

MALTESE HISTORY

LO6 jk

**Education reforms, the Language Question
and the early political parties**

(1878 to 1940)



Year 10

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for History SEC 2025



Curriculum Centre Annex

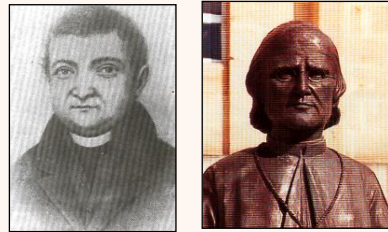
LO6 j – An overview of the education system in Malta up to 1878

The years 1800-1836

Very little importance was dedicated to improving education because the colonial government did not want to enter a costly program to educate the people. The only school run by the government since Maitland's time was the Normal School in Valletta, which however admitted only boys.

The Royal Commission of Inquiry of 1836

On education, the Commissioners stated that *'there are no schools in the villages and no tolerable education for the middle classes'*. At that time only three primary schools existed in Malta. The Commissioners criticized the colonial administration for doing nearly nothing to reduce widespread illiteracy among the people. It remarked that peasant and working-class families were too poor to send their children to school. They advised the government to open more schools in the main towns and villages, to increase the teachers' pay and to double the annual expenditure on education. In 1840, the Governor took an important step when he appointed Can. Fortunato Panzavecchia as the first Inspector of Primary Schools, a position which he held until 1850.



*The arrival of the Royal Commission of 1836
Canon Fortunato Panzavecchia (1797–1850)
Canon Paolo Pullicino (1815–1890)*

Can. Paolo Pullicino

In 1850, the post of *Chief Inspector of Primary Schools* was given to Canon Paolo Pullicino, who held the post until his retirement in 1880. The first thing he did was to visit schools in Ireland to acquaint himself with the English education system. On his return, he set at once to organize primary education. He asked village parish priests to use their sermons to persuade parents to send their children to school. He persuaded the government to increase teachers and to open a Model School at Valletta to train teachers. But as long as Pullicino remained in charge, the Italian language was given first preference over everything else. During his 30 years in office, he compiled six reports on primary education which still provide us with detailed information on what was taught and how schools were run at that time.

Patrick Keenan's Report on Education

In 1878, another Royal Commissioner, Patrick Keenan, came to investigate the education system and suggest further reforms. In his report which he handed to the Governor in 1879, he stated that teachers were still poorly paid and were not properly trained, notwithstanding the Model School. In most schools, there were no proper playgrounds for recreation. Most classrooms were small, crowded and badly ventilated. One reason for this was that the government preferred to rent houses instead of building new schools. Discipline was poorly kept, and pupils made a lot of noise. Reading books used were too difficult for most pupils to understand. The level of writing, reading and spelling was very poor. Many pupils repeated the same class or left school at an early age to work.

Keenan suggested the setting up of a government department for education headed by a Director of Education appointed by and directly responsible to the Governor. To encourage pupils to learn, he suggested giving prizes to the best pupils. Schools were to be administered by a committee of four persons with the parish priest as chairman. The teachers ought to receive better pay and better training. Parents ought to pay a small fee for sending their children to school for he held the opinion that *'what people get for nothing they esteemed to be of little or no value'*. However, children from the poorest families were to be admitted free of charge. His most controversial proposal was that the teaching of English ought to start before that of Italian. He even went further and suggested that Italian was to be taught after school hours.

LO6 j – An overview of the education system in Malta up to 1878

1. Why the colonial government do very little to improve education in Malta before 1836?

_____ (1)
2. What made the government review its previous policy on education after 1836?

_____ (2)
3. Mention **two** measures taken by Canon Pullicino to improve schooling in Malta.

_____ (2)
4. What major criticism did Keenan put forward about the way schools were run when Pullicino was in charge?

_____ (1)
5. Identify **three** factors which made learning in schools very poor in Malta in 1878.

_____ (3)
6. Mention **two** suggestions put forward by Keenan to improve schooling in Malta.

_____ (2)
7. (a) Which reform proposed by Keenan brought a mixed reaction among the Maltese (1)

(b) Why did it cause this reaction?

_____ (2)
8. Write **T (True)** or **F (False)** for these statements on education in 19th century Malta:

a	Governor Maitland appointed the first Director of Education in Malta.	
b	The Royal Commission of 1836 was in favour of compulsory education.	
c	The Model School was opened as a secondary school for boys.	
d	Keenan proposed more teaching of English and less teaching of Italian.	
e	Keenan's reforms caused the beginning of Maltese Language Question.	
f	Canon Pullicino favoured the teaching of English in primary schools.	

