to the tertiary level. The government also subsidizes church schools, which do not charge tuition fees, while parents whose children attend schools in the independent sector benefit from tax rebates.

The Education Act of 1988 is the legal framework regulating education provision in Malta.¹ A 2006 amendment to the act established two directorates: the Directorate for Educational Services and the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education. The Directorate for Educational Services plans,



manages, and provides resources and services to state schools, while the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education establishes and monitors standards and the quality of programs and services provided in state and nonstate (i.e., church and independent) schools. The amended Education Act further decentralized decision making by forming college networks in the state sector.² There are 10 college networks, having a common legal framework but a distinct identity and consisting of multiple preprimary centers, primary schools, and at least two secondary schools.

The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education is responsible for formulating, implementing, and monitoring the curriculum. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF), which guides education provision in compulsory schooling in Malta, was launched in 2012 to address the gaps in Malta's learning processes by shifting the emphasis of classroom instruction from teaching the subject to teaching the learner.³ The NCF is presented with a lifelong learning perspective and celebrates diversity by catering to all learners at each stage of their educational journey. It aims to introduce greater equity and decentralization to the national education system while seeking to present a seamless curriculum that emphasizes smooth transitions and building on firm foundations laid in early childhood education. In essence, the NCF aims to provide quality education for all learners, encourage student enrollment in further and higher education, and reduce the percentage of early school leavers.

The NCF proposed a Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) as the keystone for learning and assessment throughout compulsory schooling. The aim of the LOF is to free schools and learners from centrally imposed, knowledge centric syllabi in order to give schools the freedom to develop programs that fulfill the objectives of knowledge, attitudes, and skills-based outcomes to which all learners in Malta are entitled. The LOF is intended to create greater curricular autonomy for colleges and schools, allowing them to better address the learning needs of their students. In February 2014, the *Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014–2024* was launched with the aim of aligning in a coherent and comprehensive manner all strategies, policies, and plans being implemented by the Ministry for Education and Employment.⁴

Compulsory education in Malta covers ages 5 to 16 and comprises three main cycles: Early Years (ages 5 to 7), Junior Years (ages 7 to 11), and Secondary Years (ages 11 to 16). Prior to the start of primary education, there is provision for early childhood education and care through the Free Childcare for All scheme, established in April 2014 for children ages 0 to 3 and through kindergarten for children ages 3 to 5. Although preprimary education is not compulsory, attendance is very high and reaches 100 percent between ages 4 and 5.

Parallel to the public education sector, the nonstate sector is composed of church and independent schools. All primary state schools are coeducational, while state secondary schools began being phased into a coeducational setting over a period of five years during the 2014–2015 school year.

Following compulsory education, students can choose to follow a general or vocational educational path. Two year general education courses leading to tertiary education are provided by the state or by nonstate educational institutions. As an alternative, students may pursue vocational courses at two state educational institutions, the Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology and the Institute of



Tourism Studies. Tertiary education is provided by the University of Malta and the Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology.

Language/Reading Curriculum in the Fourth Grade

Reading Policy

The curriculum promotes the inclusion of the four language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in the Maltese and English programs. Language specialists have designed the curriculum to ensure that learners are given every opportunity to develop skills in the two official languages of Malta. The curriculum is cumulative in that skills are further developed and extended during each year of schooling. Thus, for example, while participation in shared reading experiences is encouraged in Grade 2, it also is featured in Grade 5.

Summary of National Curriculum

The English syllabus for Grade 5 (equivalent to Grade 4 in PIRLS) stipulates that students should use “a range of strategies automatically when encountering difficult text” and, “with support use a wide range of monitoring and adjusting strategies to aid comprehension,” thus promoting reading for learning and pleasure.⁵ To reach the main aim of the syllabus of ensuring that all learners become fluent and confident readers, teachers are provided with a set of learning outcomes that guide them as to how to reach the expected targets. For example, reading of both fiction and nonfiction books is encouraged, as is awareness of descriptive and technical words. Learners in Grade 5 also are expected to be able to skim texts to “gain a general impression of the main idea of text, to scan and locate specific information and also to infer and read between the lines.”⁶

The syllabus for Maltese similarly demands that learners be exposed to reading both fiction and nonfiction. Teachers are encouraged to expose learners to a variety of genres, initially focusing on what is of interest to individual children. As for English reading, learners also are expected to be able to locate important information in texts, follow storylines and arguments, comment on the material read, and give their informed opinion about the author’s ability to produce interesting material. The syllabus encourages teachers to ensure that learners develop the confidence to read whenever possible and the required skills to read aloud in the presence of an audience.

