

A personal view of transitions and fresh horizons from a Maltese language school

David Sweet with John Sweet



Editor's note

This article is essentially the transcript of a conversation between David, who lives and works in Malta, and his father John, who was visiting from pandemic-ridden Wales. John acted as interviewer and recorder, and the subsequent text was augmented by further correspondence on his return home.

David (right) and John reflecting together over coffee and cake at Mdina

Key words

Fresh horizons perspectives, language school, Malta, critical friendship, pandemic, diversification

CONTEXT AND LOCATION



Malta as the centre of the World: Maps of the World. [Wikimedia Commons](#)

David's Introduction to the Maltese Islands

The Maltese Islands, a melting pot of European and North African culture, with their Phoenician and Neolithic historical background, are undoubtedly some of the most intriguing hidden gems of the Mediterranean. A strategic location during WWII, Malta also has a lot to offer modern history buffs. With the weather being hot in the summer, and mild for the rest of the year with very little rain, the islands attract tourists from every corner of the world. Its progressive policies on LGBTQ+ rights, its EU membership, as well as its adoption of the Euro as currency, have also bolstered the tourism industry significantly, whilst also attracting many expats such as myself to relocate here.

As an English-speaking country within the EU, the English language industry has flourished over the years, attracting students from many different parts of the world to either come on a study-holiday, or live for a more extended period of time to pick up the language through a combination of tuition, socialising, and working here. However, that was before the COVID-19 pandemic decimated the tourism sector...



Malta: A view across the water to Valetta, the Capital. Photo: John Sweet

John

As co-editor of this edition, I thought I could step beyond the criticism of nepotism, getting my son David to write an article for this Journal. This is because there is a genuine relevant interest here due to his line of business, directing teaching of English to foreign students even in the times of a pandemic, and doing this from the island of Malta presents alignments and focal contrasts with the situation in the UK. Also there is the challenge of working in critical friendship between father and son over a piece of writing - and more.

Perhaps, the Invitation to Contribute was not sufficiently clear to get David writing on his own about his situation in terms of moving from stable normality through the pandemic towards new horizons, so when I visited him in Malta for a week in late October, he agreed to an interview. We would then edit together forming this article. Given the various lockdowns and travel restrictions, this was our first meet-up since February 2020, when David managed to spend some time with his Mum who was in hospital in the UK, bravely holding on to life, but eventually dying of cancer when she came home for a final couple of weeks in March. So it was good that we enjoyed some bright hot late summer sun together and got working on the interview. David also used his skills to help me develop the language in a new system of Life Journal writing, inspired by the work of Ira Progoff, that I hope to publish shortly (intimated first in Sweet, 2010). I was impressed how he was able to intuit the next stages in “my” Journal. In our discussions we continually reached those rare points of resonance where we could feel comfortable as co-authors - a strong spirit of critical friendship. This was new and exciting.



Malta: Language School administration, classrooms below and living accommodation above. Photo: John Sweet

David

Without being a particularly prolific writer, I was happier agreeing to an interview than facing the prospect of writing up this article on my own. John has a lot of ideas around new horizons, which piqued my interest, and consequently I felt drawn into this paradigm. Since the moment that John had asked me to look through his thesis by portfolio for his PhD, we've been exchanging ideas and have formed a strong critical friendship over the years, despite this being the first time we've worked on a joint paper together. Due to my role as the director of studies of a language school in Malta, I have grown accustomed to being interviewed by marketing and PR companies, as well as by associate institutions and journalists in the field of study travel. My approach to interviews tends to be quite experiential, so I was glad to have had the opportunity to share my experiences about the challenges faced and solutions found regarding what has possibly been the most extraordinary year that most people working in my industry – English language teaching - have had to confront in their entire careers.



Malta: Language School main administration building and large swimming pool facility. Photo: John Sweet

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING INDUSTRY

John

We held the interview over lunch on David's 'day-off' from work at his Language School. The school's restaurant itself was inviting and very modern with a bistro style menu and excellent fresh coffee and looking out towards the large swimming pool area. This was lined with various exotic palms and figs, taking full advantage of a huge courtyard - probably an ex parade ground in the centre of the gorgeous historic former British colonial barracks buildings that make up one part of the School's administration, teaching and accommodation facilities.

Over the noise of lunchtime music, voices and clattering crockery, I asked David what he made of 'fresh horizons' in terms of what he had been doing within his language teaching responsibilities.