(6)

(Total: 20 marks)

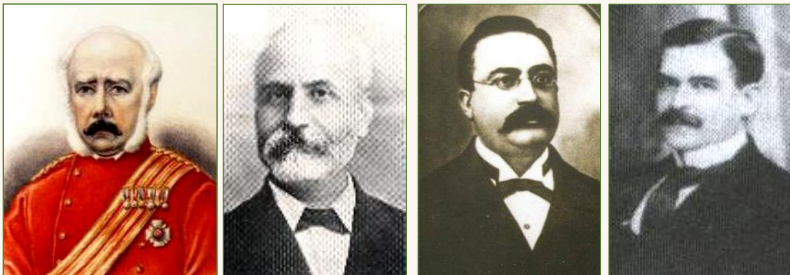
LO6 j (i) – The early phase of the Language Question, 1878–1921

The beginning of the Language Question

In 1878–1879 the Royal Commissioner Patrick Keenan conducted a report on Malta's education system. In the report, which he presented to Governor Borton, he proposed that English should be taught in primary schools and Italian should be studied as an optional subject after school. The report brought conflicting reactions among the Maltese: one faction agreed with the reforms while another faction opposed them outright. The pro-English faction became referred to as 'anglophiles' while the pro-Italian faction became known as 'italophiles'. In those days, knowledge of English was more commonly found among the civil service employees, the business community in the harbour towns and the dockyard workers, but rarely found in the villages and in Gozo. On the other hand, knowledge of Italian was most common among the professional and educated classes and the clergy.

The matter became a political issue in 1880 when Governor Borton started implementing some of Keenan's proposals. He created a new separate Department of Education and appointed Sigismondo Savona as Director of Education. Since Savona was the leader of the Reform Party, his appointment brought a storm of protests from the italophiles. To counteract this, the pro-Italian faction set up the Anti-Reform Party. In the general elections to the Council of Government held in 1884, seven out of eight members elected were Anti-Reformers.

As Director of Education, Sigismondo Savona sought to introduce the *pari-passu* system of teaching English and Italian simultaneously in primary and secondary schools. However, the Anti-Reformers interpreted it as the first measure towards the gradual removal of the Italian language. To ensure that this would not happen, the Anti-Reformist members in the Council of Government, who by now became known as Nationalists, refused to vote money for Savona's education reforms. These developments marked the beginning of a sixty-year-long language and political dispute known as the Maltese Language Question.



*From Left to Right:
Governor Sir Arthur Borton,
Sigismondo Savona,
Fortunato Mizzi, Gerald Strickland.*

Strickland's language reforms between 1898 and 1903

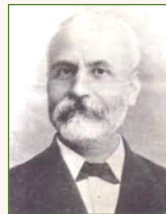
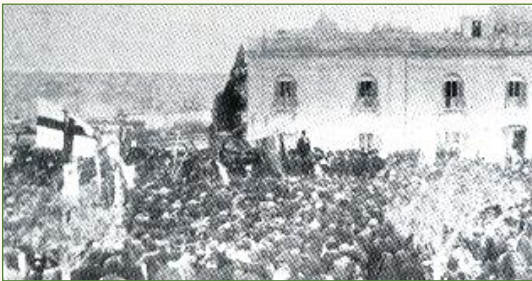
The Language Question flared up again in 1898 when Gerald Strickland (1869-1940), Chief Secretary to the Government started taking certain decisions intended to increase the importance of English and reduce that of Italian. He announced the replacement of *pari-passu* with 'free choice' (*libera scelta*) by which parents were to choose the language of instruction for their children between English and Italian. Moreover, Italian was to be replaced with English at the University and the Law Courts within fifteen years. The Government launched a propaganda campaign in favour of English, stressing how important it was for the lower classes to learn English for employment at the dockyard, with the British Services and when seeking to emigrate and settle in other English-speaking countries.

