



*English Language Competence and the Area
Secondary School: An Innovative Pilot Project*

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Abstract: *A passing score (1-5) on the Maltese Secondary Education Certificate (SEC)ⁱ English Language exam is required for entry eligibility into Form VI. In 2010, 3,248 students received a passing grade on the English Language SEC exam. Of 3,248 passes in total, only 106 were obtained from students hailing from area secondary schools. The aim of this paper is to share an innovative project piloted at an area secondary school during the 2010 – 2011 academic year. The project, which included collaboration between a group of Maltese and American teenagers, suggested that through the lens of cultural exchange Form 4 students could be motivated to harness their English language skills at a critical point in their academic careers. This paper will address the need for attention to be given to a pocket of students currently underperforming their peers of Junior Lyceum, Church and Independent schools. It will provide an overview of the project piloted, including the planning, development and execution stages, obstacles and outcomes. It will conclude by offering recommendations for improvement and future sustainability.*

Keywords: English language use, language motivation, cultural exchange, academic advancement

Preamble

The Maltese educational system entered a transitional period in the spring of 2011 with the publication of the 2011 National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (MEEF, 2011a). Although currently in transition, the pilot project administered during the 2010 – 2011 academic year was carried out within the parameters of the 2011 NCF's predecessor, the 1999 National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) (Ministry of Education, 1999). Because it was administered while the 1999 NMC was still in place, the forthcoming pilot project will be discussed against the academic setting produced by the 1999 NMC. Namely, one of the rationales behind why this project was significant will be addressed in relation to student performance in one of the four most common secondary school types available to students during the 2010 – 2011 academic year: junior lyceum, area secondary, church, and independent.

It is important to note that although the 2011 NCF has eliminated the separation of state school students between junior lyceum and area secondary schools, the significance of this project remains. One of the core objectives of this project was to motivate students to want to actively use their English language skills. Just as the 1999 NMC called for “effective, precise and confident use of the country’s two official languages. . . by the end of [the student’s] entire schooling experience,” (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 37) the 2011 NCF maintains the same sentiment on the topic of bilingualism, that “all students need to become proficient in Maltese and English” (MEEF, 2011b, p. 53). With regards to continued relevance despite the transition from the 1999 NMC to the 2011 NCF, therefore, the achievements of this project and the benefits, both explicit and implicit, on the learner should remain noteworthy even with the upcoming implementation of the 2011 NCF.

Introduction

In February 2011, thirteen Maltese male area secondary school students began a collaborative internet-based project with thirty American mixed gender high school students in Manhattan, New York. The project, titled “Culture Swap: Fostering Cultural Discovery through Creative Collaboration” (henceforth referred to as Culture Swap), was administered in Malta by a native English-speaking instructor as part of a nine-month

Fulbright English teaching assistantship.ⁱⁱ A New York State certified English teacher administered the project in the United States.

The project used culture as its common point of reference and was divided into two phases. During the first phase, students collected information on a specific aspect of his or her home culture. In the second phase of the project, students received information about the culture of their partner school. This information was used to create narrated Power Point presentations on one another's cultures.

In order to complete the project, each project administrator guided his or her respective class of students through a series of tasks. The tasks broke down the parts of the project into manageable pieces, moving the students through the research, writing, and speaking aspects of the project in a clear and structured manner. The project concluded with a videoconference where the participating students, whose previous correspondence was restricted to e-mail exchanges between project administrators, were finally able to "meet" face-to-face and ask and answer questions in real time.

Although pedagogical principles were numerous, the primary objective of Culture Swap was to provide a motivating stimulus to the Maltese students to actively use their English language skills. Using the lens of cultural exchange, Culture Swap provided a real and tangible incentive for students to use their English language skills (i.e. for communication with native English-speaking peers), and an internet-based interface through which to achieve this objective.

