

THE LEARNING ELT PROFESSIONAL

3RD ELT MALTA
CONFERENCE SELECTIONS

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ELT
COUNCIL

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The learning ELT professional: an introduction

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This book consists of a selection of papers based on talks and workshops delivered at the 3rd ELT Malta conference. The book's title is derived from the theme of the conference and it brings together the perspectives of a group of international and Maltese experts in ELT, all of whom address the idea that learning needs to be an intrinsic part of the identity of ELT professionals.

ELT IN MALTA

Every year, Malta caters for the needs of around 77,000 students coming from more than 40 countries (NSO, 2015). The ELT sector is a key contributor to Malta's economy given that students account for around 4% of the total number of tourist arrivals (NSO, 2015). More significantly, a typical student spends three weeks in Malta, with the total number of weeks for international students amounting to more than 245,000 (NSO, 2015). Since the founding of the first language school in the 1960s, it is estimated that Malta has taught English to more than one million students from around the world. These students chose Malta as their language-learning destination not only because of its culture, climate and beaches, but also because over the past 50 years, the country's ELT industry has built an international reputation for academic excellence. There are currently more than 45 licenced schools in operation and they range from family businesses to multinational companies with schools in different continents. This diversity is highly important since 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.

Over the past few years, a number of ELT schools have taken the initiative to look beyond the industry's five biggest clients – all located in Europe – and explore new markets in order to attract students from far-flung parts of the world. In most classrooms there is increasingly a bigger mix of nationalities that make the language learning experience even more satisfying. However, schools need to be provided with more support in order for the ELT industry in Malta to continue prospering. If this industry is to contribute even further to Malta's economy, then there should be provisions in place that facilitate the process of attracting students from an even wider variety of countries.

Ever since its inception, the ELT industry in Malta has always been renowned for its high academic standards. 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; this was meant at safeguarding the interests of all relevant stakeholders. The EFL Monitoring Board, the forerunner of the ELT Council, was set up in 1996; over the years, it published policies that regulated all aspects of a student's stay in Malta. Fully aware of the dangers that are associated with an exclusively top-down approach to educational management, the EFL Monitoring Board implemented policies that were entrenched in grassroots-level consultation and the sharing of best practice. In doing so, it consulted both FELTOM and MATEFL, the school owners' association and the teachers' association respectively. The EFL Monitoring Board was responsible for designing the Test for English Language Teachers (TELT), an internationally level-rated examination that assesses the language awareness requirements of teachers, as well as TEFL Cert., a pre-service teacher education programme that specifies all the pedagogical knowledge and skills that ELT professionals require in order to function effectively. Before ceasing operations, the

EFL Monitoring Board produced legislation aimed at ensuring that regulations are in line with the needs of the industry in the 21st century and guaranteeing even higher levels of quality. This legislation led to the creation of the ELT Council, which took on the mission and remit of the EFL Monitoring Board as well as added powers and responsibilities.

In the last four years of its operation, the EFL Monitoring Board broadened the scope of its interests and sought to forge ties with various entities in an effort to maintain high standards of English proficiency in Malta. For example, in 2014 it collaborated with Aġenzija Żgħażaġh in order to engage ELT schools in a corporate social responsibility programme aimed at developing English proficiency levels of vulnerable Maltese youths. This kind of collaboration amongst different stakeholders continues to be an objective of the ELT Council given its conviction that Malta's bilingual identity provides it with a competitive edge. Preserving the status of English in Malta is of utmost importance if the country is to continue reaping the benefits it has enjoyed so far.

One means of maintaining high standards of English is by enhancing teaching standards. It is for this reason that the ELT Council is committed to fostering a culture of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) amongst teachers. In order to guarantee even better teaching, the ELT Council encourages language schools to promote CPD as an intrinsic part of their academic philosophy. It does this partly by means of its academic school visits policy, which seeks to help schools with the use of teacher portfolios. Moreover, it collaborates with the Education Officers for English within the Department of Quality and Standards in Education in order to provide mainstream teachers at primary and secondary levels with in-service training aimed at enhancing their language awareness and methodology. Together with FELTOM, the ELT Council supports the University of Malta's MA in TESOL. Launched in 2014, this programme has the potential to lead to a better-informed cadre of professionals who are able to occupy the top academic positions in Malta's ELT industry. Through such initiatives, the ELT Council aims to keep fostering the growth of teachers of English and other ELT professionals.

ELT PROFESSION IN MALTA

The term *industry* is commonly used to refer to ELT in Malta and that is because the teaching of English is a profit-making sector in this country. However, one must never lose sight of the fact that this is an industry that is almost entirely dependent on a single profession: teaching. The quality of teaching is what has built the industry's international reputation. The facilities of the schools, the leisure activities organised for students, the non-academic services provided to them are very important. They are a significant part of the package offered to those visiting Malta for the purpose of learning English. Nonetheless, it is because of teachers' knowledge and skills that the ELT industry has thrived so much. Its success is due to the top quality teaching that is delivered on a daily basis.