To oppose these measures, the pro-Italian faction organized public demonstrations and meetings in Floriana. They blamed Strickland for the crisis and demanded his removal as Chief Secretary. At this point, the British Government, which wanted to keep friendly relations with Italy, postponed the language reforms in the law courts. Joseph Chamberlain, the Secretary of State went to Rome for talks with the Italian Government. In 1902 King Edward VII put pressure on the British Government to cancel altogether the reforms in the law courts. Strickland was politely removed from Malta when he was appointed Governor of Leward Island in Australia. But the Nationalists who had controlled the Council of Government, continued to demand the withdrawal of all of Strickland's language reforms. The crisis reached a turning point in June 1903, the crisis reached a deadlock when the Nationalist elected members persisted in their refusal to vote money for education. This gave Chamberlain an excuse to suspend the Constitution of 1887.

LO6 k (i) – The first Maltese political parties, 1879–1914

The Reform Party

In 1879, Sigismondo Savona founded and led the Reform Party, Malta's first political party. The *Riformisti* as his supporters were called wanted to change the education system by introducing the teaching of English in the primary years and substituting Italian for English at the University, in the Council of Government and in Law Courts. They aimed at abolishing the bread tax, opening more primary schools and continuing the underground drainage system. These measures were intended to improve the living conditions of the working classes. This party was mostly supported by civil service employees, the dockyard workers and the business community.



Left: Sigismondo Savona (1835–1908), founder of the Reform Party. Right: Canon Ignazio Panzavecchia (1855–1925), founder of the *Partito Popolare*.

Left: The first Maltese political mass meeting held at Floriana Granaries by the Reform Party in 1879.

The Anti-Reform or *Partito Nazionale*

Fortunato Mizzi was a lawyer and the President of the Chamber of Advocates when he set up the *Partito Anti-Riformista* in 1880 to oppose the education and language reforms proposed by Keenan and Savona. Following the election of 1884, its name was changed to *Partito Nazionale* to reflect the fact that the party won 7 of the 8 seats in the Council of Government. Since then, its supporters instead of *Anti-Riformisti* were referred to as *Nationalisti* (i.e., *Nationalists*). The greater support for the party came from those who were in favour of the Italian language, from the greater part of the clergy, the landowners, the professional classes and the peasants. The Nationalists strongly opposed the language reforms intended to substitute Italian with English. They also wanted self-government in local matters. They opposed the abolition of the bread tax and the undertaking of expensive public works projects because these would make the colonial government increase or introduce new taxes.



Left: Popular Party meeting at Floriana Granaries in 1896 to oppose the Mixed Marriage Law of 1896. Right: Nationalist mass meeting at Blata l-Bajda in 1901 to oppose Strickland's language reforms.

The *Partito Popolare* (or Popular Party)

Monsignor Ignazio Panzavecchia was a Canon of the Cathedral Chapter and represented the clergy in the Council of Government when he set up the *Partito Popolare*. The main aim of this party was to oppose the Mixed Marriage Law proposed by the Colonial Government in 1895. The proposed law, which was opposed by the Church and by all Maltese political leaders was withdrawn by the Government in 1896. In common with the *Partito Nazionale*, the Popular Party stood for the Italian language, for Malta's Catholic culture and traditions and for a self-governing constitution.

In 1911, when both Mizzi and Savona were already dead, Panzavecchia set up the *Comitato Patriottico* to continue the Nationalist policy of abstentionism against the British Government. After the war, he set up a new party, the *Unione Politica Maltese* (U.P.M.) which came out as the largest party in the general elections of 1921. This party received its greater support from the clergy and the Maltese who were staunchly loyal to the Church, especially those in the villages. For this reason, the British authorities often referred to it as the 'clerical party'.

LO6 jk – The Language Question and the first political parties, 1879–1921

1. Which were the two official languages in Malta when the Language Question broke out in 1880?
_____ (2)
2. Mention two causes of the Language Question in Malta.

_____ (2)
3. How did the Language Question impact Maltese political life in the late 19th century? Comment on two examples.

_____ (4)
4. What was the main argument of the anglophiles in favour of the English language?

_____ (2)
5. What was the main argument of the italophiles in favour of the Italian language?

_____ (2)
6. Which early Maltese political party did these social groups tend to support?
- (a) the clergy: _____
- (b) civil servant employees: _____
- (c) dockyard workers: _____
- (d) the professional classes: _____
- (e) the business community: _____
- (f) the peasants in the villages: _____ (6)
7. Mention **two** ways in how the early Maltese political parties made their aims and ideas known by the public.

_____ (2)

(Total: 20 marks)

LO6 j (i) - The early phase of the Language Question, 1879–1903

Source Question

Carefully read the following sources and then answer all the questions on a separate piece of paper.

