

Workshop on modern language programmes in schools



by Dr Antoinette Camilleri

THE Ministry of Education and National Culture and the Education Division together with the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe in Graz, Austria, last month hosted a workshop, the first of its kind in Malta, entitled "The specification of objectives for learner autonomy and cultural awareness within syllabus development at secondary school level."

The workshop was co-ordinated by Dr Antoinette Camilleri and was opened by Education Minister Evarist Bartolo, who stressed that schools had to be both attractive and interesting for students, otherwise they risked becoming irrelevant and obsolete with students switching off.

Mr Bartolo said there was an urgent need to change educational material and methods used in schools. Educational achievement was intrinsically linked to language proficiency. Students who lagged behind in language were later excluded from the benefits of education. The theme of the workshop was particularly relevant to Malta at a time when the national minimum curriculum is being revised.

In addition to the development of the learners' communicative competence, modern language programmes in schools should aim at developing the students' progressive independence of thought and action combined with social responsibility, and their acceptance of, and respect for, other cultures.

A new paradigm of syllabus development was introduced. Rather than a top-down, centrally prescribed, knowledge-based syllabus, this workshop proposed a negotiated, school- or classroom-based syllabus with emphasis on learning processes and the students' and teachers' involvement to a high degree.

Since Malta's contribution to the area of modern languages within the Council of Europe housed in Strasbourg has been going on for years, this Malta workshop has a history. The topic dealt with can itself be linked to a Strasbourg workshop on Language and culture awareness in language learning/teaching (L2 and L1) for the development of learner autonomy (age 11-18) which had taken place in Malta in March 1996.

The overall aim could be described as 'the increase of respect for identity and cultural diversity, as an intrinsic part of language learning'.

This is taking place within the framework of the Council of Europe and is centred around the

following principles:

- The rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding;

- It is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination.

The importance of learner autonomy as a philosophy and a methodology of learning, includes raising the learner's awareness of his/her present state of knowledge and skill and the students' own setting of feasible and worthwhile objectives; selection of materials; and self-assessment.

The short-term aim of learner autonomy is to maximise the student's learning at present, with a long-term aim of preparing himself/herself for future, lifelong learning. The ability to learn by oneself, to reflect on one's own thinking and learning processes (metacognition) is essential in a world of continuous change. Formal schooling must therefore start a dynamic process through which pupils are progressively weaned from their dependence on teachers and institutions and given the confidence to manage their own learning.

Aims of the workshop

The workshop helped participants to learn how to

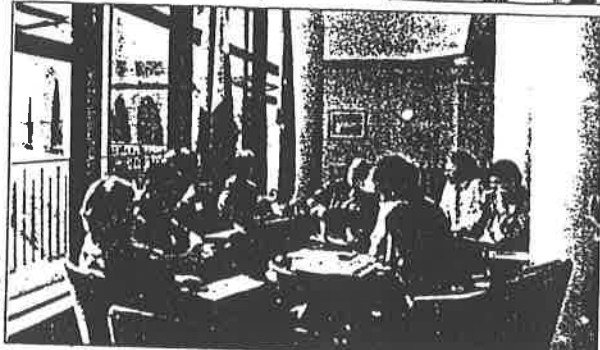
- share their experience in the area of syllabus development specifically dealing with the introduction and implementation of learner autonomy and cultural awareness;

- explore routes in the specification of objectives for learner autonomy and cultural awareness as a means for syllabus development. Theoretical input was provided by the animators on syllabus development, taking France and Slovenia as examples; and on the specification of objectives for learner autonomy and cultural awareness in syllabus development; a debate on learner autonomy also took place scrutinising the pros and cons of this educational concept;

- engage in a research and development phase by forming regional/

international networks. A special interest was expressed by the Maltese participants to form local, national networks of collaboration, especially as inter-school projects.

Emphasis was on the sharing of information and knowledge between the experts and the practitioners, on group work and discussions, hands-on experience within the Maltese community, i.e. finding out about Maltese culture and traditions centering around Good Friday and Easter



The European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe

THE European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz, Austria, is a non-residential institution whose aim is to promote the learning and teaching of modern languages in a multilingual Europe.

It was set up in 1994 on the initiative of Austria and The Netherlands in the form of a Council of Europe "Enlarged Partial Agreement". Malta was among the eight founding members, the others being Austria, France, Greece, Liechtenstein, The Netherlands, Slovenia and Switzerland. Since then the total of Western, Central and Eastern European country members is 34.

The aim of the Graz Centre is to offer, generally through international workshops or seminars, a platform and a meeting place for officials responsible for language policy, specialists in didactics, teacher trainers, textbook authors and other multipliers in the area of modern languages. The Centre undertakes, therefore, to promote the dissemination of good practice in language teaching and learning, and to contribute to the respect and reinforcement of linguistic diversity in a multilingual, multicultural, democratic and tolerant Europe.

celebrations, and a simulation activity of syllabus design.

One of the most successful parts of the workshop was the foreign participants' experience of the Maltese community. The foreigners felt extremely enthusiastic as they interviewed and filmed Maltese people about their cultural habits relating to this particular time of the year, and also as they visited places of cultural, historical and religious interest.

Participants included 27 decision-makers in curricular matters in the area of modern languages at secondary school level from 27 European countries.

Twenty Maltese participants from state and non-state sectors, and the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta participated. The workshop was conducted in English and French with simultaneous translation.

Dr Antoinette Camilleri is head of the Department of Arts and Languages in Education within the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. She published various books like Bilingualism in Education: The Maltese Experience, Skawuni, Ghanijiet ghat-Tagħlim tal-Malti fil-Primarju and Merħba Bik: Welcome to a Course in Maltese for Foreigners. Her research has been published in international journals. She has co-ordinated and animated several other Council of Europe workshops relating to bilingual education, culture and language awareness and learner autonomy.

Other members of the organising team included the animators: Ms Berta Kogoj, of the Ministry of Education, Nova Gorica, Slovenia; Ms Albane Cain, Institute for National Research in Pedagogy, Paris, France, and Dr David Newby, Karl-Franzens University, Graz, Maltese organisers included Mr Andrew Buhagiar, Director of Education, Student Services and International Relations, and Mr Paul Attard, assistant director of education. Mag. Josef Huber, director of studies of the European Centre for Modern Languages, also assisted.