The composition of the ELT profession in Malta is adequately varied, consisting of both native and second language speakers of English with a wide range of ages and life experiences. Around 1,400 teachers work in the ELT sector and the majority of them are employed on a part-time basis while usually acting as teachers in mainstream schools (NSO, 2015). More than 70% of these teachers are female and a significant proportion of women occupy decision-making posts in most ELT 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 the teachers working in the ELT sector in Malta are employed on the basis of specific minimum requirements in terms of qualifications in pedagogy and language proficiency and awareness. The industry encourages people from all walks of life to obtain the necessary qualifications in order to teach English. The university student population has always been one of the mainstays of the ELT profession in Malta and many undergraduates start teaching English while reading for a degree. This initial teaching experience provides them with the opportunity of meeting people from all over the world and allows them to value the contribution that English teachers make to the attainment of students' aspirations. This profession also welcomes people who might have been doing a variety of 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 who choose to make teaching their vocation also choose to embrace the fact that teaching necessarily involves constant learning. As teachers they are convinced that learning is an experience that lasts a lifetime and it is only because they are passionate about learning that they can fulfil their duties as teachers. It is for this that the ELT Malta conference was launched in 2012 and it has kept this annual appointment with ELT professionals ever since.

ELT MALTA CONFERENCE

Given its appreciation of the fact that MATEFL, FELTOM, and individual teacher trainers regularly run workshops and seminars for CPD purposes, the EFL Monitoring Board in 2012 took the initiative to organise the country's first ELT conference so that as many teachers as possible would be provided with a means of professional growth. The organisers of this seminal event in the history of ELT in Malta hoped that it would be the first in a series of annual conferences in which teachers of English working in different contexts could come together to celebrate their profession. The hope was that the conference would complement the many other CPD opportunities available to teachers of English in Malta, especially in an era characterised by the prevalence of online forms of professional development. In organising the 1st ELT Malta conference, the EFL Monitoring Board sought the collaboration of the English Language Resource Centre, and the support of FELTOM and MATEFL. It did this because it wanted the conference to address the

needs of all English language teachers and not only of those teachers involved in the ELT sector. The conference organisers believed in the value of cross-pollination and were aware that many mainstream teachers worked in the ELT sector in the peak season, i.e. July and August.

Since its first edition, the ELT Malta conference has acted as a learning experience for all participants. ELT professionals gather to listen to speakers who have amassed a substantial amount of knowledge about the profession and who have ideas that they would like to share with their audience. The latter, in turn, attend the conference because they want to contribute their thoughts and experiences and because they feel enthusiastic about the fact that learning is a highly social activity that is dependent on the exchange of ideas. The participants question these same ideas and adapt them to their respective classrooms, fully knowing that as ELT professionals they need to avoid a one-size-fits-all mentality. As one of the plenary speakers at the 3rd ELT Malta conference 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” (Scrivener, 2011, p. 8). One of the aims of the ELT Malta conference has always been that of providing teachers with access to new options so that they may continue enriching their teaching.

It is in recognition of the fact that the quality of teachers needs to remain the industry’s first priority that the ELT Malta conference is organised every year. Just like its collaborators within MATEFL, FELTOM and the schools themselves, the conference organisers see teaching as a lifelong learning process. The very first edition of the conference owed its origins to the idea that the industry required a unified event that celebrated ELT professionals’ identity as learners. Their knowledge, skills and attitudes need to be constantly nurtured and developed; otherwise, stagnation is inevitable and the repercussions of that are disgruntled students for whom no learning is taking place. Teachers who are not motivated to keep learning cannot inspire their students to do the same. Without their admirable commitment to learning, the ELT Malta conference would not have continued to take place year after year.

Attending the ELT Malta conference is not only a means for teachers to be inspired by different speakers in order for them to inspire their students. The conference is also meant to encourage ELT professionals to position themselves differently. They can be inspiring for their own peers if they start valuing their potential to be more than consumers of knowledge. Their experiences as ELT professionals, in schools and in CPD events like the ELT Malta conference, allow them to be contributors to the professional development of others. Harmer (2012), a plenary speaker at the 2nd ELT Malta conference, points out that “Some of the most effective teacher development takes place when we work and share with colleagues and other professionals” (p. 173). Most probably, the emphasis in that sentence should fall on the word *share*. There are so many ways in which teachers

can engage in such sharing. They could give a joint session at a conference like ELT Malta or at one of the regular CPD events organised by a teachers' association like MATEFL. They could write a blog and comment on those written by so many ELT bloggers from all over the world, or use Twitter and Facebook to discuss issues they find relevant to their practice. They could rope in a colleague and engage in action research, or collaborate in writing an article for a teachers' magazine. They could do peer observation with colleagues they trust, or take part in webinars. Most importantly, they could talk to their colleagues about their ideas and use these discussions to reflect on what happens in the classroom.