'...the worst public course...to resort to compulsory measures in a place like Malta, where the effects would be disastrous to the immediate personal interests of the professional classes... The attempt would be resisted by all lawful measures, and by all classes of the population, whose feelings would naturally go with their suffering countrymen...'

Source A. Sir Adrian Dingli, Crown Advocate, 1880.

'These measures have made it a political question, and worse than all, a religious question, and rendered it an object of suspicion and mistrust. The people feel in spite of all the promises of the Imperial Government, in spite of all the assurances of the Chief Secretary, the English language will be forced upon them and the Italian language abolished.'

Source B. Capt. Cooper Kirton, Anti-Reformist member in the Council of Government in 1884.

'England's favourable attitude towards English-speaking civil servants and traders now became more manifest. The Colonial Government...thus created an ally in the Maltese political arena versus the pro-Italian professionals. Many young businessmen and civil servants considered close political and cultural ties with Britain as the best guarantee for Malta's development into a modern society and for their own future.'

Source C. Adrianus Koster, Prelates and Politicians in Malta, 1984.



Source D. A 'Patria et Religio' meeting outside Floriana's Portes de Bombes in 1901. National Archives, Santo Spirito, Rabat

1. Which of Sources A, B and C is a secondary source and why?

_____ (2)

2. Briefly explain how the authors of Sources A, B and C assessed the Language Question?

Source A: _____ (2)

Source B: _____ (2)

Source C: _____
_____ (2)

3. Mention **one** major consequence of the Language Question according to:

(a) Source A: _____
_____ (1)

(b) Source A: _____
_____ (1)

(c) Source A: _____
_____ (1)

4. What does the photograph of Source D depict?
_____ (1)

5. Who organized this event?
_____ (1)

6. What was the main motive for holding such an event?
_____ (1)

7. Why was it held at Portes de Bombes outside Floriana?

_____ (1)

8. Identify **three** groups of people who may have attended this event.

_____ (3)

9. Briefly describe the outcome of the Language Question in 1902 and 1903?

_____ (3)

(Total: 20 marks)

LO6 j (ii) – The later phase of the Language Question, 1921–1940

The Language Question flares up again in the 1920s and 1930s

The 1921 Constitution which gave granted a responsible government declared English and Italian as Malta's official languages. Since Malta had a pro-Italian government between 1921 and 1927, no drastic changes were made in education, except that primary education was made compulsory in 1924 and the government started building primary schools in the larger towns and villages.

Things flared up again when there was a change of government in 1927 with the pro-English Gerald Strickland becoming Prime Minister. Strickland's pro-English language policy was supported by the Labour Party. The government started giving more importance to English and Maltese. The Italian version was removed from post-office notices, government notices, lotto offices and street names were changed to English. English become more important than Italian for those seeking promotion in the civil service or for employment at the dockyard. The prospect of emigration to English-speaking countries encouraged the working classes to learn English rather than Italian. The working classes had no choice but to accept English as their second language after Maltese.



Left: Strickland addressing a political rally during the election campaign of 1932.

Centre: Sir Gerald Strickland, Malta's foremost pro-British Prime Minister between 1927 – 1932.

Right: Enrico Mizzi and Ugo Mifsud who led the pro-Italian Nationalist Government in 1932–1933.

When the Nationalist Party won the general elections of 1932, it immediately tried to put the clock backwards by reintroducing Italian as a compulsory subject in primary schools. But this time, due to Mussolini's expansionist policy in the Mediterranean and Africa, the colonial government became very much concerned with the increase of Italian fascist propaganda in Malta. The Italian Government with the support of the Ministry of Education opened an *Istituto di Cultura* to lend Italian books and arranged for famous Italian scholars to visit and hold public talks on Italian history and culture in Malta. When in November 1933, the Nationalist administration voted money to re-introduce the teaching of Italian in primary schools, the Governor immediately suspended the 1921 Constitution. Recent evidence however show that the real motive was the fear that Italian fascists were using language issue in Malta to promote the unification of Malta with Italy.