The National Minimum Curriculum, published in 1999, focused on the holistic development of all children. In 2011, a review was undertaken to reflect on achievement and evaluate enhanced successful achievements. Following consultation with various stakeholders, The National Curriculum Framework 2012 was launched. The framework focuses on six general principles: entitlement, diversity, continuum of achievement, learner centered learning, quality assurance, and teacher professional support. The National Curriculum Framework promotes a shift from a “prescriptive curriculum” toward a framework that allows for flexibility. It also promotes “diverse pathways to learning so that all learners are equipped with the necessary skills to experience success at school and beyond.”⁷

Teachers, Teacher Education, and Professional Development

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

Teachers of Grade 5 in Malta have completed a four year training course leading to a bachelor's degree in education. Prospective teachers are given the opportunity to specialize in early childhood education or junior years. Throughout the program, trainees study topics related to teaching and learning and carry out six week practical teaching placements during each of the last three years of the program. This gives them the opportunity to implement what is discussed during lectures and to refine their teaching skills with the support of their tutors. Although student teachers follow general study units in reading, they may enroll in specialized courses on reading difficulties (e.g., specific learning difficulties) at the postgraduate level.

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

Teachers specifically working in the area of reading are provided with continual professional development for one day a month and are expected to follow a 12 hour in-service training course. Schools also might offer basic training in general reading strategies during the two hour professional development sessions held each term during the school year.

Reading Instruction in the Primary Grades

Instructional Materials

Students in Malta are expected to acquire and develop competence in the four language modes—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—in both Maltese and English. Maltese and English language course books include reading as one of the language modes. The students' books include reading comprehension passages and excerpts for reading for pleasure.

Schools use a variety of readers to teach Maltese and English. Decisions about the choice of reading materials to be used for English are college or school based. For teaching of Maltese, schools are provided with a set of graded readers, the Maltese names of which do not mean anything to the international reader. Each year group is given two readers, and teachers are expected to adapt the reading materials to suit the needs of individual students. A list of supplementary reading materials appropriate for each year group is provided to schools.

Use of Technology

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has assumed central importance in Maltese classrooms. All classrooms are supplied with interactive whiteboards and, over the last two years, efforts have been made to familiarize learners gradually with tablets so as to extend and support teaching and learning. In 2015, a pilot project was carried out with Grade 4 learners to investigate the effects of digital technology on learning outcomes. In 2016, teachers were provided with basic training about the pedagogical uses of the devices. As of January 2017, all Grade 4 students will be provided with their own personal tablet, which they will use in the following years. This initiative likely will continue on an annual basis until all learners have their own tablet.



Role of Reading Specialists

Every effort is being made to support learners with reading difficulties. In 2013, the Ministry for Education and Employment set up the National Literacy Agency with the sole purpose of improving the literacy attainment of children, youths, and adults in Maltese and English.⁸ Throughout the last 20 years, state primary schools have been allocated the services of complementary teachers to support students who are struggling with reading and literacy. More recently, literacy support teams have been established to coordinate and oversee the implementation of guided reading in schools, to support classroom teachers in the teaching of reading, and to implement reading programs in schools. These professionals contribute to the enhancement of the reading culture and support learners who require support in Maltese and/or English.

Second Language Instruction

Students in Malta acquire, learn, and use two languages at school: Maltese, the national language, and English, an official language. The National Minimum Curriculum established bilingualism as the basis of the educational system.⁹ In fact, students are expected to become proficient in both languages by the time they complete secondary school. While Maltese is used by 90 percent of the population and generally is considered to be the mother tongue, English is thought of as a second language. However, the level of English language competence varies greatly in Malta, and while some people develop both fluency and competence in written and spoken English, others continue to function at basic levels. Additionally, students who have arrived to the island recently require instruction in both languages before they are able to follow the age appropriate curriculum. For this reason, teaching hubs have been set up to support learners in developing the required competence level before they attend mainstream education.¹⁰

Accommodation Policies for Instruction and Testing

The National Literacy Agency promotes a balanced literacy approach for teaching and learning in which “the technical aspects of reading and writing are taught in the context of making meaning through text.”¹¹ This approach promotes “shared reading, word study, guided reading, independent reading, modelled writing, shared writing, interactive writing, guided writing, independent writing, and read[ing] aloud.”¹²

Students with Reading Difficulties

Diagnostic Testing

Children with difficulties in reading and writing are initially supported by the classroom teacher. In the Early Years cycle (ages 5 to 7), class teachers who are concerned about a learner’s limited literacy development might seek the support of the complementary teacher or literacy support teacher to administer collaboratively a checklist that facilitates identification of the learner’s strengths and weaknesses.¹³ Learners who are lagging behind their peers receive support from the complementary teacher. In instances of continued insufficient progress, learners in Grades 4 to 6 are referred to the



Specific Learning Difficulties Service for an in-depth assessment for dyslexia. Learners who are encountering behavioral problems or demonstrating issues of greater concern are referred to an educational psychologist for further testing.