Ever since it was first organised, the ELT Malta conference has sought to bring about a mind shift amongst ELT professionals in the industry. The hope has always been that as many professionals as possible would muster the courage to share what they know with their peers. Such professionals already inspire their students and that is why ELT in Malta is a healthy sector. However, the conference is meant to encourage them to position themselves as inspiring teachers of teachers, in their schools, in the blogosphere, and at CPD events in Malta and beyond its shores. It was for this reason that at the 3rd ELT Malta conference the Inspiring ELT Professional Award was given for the first time. This was awarded to Alan Marsh, one of the contributors to this book. With such a long-standing ELT industry, professionals in Malta have so much to offer one another and those working in other countries. They have a wealth of ELT knowledge and experience to export far and wide. The fact that professionals working in Malta have authored a number of contributions in this book is probably an indication that the ELT Malta conference has helped to ignite the spark of inspiration. Hopefully, this book will act as a means by which the act of sharing can take a leap forward.

THE LEARNING ELT PROFESSIONAL

The 3rd ELT Malta conference spanned over four days, starting with an IATEFL Research SIG supported event led by Simon Borg and consisting of 19 workshops and 6 plenary sessions, some of which were delivered by the likes of Carol Read, Lindsay Clandfield, and Jamie Keddie. The fact that a sizeable number of participants registered for Borg's workshop on doing good quality ELT research was testament to the fact that there is a growing commitment to non-traditional forms of professional development in Malta's ELT industry. This is reassuring given that the industry urgently requires more teachers to adopt the role of research-engaged professionals.

The conference theme focused on the learning ELT professional because of the belief that effective professionals are primarily effective learners. They value the development of their own knowledge, skills and beliefs. They refuse to stagnate as professionals. They embrace learning, its joys and its challenges. ELT professionals can lead by example by demonstrating the attitudes of effective learners. They can act as role models by being fully engaged with the lifelong learning process.

The eight papers in this book address the issue of ELT professionals' learning development by either showcasing how they can position themselves as learners or by discussing pedagogical approaches that can enrich classroom practices.

The papers by Simon Borg, Larissa Attard, and Kenan Dikilitaş and Koray Akyazi focus on how teacher research can act as a form of professional learning. Borg argues that teacher research is a highly valid form of professional development as it enables practitioners to become knowledge producers, this being in contrast to the traditional view of teachers as consumers of the knowledge shared by experts coming from outside the school. Hence, teacher research is empowering given that it provides practitioners with ownership over their professional development. Recognising the validity of this idea, Attard provides an introduction to how practitioners may engage in one type of teacher research. Action research is a systematic approach to teacher research in that it allows practitioners to investigate their own practices and classrooms by following a number of stages and cycles. Attard's paper gives a lot of importance to the preparation stage and seeks to provide a model for this given that some teachers might consider this stage to be the most challenging one. Given the possibility that teacher research might be perceived as demanding, in their paper Dikilitaş and Akyazi explore the perceptions of a group of ELT professionals in Malta. Their study shows that despite some negative views, doing teacher research is mostly deemed to be a professional development activity that enhances beliefs and practices, and possesses relevance to the classroom.

Writing is the focus of the papers by Caroline Campbell, Mario Aquilina and Stephanie Xerri Agius, each author approaching the subject from somewhat different angles. Campbell discusses the significance of writing as a tool that facilitates teachers' reflective practice. She delineates a process that facilitates teachers' reflective journey and provides them with ownership of their professional development. Besides being necessary for this purpose, writing is also one of the skills that ELT professionals give a lot of attention to in schools. Hence, developing their knowledge of how to address students' needs more effectively is crucial. Aquilina's paper builds on research in order to equip the reader with a better understanding of how to exploit pre-writing strategies in academic writing classes. The instructional practices he explicates are derived from both genre-based and process approaches to the teaching of writing. Within the latter field over the past few years the issue of feedback has become one of the main areas of concern. Xerri Agius discusses the principles of feedback practice and presents a number of strategies for providing and implementing feedback. Based on research investigating learners' perceptions of feedback, her paper indicates how some of the most common challenges involved in providing feedback can be overcome.

In order to better address the needs of learners in the 21st century, ELT professionals are required to demonstrate the ability to repackage their existent knowledge as well as develop new competences. This is what the papers by Alan Marsh and Gavin Dudeney touch upon respectively. Marsh proposes a number of

ways by means of which the teaching techniques associated with methodological principles that might no longer be considered valid can be reactivated once they are merged with contemporary ELT approaches. He illustrates how translation, stimulus-response pattern drills, teacher talk time, and the PPP model could all benefit from such treatment. Dudeney's paper acts as a digital literacies primer for ELT professionals working in a learning environment in which the use of technology prevails. It starts by defining digital literacy and then develops a taxonomy of sub-literacies by analyzing the concept of digital literacies.

All eight papers seem to indicate that a positive attitude towards professional learning is necessary on the part of ELT professionals. The authors exemplify how such learning may be conducted by either focusing on empowering forms of CPD like teacher research or else by reexamining how professional and pedagogical knowledge and skills may be harnessed and enhanced. In this sense, this book propounds the idea that learning is a fundamental part of every ELT professional's identity.

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