Decline in the influence of the Italian language in the 1920s and the 1930s

During the midst of the dispute between pro-English and pro-Italian factions, the Maltese language was the one that gained the most. One of the aims of the Labour Party set up in 1921 was to promote the use of the Maltese language since this was the language mostly used by the working classes. In 1920, a group of Maltese writers set up the *Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti* with the aim to standardize the Maltese alphabet as a first step towards having Maltese declared as an official language. The *Moviment Malti Safi* wanted to remove Italian loan words from the Maltese language and substitute them with older Semitic ones. In 1923, Dun Karm's *Innu Malti* was sung in public at the Manoel Theatre for the first time. However, it was in 1941 that the British Government declared it as Malta's national anthem. In 1929, the government permitted for the first time, the use of Maltese in the law courts.

From 1933 onwards the British Government, which now came under the direct control of the Governor, took decisive steps to eliminate the remaining influence of Italian in Malta. In 1934 English and Maltese were declared the official languages of the administration and the law courts. Knowledge of English and Maltese became compulsory for employment in the civil service. In 1935, the government opened a private cable radio station known as *Rediffusion* to diffuse BBC programmes in English among the people.



From 1936 onwards relations between Britain and Italy moved closer to war. By the outbreak of war in 1939 the Governor had closed the *Istitutio Italiano di Cultura*, set up the British Council, banned the importation of Italian newspapers and magazines, stopped printing the Italian version of the Government Gazette and abolished Italian as an official language in Malta.



Maltese Alphabet issued by the "Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti"

Latin Type	Sound	Examples	Latin Type	Sound	Examples
1. A a	a (alf)	Alda, sār	15. L, l	Ellel(h)	Lejla
2. B, b	Be (Ba)	Bajt, beħ	16. M, m	Emme(M)	Majda
3. Ċ, ċ	Ċe (Ċin)	Ċajta, ċomf	17. N, n	Emme(Nun)	Nifris
4. D, d	De (Dej, d)	Dakar, dān (dew, djan)	18. O, o	O (ub/vis)	Moro
5. E, e	Effe (E)	Effe, xēn	19. P, p	Pe	Pietra
6. F, f	Ffe (Fa)	Filfa	20. Q, q	Qa (Qaf)	Qadim
7. Ġ, ġ	Ġe (Ġin)	Ġallewz	21. R, r	Ra (Ra)	Riż
8. G, g	Għe (Għin)	għaddeh għaddeffa	22. S, s	Sa (Sa)	Silg
9. H, h	Hē (Ha)	Hajja, hafa	23. T, t	Ta (Ta, Ta)	Tak
10. I, i	Ite (Ia)	Iħaj, iħaj	24. U, u	Wa and Ua	Safra
11. J, j	Jē (Ja)	Jajja, jaja	25. V, v	Ve	Vannin
12. K, k	Ka (Kaf)	Kajja, kaja	26. W, w	Wa (Waw)	Wattin
			27. X, x	Xax (Xin)	Xajja
			28. Z, z	Za (Zaf)	Zajja
			29. 3, 3	Zeta (Zoj)	Zajja



Further above: Enrico Mizzi addressing a Nationalist Party meeting in 1932.
 Left: The first Committee of the Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti in 1920.
 Right: The official Maltese alphabet issued by the Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti.
 The original lyrics of the Maltese National Anthem, 1923

The end of the Language Question

On 10th June 1940 Italy declared war on Britain and the following day Italian aircraft bombed Malta for the first time. This event marked the sudden and unexpected end of the Language Question which had dominated Maltese education and politics for almost three generations. Another decisive act took place in 1942 when 43 pro-Italian Maltese were interned (exiled) to Uganda until the duration of the war. During the war, showing support for the Italian language in Malta was seen by many as an act of treason. Among the internees, there were three prominent Nationalist Party leaders: Enrico Mizzi, Herbert Ganado and Arturo Mercieca. After the war, the Italian language in Malta never recovered its influential position which it had enjoyed for many centuries before.



Three prominent Nationalist Party leaders interned in Uganda during the Second World War. From left to right: Enrico Mizzi, PN leader, Magistrate Sir Arturo Mercieca, Herbert Ganado, author of 'Rajt Malta Tinbidel'.

LO6 j (ii) - The later phase of the Language Question, 1821–1940

1. Which language do you think the greater part of these Maltese social groups supported during the Language Question? In column D provide a reason for your answer.

	Maltese social group	Italian	English	Reason
(a)	The professional classes			
(b)	The dockyard workers			
(c)	The civil servants			
(d)	The clergy			
(e)	The country folk			

(10)

3. Why did Gerald Strickland's language policy in 1898–1901 intensify the Language Question?

(2)

4. (a) What was the language policy of the Nationalist Government of 1932–1933?