Background

English Proficiency and Academic Advancement

The 1999 NMC "considers bilingualism [in Maltese and English] as the basis of the educational system" (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 37). A student's progress towards achieving a level of bilingualism satisfactory to the 1999 NMC standards is measured through assessment at two stages of compulsory education.

The Eleven Plus exam, administered during the final year of primary schooling, determines eligibility for student entry into a junior lyceum for his or her secondary school

education. Students who receive a passing grade in Maltese, English, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Religious Knowledge are eligible to enroll in a junior lyceum for secondary school. Students who receive a failing grade in one of these five subjects are eligible to enroll in the less academically prestigious area secondary school.

The Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) Exam is administered in the final year of a student's secondary schooling. Here, six passes are required in six subject areas to obtain eligibility to enter Form VI. Three of six passes must be obtained in Maltese, English Language and Mathematics. The remaining three passes may be achieved in subjects of the student's choice.

The Eleven Plus exam marks the first point of assessment where passes in certain subject areas are required for positive academic advancement. The SEC exam marks the second point of assessment. Should a student not obtain the passes required on the SEC exam, he or she is unable to enter Form VI. With Form VI as a pre-requisite to University entry, lack of Form VI admittance decreases the likelihood that one progresses to University.ⁱⁱⁱ

On both the Eleven Plus exam and SEC exam, English is marked as one of the subjects in which a passing grade is required to pass the exam overall. By establishing English as necessary to pass on both exams, English language proficiency assumes a role in determining a student's upward academic mobility. In short, English becomes a gateway language for academic advancement. Mastery is required for academic success and failure produces an educational roadblock.

English Proficiency and Learner Realities

In 2010, 86.8% of students born in 1994 registered for the 2010 SEC exams. Of those registered, 41.9% received enough passes for eligibility into Form VI. Narrowing the scope of registrants and passes to the English Language SEC exam only, 2010 yielded 5,692 registered candidates and 3,248 candidates (or 57.1%) receiving a passing grade on the English language SEC exam. A pass is determined by obtaining a score of 1 through 5 on either Paper I or Paper II (MATSEC Support Unit, 2011a).

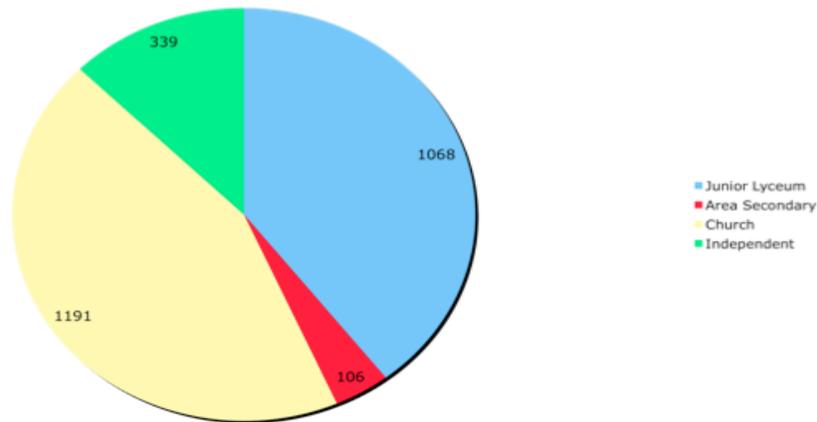


Figure 1: SEC English Language Student Passes (2010)

A close look at the 2010 Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) Report (MATSEC Support Unit, 2011a) shows that students hailing from different school types do not achieve the level of English language proficiency required for academic advancement equally. Figure 1 shows the total number of student passes for the 2010 SEC English Language exam by school type. This graph identifies the amount of students of the whole who passed the exam from each school type. Area secondary schools had the least amount of students passing with a total of 106 out of 3,248.