Malta: David Sweet outside his Language School main entrance in Pembroke: photo: John Sweet

David

Well fresh horizons come and go every day - life is so much in flux so it is very difficult to identify milestones and new horizons when there is so much change! There are so many new developments in the world and each new development affects the way you do things. There are more than just set new horizons as big events. There are microcosms and macrocosms. There are overriding scenarios that are going on in the background and are changing all the time. Then there are things happening in the foreground as well which are changing more rapidly perhaps.

John

So would you like to enumerate what they might be? What are these things?

David

Background changes centre around the global pandemic that has affected our business. All travel restrictions have reduced the number of students, because there is no confidence in travel. The necessity to learn the English language during a global pandemic - there's less necessity or at least a propensity to learn more on online - as education is moving online rapidly. This has left the language holiday industry a bit broken. This is all happening in the background. Then you have long-term students stuck in Malta, and long-term students still coming from Japan and South America. A long-term student would be attending three months to a year, staying in Malta to learn English for a full immersion type program. Shorter term students might be more like European or Russian students coming for a few weeks on a vocational break from work or being sponsored by their work, or perhaps just a holiday. It could be a family holiday as well.

John

So how many of these long-term students have you got now?

David

Well now we probably have more long-term students than short-term because travel confidence has gone down so much. Usually, we have about 75% short-term students and 25% long-term. Because Malta is quite a safe country compared to other countries, some students like to get away for a longer period. If they're going to travel at all, they might as well stay longer to make it worth their while. So this is the background. In the foreground there are actual students, our staff, and what's actually going on in their lives and a global pandemic that we are experiencing – challenging everyone personally and professionally. Those who don't adapt will sink, and those who adapt will swim – it is that situation essentially. No matter how old you are or how much work experience you have, it is more about your attitude of adaptability.

ADAPTING AND IMPROVISING

John

Can you give some examples of that? Of how your language school stayed afloat? What would you say are some of the secrets of your success?

David

Well I wouldn't call it success and I wouldn't say it's all basically down to me. Our business has the luxury of having a unique set of premises in which we are able to diversify to continue operating at low-power. We were able to open up our premises to the general public, making it into a lido! Charging €10 as a day fee. Our bar restaurant manager has a background in marketing, and he was combining his expertise with my boss the managing director's ideas to bring in new customers.

John

How about you with your side of things? How do you find how you managed to succeed in keeping going?

John

Had you an online presence within the school before all this happened? Or was this all new

John

Quite different from getting them to sit in a language lab somewhere – not your scene. So that was quite a change? So what came down to you? Who managed to make this dramatic move

John

So how long did that take?

John

Blimey

John

So what did that entail then? Who are you catering for – long-term short-term or what?

John

Who were you aiming it for?

David

We switched to online lessons. Actually, the government shut down our school for in-person teaching.

David

No, our ethos was to get people off their screens, in this modern world where people are on their screens all the time. Get them off their screens and get them talking in the café after the lessons, and making friends and practising their English outside of class. All this instead of getting them online more.

David

Well, it was a team effort. I organised a training session, and I helped the IT team with whatever was needed to get the new system running.

David

Two weeks.

David

To get everything set up.

David

A totally new market, for online learning. It was a totally different product. You can't expect a student to come on holiday to Malta for this.

David

Whoever would buy it.

John

Throughout the world! So has your demographic changed?

David

Yes, junior students, teenagers – which fitted the nature and duration of the courses.

John

Were you actively copying somebody else to do this? Or did you think this through yourselves?

David

No we never copied anyone. Most people were using Zoom as a platform at the time, but we decided to go with WebEx. We found it a much more stable platform which we were able to integrate with our own system to maintain the branding. We managed to make some money out of this. Enough to keep us ticking over.

We, as a company, have centres all around the world with different languages. So our centres in Spain were teaching Spanish and our English centres in Canada - Vancouver and Toronto - the UK, Frankfurt, and Munich were all helping out. So it was an online language teaching operation worldwide and across time zones. This was important to reach the international market remotely.

John

So what happened when things got easier? When you could get people back in again? How long was it that you were off?

David

Mid-March to the beginning of July. During the intervening period we were working online only.

John

So it wasn't so successful that you gave up your physical presence?

David

No, that's not what we are about. Especially considering that the educational market online became saturated with online courses. We did quite well at the beginning and then others came along with something cheaper. The prices went down, so we were unable to compete.

John

Well how about coming back. How slowly did that happen?

David

Well we only found out a week before that we knew that we could re-open.

John

So is it possible to open so quickly? Or did you have your own delay on top?

David

No everything was set up – we opened up – with new health protocols of course – to keep everyone safe.

John

Very complicated

John

So how did you get back in terms of numbers compared with what you would do normally?