(1)

- (b) How did the Colonial Government stop this Nationalists language policy?

(1)

5. Mention **three** measures by which the Colonial Government restricted the use of Italian in Malta.

(2)

7. How did the Maltese language benefit from the Language Question?

(2)

8. What effect did the Second World War have on the Italian language and influence in Malta?

(2)

(Total: 20 marks)

LO6 j (ii) - The later phase of the Language Question, 1921–1940

Source Question

Carefully read the following sources and then answer all the questions on a separate piece of paper.

Malta Census	Maltese population	Knowledge of Italian	% of Maltese population	Knowledge of English	% of Maltese population
1842	114,499	12,839	11.0%	5,245	4.5%
1851	123,496	14,061	11.0%	6,861	5.4%
1862	134,055	15,806	11.8%	8,675	6.5%
1871	141,775	15,591	11.0%	9,690	6.8%
1891	165,037	18,052	11.0%	13,604	8.2%
1901	184,742	21,927	11.3%	18,922	10.2%
1911	211,564	24,247	11.5%	28,811	13.6%
1921	212,258	25,329	12.0%	36,774	17.3%
1931	241,621	32,416	13.4%	54,700	22.6%

Source A. Various Malta Census figures between 1842 and 1931

'The Language Question remains the main cause of division...The upper classes can perhaps afford to waste time and energy over idle questions of this sort, but with the lower classes generally, and with the workers in particular, the Language Question is one of bread and butter. Even the present Government realises that English, and English alone, is necessary for the working classes which constitute the backbone of the nation.'

Source B. *The Daily Malta Chronicle*
4th January 1922.

OLD NAME — ISEM QADIM	NEW NAME — ISEM GDID	
	English — Bi-Ingliż	Maltese — Bil-Malti
Siggiewi — Is-Siggiewi		
Piazza San Nicolò	St. Nicholas' Square	Misrah San Nikola
Vicolo Kajid	Qajjed Lane	Sqaj Qajjed
Strada Sda. Ramia Via Ta Bria...	Ta' Bria Road	Trieg ta' Brija
Via Notabile	Notabile Road	Trieg l-Imdina
Strada Santa Margherita	St. Margaret's Street	Trieg Santa Margerita
Strada Stretta	Strait Street	Trieg id-Dejqa

Source C. *The Malta Government Gazette* of 1st May 1937.

1. What can you deduce from the Table of Source A with regards to the knowledge of Italian and English in Malta between 1842 and 1931?

(4)

2. How do you think the anglophiles would have interpreted the figures in the table with regarding the Language Question in the 1930s.

(2)

3. Name **two** groups that constituted the 'upper classes' mentioned in Source B.

(2)

4. Which language did these upper classes favour and why?

(3)

5. Explain why Source B states that for the working classes, the Language Question is a matter of bread and butter?

(3)

6. (a) What was the main function of the newspaper shown in source B.

(2)

(b) What information did the newspaper issue of 1st May 1937 seek to convey to the public?

(2)

(c) Briefly explain why the colonial government took this measure.

(2)

(Total: 20 marks)

LO6 jk

Education reforms, the Language Question, the early political parties, 1878–1940

Carefully read these essay titles and then choose one to answer.

PAPER Level 2-3

1. (a) Describe the most important points in Keenan's Report. (8)
(b) Why was Malta's educational and political development affected by this Report? (12)
2. (a) Explain the cause and one consequence of the Language Question in up to 1903. (8)
(b) Discuss arguments used by the opposing factions during the Language Question between 1879 and 1921. (12)
3. (a) Describe the aims of the anglophiles during the Language Question. (8)
(b) Why was a section of Maltese politicians so obsessed with defending and promoting Italian language and culture in Malta? (12)
4. (a) Describe the aims of the early Maltese political parties of the 1880s and the 1890s. (2)
(b) Compare and contrast the involvement in Maltese politics of Fortunato Mizzi, Sigismondo Savona, Gerald Strickland 1879 and 1903. (12)

PAPER Level 1-2

2. (a) Identify four facts about the Language Question between 1879 and 1903. (8)
(b) Explain two causes and two consequences of the Language Question up to 1903. (12)
3. (a) Identify four facts about the first two Maltese political parties that existed in the 1880s. (8)
(a) Describe the main features and aims of these same two political parties. (12)