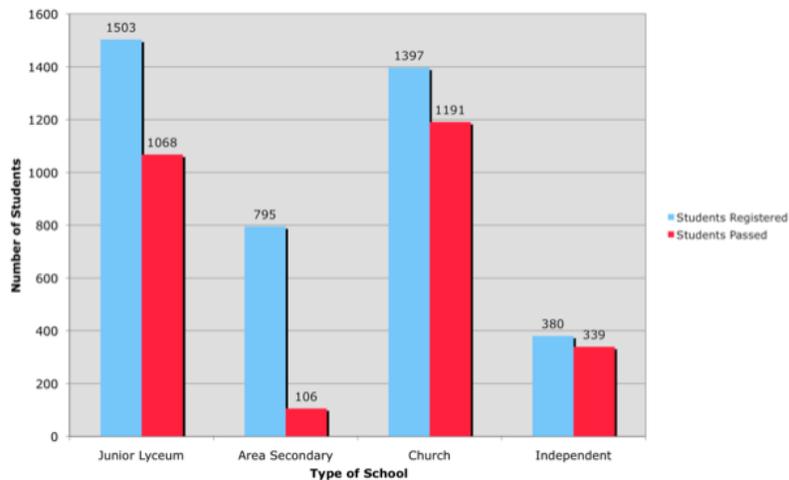


Figure 2: SEC English Language Registrants and Passes (2010)

Figure 2 plots the amount of students registered against the amount of student passes, by school type. A brief glimpse at this graph emphasises the sharp contrast between registrants and passes in the area secondary schools, as compared to other forms of secondary schooling in Malta. Where the second lowest registrant to pass percentage is produced by junior lyceums at 71.06%, area secondary schools produced a mere 13.33% students achieving satisfactory standards in English proficiency on the 2010 English Language SEC exam. The low passing rate among area secondary school students on the 2010 English language SEC exam is not unusual. In fact, tracing the pass rate over the last seven years beginning in 2004, the passing range has fluctuated between 7.12% and 13.33% (MATSEC, Support Unit 2011a).^{iv}

Measured through two points of assessment under the 1999 NMC standards and required as a fundamental principle of language acquisition not only in the 1999 NMC but also in the currently in progress 2011 NCF, these figures reveal how while English proficiency is required for advancement within the Maltese educational system, a startlingly low number of area secondary school students are actually achieving this benchmark.

A possible solution

Cassar (2000, p. 12-13) identifies lack of applicability to student's daily lives as one of several factors contributing to Maltese student's reluctance to embrace English in the classroom. Offering a solution to this problem, Cassar looks to culture in her statement,

many of those who have tried and failed to learn other languages have been discouraged by the methods employed by endless repetition. . . and academic exercises...Culture is the remedy. With its innovative approach, with its emphasis on effective communication, it shows students what they can do rather than what they cannot (Cassar, 2000, p. 69).

Putting into practice Cassar's assertion of eleven years prior, "showing students what they can do rather than what they cannot," is precisely what Culture Swap did. The forthcoming discussion will show that, when given the right stimulus, students can be motivated to use their English language skills for positive and effective communicative purposes.

Methodology and procedures

Culture Swap: Objectives

Culture Swap had five objectives. First, in naming “culture” as the central term of reference, the project served as a point of introduction to cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication. It helped students to deepen understandings of their own culture while also allowing them to broaden their worldviews through exposure to a culture different from their own.

The next three objectives of Culture Swap looked to improve general academic skills, including research, writing and public speaking. All participating students had to research an original topic of their choice, gathering enough information for their partner country peer to understand the topic from the perspective of the native resident. Both the information gathering and slide development stages required students to take larger pieces of writing and put them into their own words. Therefore, paraphrasing and summarizing were both highlighted and reinforced repeatedly. Public speaking skills were emphasised in the recorded slide narration and through participation in the 45-minute videoconference. Also, using Microsoft Office Power Point allowed students to increase their familiarity with professional presentation tools.