John

And that was enough to keep things ticking over? Is that because you do not employ teachers on a full-time basis with long-term contracts? So you can adjust your teaching to cover the demand?

WINNERS AND LOSERS

John

So are you out of the woods yet? What do you foresee for the future then?

David

Well as I said, you know things change day by day – there's no way of knowing. There is no 'out of the woods'. Life is a big wood. Some people haven't survived. Either they didn't go online fast enough or they didn't reassure their customers that they will be safe enough for a course. The schools that survived are the ones that have their own properties in Malta, whereas the ones who are renting or who relied on one source of income - i.e. tuition only - are the ones that failed. Those who didn't have to pay rent and who had other services such as accommodation, such as leisure activities, or like us, with a pool that can be diversified – making money in other ways – having a restaurant and a bar. These other services were crucial in helping us survive. And of course, government support, because without government support, we would not have survived.

John

So there was a kind of furlough system?

David

In Malta we have a wage supplement system which isn't exactly fair on the teachers when you look at the type of contractual arrangement as opposed to the number of hours they teach, which isn't really fair on the teachers at all. So teachers got a really bad deal, before tax and social security they're getting paid €500 a month from the government, which is not enough to survive on. They're feeling a bit disgruntled. We are not out of the woods yet.

David

Very difficult – students coming from all different parts of the world.

David

We had about 1/4 of the usual intake; mostly short-term students.

David

That's right. In this case it was more that we had to hire a couple of teachers recently because our teaching got obliterated – people dropping out – people going back to their own country. This ended up with about 1/3 of the core number of teachers we usually had.

REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

John

Is there anything you have in mind that you still have to do – further diversification. Was there a limit to that?

David

It's not up to me. I remain in charge of the school. I can't decide the company's direction. Even the local company can't decide which way the international one is going to go.

John

So you are still here and working? What are your reflections on that? What do you think you could have done differently? Would you think that things worked out pretty optimally?

David

Well we've learnt a lot, but I think we adapted as quickly as we could have, to what arose in the foreground. We had marketing promotions – new signs, new ideas. Yes there were times when it was very difficult to find enough staff out of the smaller cluster. In order to better understand the background, I tend to be more invested in the teachers' lives, like I know exactly what personal problems they have and what they are going through. I guess that makes me more sensitive towards them. This helps me gauge the wider background issues which could affect staffing.

John

So how do you cope when you've got a large shortage of staff?

David

At one point I had to teach half the school. I took them all on a history tour of the area and then I gave them a lesson around the swimming pool – in order to keep social distancing – and avoid not giving them something to do. It was challenging enough.

John

Did they enjoy that?

David

Yes it was a novelty. They couldn't do that every day. It was a one-off.

John

What are the things you have done like that though, where you had to stretch yourself?

David

We did have a Covid positive case at the school, so we had to isolate all the classmates and all the teachers – get everyone tested – very stressful. Yes that was a big challenge. Everyone else tested negative, including myself. Maybe the virus had not spread and wasn't as contagious as everyone else made it out to be, or perhaps we kept all our distancing right and did all the right things.

We were good with our health protocols, and there was a class of eight people, and only one student and one teacher got sick; everyone else was fine. Everyone else in the school, even people who were kissing positive students, they all tested negative!

John

I think you're a bit lucky in some ways. So anything else – particularly stressful things – like resources that were difficult to come by?

David

Well money was difficult to come by: investing in new books – these are things we can't afford to invest in – diverting all our resources into running on low power, doing the best with what we've got, surviving on that instead of shutting down. Not making a loss is the main thing. Drawing on what we have, and coming up with new ideas has really been the key achievement, rallying well as a team and having the right attitude.

ENVOI: FRESH HORIZONS

David

After reading through this interview, I feel like we touched on the major points regarding change management and making the most of fresh horizons from my own context at this moment in time. I believe that if we fast forward a few years from now, my perspectives will most likely change, and my foreground/background dichotomy will either simplify and amalgamate within a larger global awareness, or it could expand and be elaborated on if the 'woods' of life take me in a more analytical direction.

John

To me it has been a joy from start to finish to interview David in Malta and gain some insight into his world of pandemic, resilience and fortitude. It has been worthwhile to facilitate him in sharing his perspectives to a wider audience through preparing this article. It has set the scene for more writing collaboration between us in the future, and sealed the process of critical friendship between father and son.

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About the contributors

John is an educationalist particularly interested in personal development, reflection and journaling. He lives on a hillside in Wales with a good number of beehives and fruit trees and with his mother of nearly 93. He has two sons, James, a programmer, living in Cardiff and David, a language school director of studies, in Malta.

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