Instruction for Children with Reading Difficulties

Support for learners with reading difficulties tends to vary considerably. The class teacher is expected to identify learners' individual reading levels and offer reading materials at the appropriate level. If the achievement gap among students is not extensive, the complementary teacher might offer support for struggling learners within the classroom. However, the complementary teacher might choose to offer students with considerable difficulties an individualized intervention program for two hours per week. Learners with dyslexia participate in a structured and individual multisensory teaching program. Though this program is temporary, it enables the learner to consolidate and extend basic learning skills that continue to be overseen by the complementary teacher.

In addition to school-based support, learners with reading difficulties can attend state-funded programs for literacy development such as *Klabb Nahla* and *Nwar* after school. While *Klabb Nahla* seeks to support young learners who have emergent literacy difficulties, *Nwar* is a family program for learners who have not acquired basic literacy skills by the end of Grade 3.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Reading development is monitored in a variety of ways. The classroom teacher, supported by the complementary teacher, identifies learners' levels of attainment, monitors their progress, and plans long term and short term goals for each learner. Progress also is monitored by classroom teachers through guided reading sessions and by complementary teachers who identify the performance of students in relation to their individual strengths and weaknesses. Specific assessment policies and literacy strategies vary by school.

Informal assessments to measure progress are held at the teacher's discretion, while summative tests are held twice annually in Grades 4, 5, and 6. This gives teachers an overview of students' attainment levels and individual needs during and at the end of the school year. The final assessment is carried out through the central educational authority to ensure consistency of standards among schools.¹⁴

Special Reading Initiatives

Over the years, a number of initiatives have been undertaken to increase literacy attainment in Malta. The National Policy for the Attainment of Core Competencies in Primary Education focused on the identification of learners struggling with basic literacy, and the National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo focuses on promoting and enhancing "lifelong and life-wide literacy practices."^{15,16}

Several programs are being promoted to ensure increased standards of literacy development. For example, Read with Me seeks to motivate learners ages 0 to 3 together with their parents to develop an interest in books and enjoy reading. Because it is important for children to have a variety of books at

their disposal, the national Enriching Classroom Libraries program has provided the class library of each state school with more than 100 appealing and attractive books in Maltese and English. Another program, Reading Ambassadors, invites well known local personalities to visit schools, read stories aloud, and act as role models to promote enthusiasm for reading. A national contest was launched in 2014 to encourage children and teenagers to promote interest in reading among their peers by acting as reading role models.¹⁷

Other reading initiatives include The Magic of Stories and Reading Stars. The Magic of Stories, a family literacy program for children ages 4 to 6 and their parents, involves weekly sessions during which stories are read in an engaging manner. Reading Stars seeks to highlight and model to others the reading habits of fluent readers of all ages. People who are observed to be reading and caught on camera are rewarded by the National Literacy Agency. The agency also organizes an intensive summer reading campaign to promote reading for fun in the summer months when children are out of school. It is presumed that through the agency's initiatives the "number of individuals who are socially excluded because of a lack of or a low level of literacy skills" will be reduced.¹⁸

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Following PIRLS 2011, the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education disseminated the results and discussed the findings with stakeholders including directors, education officers, subject coordinators, and heads of primary schools. Literacy specialists reviewed students' performance on reading comprehension tasks, and most schools held professional development sessions in which issues such as the school environment, teaching methodologies, parental involvement, and school libraries were discussed. Recommendations for improvement were proactively discussed at these meetings. Members of the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta also met to analyze the results and make recommendations as to how to ensure that student teachers have sufficient awareness of the implications of PIRLS for Malta and are able to extend their knowledge of reading comprehension techniques in the classroom. Continuing professional development courses for teachers—including a three day course on reading comprehension techniques for Grade 4 teachers—were organized, and all teachers of kindergarten through Grade 3 participated in an awareness session on the implications of PIRLS. This was followed by a seminar on using more challenging texts and questions during lessons.

Following the publication of the PIRLS 2011 results, a number of professional development sessions for teachers were held in all state primary schools. Literacy teachers met with class teachers in hands-on sessions during which they illustrated strategies that enable learners to become more critical and insightful when reading and responding to questions.

As a consequence of the PIRLS 2011 results, the Ministry for Education and Employment felt the need to continue to enhance and strengthen reading development in Malta and Gozo. The National Literacy Strategy for All was launched in 2014 to improve literacy outcomes and ensure that "everyone in Malta and Gozo is provided with the best opportunities to acquire the required literacy skills."¹⁹



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