Finally, intent on motivating the Maltese students to harness their English language skills at a critical point in their academic careers, Culture Swap aimed to provide the stimulus to encourage students who do not normally prefer to speak in English to do so voluntarily by using a different academic approach to English language learning.

Culture Swap: Development (Mid-December 2010 – January 2011)

Preparation for the launch of Culture Swap began in mid-December 2010. The initial project proposal was a modified adaptation of a common European eTwinning^v project, “Culture-in-a-box.”^{vi} After receiving project approval from the Maltese school and the partner school in the United States, a timeline of execution, which included both the Maltese and American academic calendars, was set between the project administrators in each participating school. The timeline included dates of information exchange and the date and time of the culminating videoconference.

During the development stage, all worksheets to be used during the project were developed by the project administrators. In order to maintain continuity and familiarity between classes, worksheets were developed which were identical in all aspects except examples, which were modified to be culturally-relevant to each respective group. In establishing a set of uniform worksheets between the two participating classes, each class was not only kept on task well, but when information was exchanged, although the content was unfamiliar, the familiar formatting assisted students in making sense of information received.

In preparation for the videoconference, the development stage also allowed time to establish the necessary resources in both the United States and Malta to allow the students to participate in a digital videoconference. Necessary equipment for the Maltese students was provided by the Embassy of the United States in Malta. Contacts were established with the Office of Global Affairs of the State University of New York to host the American students during the videoconference. Certificates of participation in the program were also proposed, developed, printed, and distributed to each participating student by the culminating videoconference.

Finally, to gather participating Maltese students themselves, an overview of the project was proposed by the project administrator to all Form 4 students in January 2011. Students voluntarily chose to join the project. Any student who did not volunteer to join the project group had the option to join up until the completion of Phase I (April 1, 2011). Any student who did volunteer to join the group was aware that this was not binding and that they could leave the project at any time if they chose.

The project administrator created a project e-mail address to allow the students and project administrator to correspond with one another outside of class time. Correspondence included reminders for students and electronically submitted assignments from students. Finally, project folders were created and included the project title, group e-mail address, and class meeting time as well as a calendar of all class meetings, topics and assignments. Each participating Maltese student received a project folder during the first meeting of Culture Swap and was encouraged to bring the folder to each successive class meeting.

Culture Swap: Execution, “Information Gathering Stage” (Phase I: February 21 – April 1, 2011)

Phase I of Culture Swap began with an exploration of similarities and differences across cultures and an introduction to what comprises different parts of one’s own culture. These included looking at language, tradition, landscape, and history as components effecting one’s cultural background and current perspectives. Students were guided by a worksheet to identify specific aspects of their own culture they wished to research further. Each student listed his or her top three topic preferences. The project administrator assigned topics based on preferences to avoid overlap. All students received one of their top three topic choices.

Once assigned a topic, each student gathered important information, including pictures and additional resources, on their individual aspect. General information about Malta including location, size, population, and geography was also collected during the first phase of the project. Working in pairs, students completed this task with the help of a second worksheet.

By the conclusion of Phase I, each participating student gathered and documented information on his or her assigned topic. Each class also provided general information about each class’s home culture. All worksheets and information collected by the students were submitted to their respective project administrators. The information was exchanged via e-mail between the two project administrators. With each group now in hand of a plethora of information about their partner school, Culture Swap moved into Phase II of its execution.

Culture Swap: Execution, “Focus on NY” (Phase II: April 1 – May 16, 2011)

All information received from the students in Manhattan was printed and distributed amongst the Maltese students. Each Maltese student received an individual copy of the general background information provided by the American students on Manhattan Island, along with a copy of the class pictures submitted by the American students. Each Maltese student then chose a cultural aspect about Manhattan to focus on during Phase II of the project. For each cultural aspect, each student was required to develop at least one Power Point slide, including 1-2 pictures and 3-4 short, bulleted points,

and a 2-3 sentence oral recording to further explain the slide. The slides were organised together into one continuous Power Point presentation about life as a teenager in New York City, as described through the eyes and perspectives of teenagers in New York City.

