



Opening address by Mr. Daniel Xerri, Chairperson of the English as a Foreign Language Monitoring Board, on the occasion of the 1st ELT Malta Conference: Current Trends in ELT

Venue Old University Building, Valletta

Time & Date 09.00, Friday 14 September

Honourable Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues,

It is an honour for me to welcome you to the first ever English Language Teaching conference to be held in Malta. By means of this conference we hope to include Malta in the international ELT events calendar. We aspire to do so because ever since the inception of the ELT industry in Malta the country has always been renowned for its high academic standards.

Every year Malta caters for the needs of around 70,000 students coming from more than 60 countries. Since the founding of the first EFL school in the 1960s it is estimated that Malta has taught English to 1.15 million students. There are currently 40 licenced schools in operation and they range from family businesses to multinational companies with schools in different continents. This diversity is highly important since the students who opt for Malta as their academic destination are spoilt for choice when it comes to selecting a school that best fits their requirements. Such diversity is also of crucial importance to Malta's success in carving a niche in the global ELT sector.

EFL students are a key part of Malta's economy given that they account for 5% of the total number of tourists and more significantly because they spend a total of 182,000 weeks in the country. Despite its small size the country has an ELT industry that can provide larger competitors with a run for their money. It can do so because Malta was the first country to regulate this industry by enacting legislation meant to safeguard the interests of all relevant stakeholders.

The EFL Monitoring Board was set up 16 years ago and over the years it has published policies that regulate all aspects of a student's stay in Malta. We've created an internationally level-rated examination that assesses the language awareness requirements

of teachers, and quite recently we've launched a new policy that specifies all the pedagogical skills and knowledge that pre-service EFL teachers require in order to function effectively. Fully aware of the dangers that are associated with an exclusively top-down approach to educational management, we've implemented policies that are entrenched in grassroots-level consultation and the sharing of best practice. We've just finalised new legislation that will ensure that regulations are in line with the needs of the industry in the 21st century and we've ensured that all schools will form part of an accreditation scheme meant to guarantee even higher levels of quality.

Over the past few years the board has broadened the scope of its interests and is presently forging ties with various entities in an effort to increase the standards of English proficiency in Malta. Such collaboration is essential because we believe that our nation's bilingual identity provides us with a competitive edge. Preserving the status of English in Malta is of utmost importance if we are to continue reaping the benefits enjoyed so far.

Achieving higher standards of English entails an enhancement of teaching standards. It is for this reason that we are committed to fostering a culture of continual professional development amongst teachers. In order to guarantee even better teaching we are encouraging schools to promote CPD as an intrinsic part of their academic philosophy. Given our appreciation of the fact that MATEFL, FELTOM, and individual teacher trainers regularly organise workshops and seminars for CPD purposes, this year we took the initiative to organise an ELT conference so that as many teachers as possible are provided with a means of professional growth. We hope this conference can complement the many other CPD opportunities available to teachers, especially nowadays with the prevalence of social media.

In organising this conference we sought the collaboration of the Education Officers for English within the Department of Quality and Standards in Education, and the support of FELTOM and MATEFL. We did this because we want this conference to address the needs of all English language teachers and not only of those teachers involved in the EFL sector. We believe in the value of cross-pollination and are aware that many mainstream teachers teach EFL in the peak season.

Around 1,300 teachers work in the EFL sector and the majority of them are employed on a part-time basis while usually acting as teachers in mainstream schools. More than 70% of these teachers are female and I'm especially glad to see women occupying decision-making posts in most schools. Half of all the Directors of Studies in Malta are women and the success of this industry owes a lot to women's insightful contributions. All EFL teachers are employed on the basis of specific minimum requirements in terms of qualifications in pedagogy and language proficiency.

The industry encourages people from all walks of life to obtain the necessary qualifications in order to teach EFL. The university student population has always been one of the mainstays of the EFL profession in Malta and many of us in this room, myself included, started teaching English while reading for an undergraduate degree. This initial teaching experience provided us with an opportunity of meeting students from all over the world and allowed us to value the contribution that language teachers make to the attainment of students' aspirations. This profession also welcomes people who might have been doing other jobs before choosing to become teachers. This blend of life

experiences helps to create a highly dynamic group of teachers that enrich their students' learning. Those of us who chose to make teaching their vocation also chose to embrace the fact that teaching necessarily involves constant learning. As teachers we are convinced that learning is an experience that lasts a lifetime and it is only because we are passionate about learning that we can fulfil our duty as teachers.

This conference is meant to be a learning experience for all of us gathered here today. We're here to listen to speakers who have amassed a substantial amount of knowledge about our profession and who have ideas that they'd like to share with us. We're here to contribute our thoughts and experiences and we feel enthusiastic about this because we know that learning is a highly social activity that is dependent on the exchange of ideas. We're here to question these same ideas and adapt them to our respective classrooms, fully knowing that as teachers we need to avoid a one-size-fits-all mentality. As Jim Scrivener points out in his book *Learning Teaching*, "In order to become a better teacher, it seems important to be aware of as many options as possible. This may enable you to generate your own rules and guidelines as to what works and what doesn't." This conference focuses on current trends in ELT and it is meant to provide teachers with access to new options so that they may continue enriching their teaching.

It is my sincere hope that this seminal event in the history of ELT in Malta will be the first in a series of annual conferences in which teachers of English working in different contexts can come together to celebrate their profession. I hope you'll enjoy the varied programme we've prepared for you and I wish you all a great conference.

Thank you.