Upon completion, the Maltese students and the American students exchanged Power Point presentations with one another. The Maltese students received a presentation about life as a teenager in Malta, described by themselves and interpreted and created by their peers in Manhattan. The American students received a presentation about life as a teenager in New York City, described by themselves and interpreted and created by their peers in Malta.

The project culminated in a videoconference between the Maltese and American students. This was the first time that the participating students saw and spoke to one another in real time. The videoconference provided an opportunity for students to ask questions either about the presentation they created or the presentation they received. It also provided an opportunity for students to ask any other curiosities they developed about their peers of their partner culture over the course of the project.

The videoconference began with original, pre-written questions by the Maltese students, however as the students became more comfortable speaking into a microphone and to a television screen, a free-flowing non-scripted conversation ensued after approximately ten minutes. This continued for the duration of the conference with minimal instructor interjection.

Culture Swap: Obstacles

As a native English-speaking guest instructor in a school where preferences to speak in English are low among students, behavior, motivation and work ethic were three major obstacles confronted at the beginning of Culture Swap. Specifically: time discontinuity due to holidays, class meetings held only once weekly, a six-hour time zone difference, and Internet regulations which limited all correspondence between classes to take place only between the respective project administrators all contributed to difficulty in immediately providing tangible outcomes for students to find satisfaction in the project.

This all fueled the initial difficulty to overcome the three obstacles of behavior, motivation and work ethic.

As students began to see the evolution of the project, particularly with the transition between Phase I and Phase II when the partner school became more “real” through the providing of information and pictures, students became increasingly more motivated to actively engage and complete the project. The Maltese students were also internally motivated by their own peers. Students who completed slides and recordings quickly offered their slides as models for their peers and also provided assistance as each slowly moved towards completing his role within the project. With each slide completed and displayed to one another, the class Power Point slowly began to take shape. As the videoconference approached, behavior, motivation and work ethic improved immensely with many students taking the initiative to volunteer their own free time to complete their work in school.

Despite initial difficulties in engaging the Maltese students to actively participate in the project, by the time of the videoconference, the students were eager and excited to finally meet the students they had only previously corresponded with in writing.

Outcomes

Overview

On Monday, May 16, 2011, thirteen students in Malta and thirty students in Manhattan engaged one another in a forty-five minute free flowing conversation. The conversation, which began with nervous introductions by the Maltese students, quickly evolved into a casual conversation between peers. The conversation revolved around popular teen topics including sports, television, music and school. Little external guidance was offered by the project administrators, except to prompt students to ask questions during brief, sporadic lulls in conversation. Overall, however, all communication and interaction was carried out student-to-student in English, with the project administrators maintaining their positions on the periphery.

At the conclusion of the videoconference, all participating Maltese students received a certificate from the Embassy of the United States in Malta for participation in the collaborative project between Malta and the United States.

Language Use

A 2007 local study concluded, “students who attend the Boys’ Area Secondary school use Maltese exclusively in the school context” (Brincat, 2007, p. 31). A second local study identified feelings such as “not good at English” and “not comfortable speaking in English” as primary reasons why area secondary students in particular use Maltese within school, even when addressed in English (Scerri, 2009, p. 100). These two studies show a relationship between lack of self-confidence in English language skills and subsequent shyness towards using English in general.

Following the videoconference, the participating school’s headmistress commented, “The . . . form 4 [students] were not only very excited but they participated and performed brilliantly [during the videoconference]. . . . [T]hey were proud of themselves. . . . [T]hey spoke in English throughout, even among themselves. They showed an enthusiasm and interest that is not usual in school” (H. Borg, personal communication, May 25, 2011). A form 4 teacher also in attendance at the videoconference continued, “During our everyday English lessons, some of these students have to be continuously encouraged to speak in English. However, this has been a good opportunity and most of all an excellent motivation for them to practise the English language” (A. Depasquale, personal communication, May 30, 2011).

In completing all steps of the project, from the organizational and information gathering stages to the narrated Power Point presentation exchange, the students gradually increased their use of English. By the videoconference, all participating students achieved a level of confidence that allowed them to participate in the event while speaking entirely in English with their peers both in Malta and abroad.

The movement of the conversation from single questions posed by individual students to communal responses, elaborations, and explanations to move towards mutual understanding also provided an opportunity for the students to practise complex,

argumentative language skills. Where responding to single questions is sometimes the extent of the need of their English skills, in communicating with others, students had to follow-up, clarify and explain further any concept or idea they wanted to relay to their peers abroad.

Additional positive academic benefits

In addition to providing an opportunity to increase students' general use of English, the similarity of the videoconference to a role-play was also highlighted. Each participating student assumed a role in a forty-five minute interaction with the participating American class. The videoconference conversation topics were not pre-planned. Therefore, students had to comprehend, process, and reply to their peers within a limited amount of time. This process is similar to that of the role-play portion of the SEC English language oral exam.^{vii}

The English Head of Department, also in attendance during the videoconference, explained, “[t]heir speaking skills...showed great ability when asking questions together with them assuming different roles...such an approach [shows] these students [would] be able to easily cope with the oral component when sitting for the local SEC English Language examination.” The English Head of Department continued, “students who carry out such projects [also] automatically have positive evidence to be included in their school leaving certificate” (A. Privitera, personal communication, May 23, 2011).

Cultural Enhancement

Although some objectives of Culture Swap applied only to the participating Maltese students, the goal of increasing cross-cultural awareness and understanding among teenagers was applicable to all participating students. Culture Swap allowed students to be introduced to new and different cultural perspectives in a real and tangible way. Reflecting on the reactions of his own students to the project, the project administrator of the Manhattan school commented, “[The students are] realizing that there is life beyond NYC [or Malta] and more importantly, [they are] starting to develop an intellectual curiosity about the world” (J. Mohr, personal communication, May 16, 2011). In an increasingly interdependent global environment, the project stirred an interest in individuals other than those within one's immediate proximity.

It is also noteworthy to highlight the exposure to ethnic diversity that resulted from the exchange between the two participating classes. With misinformed stereotypes often developing out of sheer lack of interaction or exposure to individuals of differing cultural backgrounds, Culture Swap allowed students to see individuals of different races and ethnicities as other teenagers just like themselves.

Conclusion

The Maltese educational system, under both the 1999 NMC and the upcoming 2011 NCF standards, calls for all students to achieve bilingualism in both Maltese and English during their academic careers. So long as achieving bilingualism remains an academic standard, attention must be given to students who are not adequately achieving this standard.

Culture Swap offered one example of how the lens of cultural exchange, combined with creativity and innovation, can be used within the classroom to increase Maltese students' use of English. This project provided a practical and tangible incentive to practice and improve English language skills: for communication with peers. In using culture as its central point of reference, it also broadened students' overall perspectives and opinions about individuals outside of their immediate zone of familiarity. The free-flowing, non-scripted speech carried out during the videoconference emphasised the student's language skills and abilities to communicate adequately with native English speakers.

The 2010 English language SEC exam documented a 13.3% pass rate among area secondary school students. Although the Maltese educational system is currently in transition and distinctions between area secondary and junior lyceum schools will soon be a moot point, students who are finding it difficult to harness their English language skills will remain. The success of this project among area secondary school students highlights that any student of any academic level can indeed succeed in the use of English, so long as the proper opportunity presents itself.

Recommendations

Culture Swap was initiated and administered by a visiting, native English-speaking instructor on a short-term grant in Malta. Although the circumstance which served as the

background to this project was temporary, modifications can allow for future sustainability of similar initiatives in Maltese schools.

First, one may consider incorporating collaborative work with English-speaking schools throughout the world as part of the general English curriculum at the primary and/or secondary level. The eTwinning framework can serve as one resource for establishing partnerships with English-speaking schools throughout Europe. Local embassies can serve as a second venue to be explored for assisting in the establishment of partnerships abroad.

In addition to attempting to maintain internet-based communication to increase learner motivation towards speaking and using English, altering the general approach towards the teaching of English may also be considered. English is the official language in over fifty countries throughout the world (North Carolina State University, 2011). Teaching English through cultural units, where different English-speaking countries and their respective cultural trends and traditions are highlighted can serve as both an exciting way to practice and improve English language skills as well as an effective way to increase student's understanding of the interdependent and diverse world in which they live.

Whether through continued partnerships with others or through reconfiguring the methods and approaches towards English language instruction itself, so long as English remains a gateway language for academic advancement, it is crucial for educators to begin conversations to ensure that all students are achieving their full linguistic potential. If they do not, pockets of students will continue to be excluded from further academic achievement not because they do not possess adequate English language skills, but because they are simply unsure of how to cultivate them best.

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Secondary School (Birkirkara, Malta) and Leadership and Public Service High School (Manhattan, New York) – well done!

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Author's note

The content of this article is not part of official Fulbright Program documentation. The views expressed are those of the author, and are not endorsed by the Fulbright Program, the U.S. Department of State, or any of its partner organizations.

Endnotes

ⁱ This is one of the official secondary school completion public examinations set by the University of Malta Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Board.

ⁱⁱ The Fulbright U.S. Student program is “the largest U.S. international exchange program offering opportunities for students, scholars, and professionals to undertake international graduate study, advanced research, university teaching, and teaching in elementary and secondary schools worldwide.” English teaching assistants “are placed in schools or universities outside of capital cities; are assigned various activities designed to improve the students’ language abilities and knowledge of the United States; are fully integrated into the host community, increasing their own language skills and knowledge of the host country” (Fulbright n.d.). The Fulbright U.S. Student Program is sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State and administered by the Institute of International Education. For additional information, please see: <http://us.fulbrightonline.org/home.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Candidates who do not pass the SEC exam in May of their final year of secondary school may re-sit the examination the following September, as well as in any subsequent year (May or September).

^{iv} The percentage of students hailing from area secondary schools who passed the English Language SEC exam between 2004 and 2010 was manually calculated using the statistical reports from the 2004 – 2010 exams. The total number of area secondary school students who registered for either Paper I or II of the English language SEC exam was divided by the total number of area secondary school students who received a grade of 1-5 on either paper. The result was multiplied by 100 to determine the passing percentage of area secondary school students. The lowest passing percentage occurred in 2007, where 7.12% of area secondary school students who registered for the English language SEC exam

passed the exam. The highest passing percentage occurred in 2010, with 13.33% of registered area secondary school students passing the English language SEC exam.

^v eTwinning “is part of Comenius, the EU program for schools” (eTwinning 2011a). For additional information, see: <http://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm>.

^{vi} For additional information on “Culture-in-a-Box” (eTwinning 2011b) see: http://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/inspiration/kits/kits_main.cfm?kid=4&klang=en&lang=en.

^{vii} The English Language SEC exam (MATSEC Support Unit 2011b) contains two oral components, “Conversation – Visual Prompt” and “Conversation – Role-play.” The “Conversation – Visual Prompt” task provides the student with a “picture, a set of pictures, maps or diagrams” which the student is expected to “examine and talk about.” The “Conversation – Role-play” task “comprise[s] a role play task based on a situation with which a candidate may reasonably be expected to identify.” The candidate is expected to converse with the examiner on an assigned topic through written prompts on the exam paper and oral prompts provided by the examiner. Together, these two components account for 10% of the student’s total English language SEC exam mark. For additional information, see: http://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0013/102028/SEC11.pdf.

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