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ANTONELLA BENUCCI, VIOLA MONACI

Which training for teachers of Italian as Second Language to beneficiaries of international protection: criticalities and excellencies¹

Abstract

Many beneficiaries of international protection do not manage, after training courses, to reach levels of linguistic autonomy to integrate in the host community and to undertake work activities.

This paper presents the results of a survey devoted to verify the effectiveness of the training offered in Italian as Second Language courses. From the data, the need for specific training for teachers emerges, on the management of intercultural, multilevel and multilingual reflection in order to deal with the communicative needs of the beneficiaries, which are substantially different from those of other groups of learners. It also emerges that about half of the beneficiaries would like to receive more effective training on Italian Language for specific purposes.

Keywords

Migration; Refugees; Italian as Second/Foreign Language; Language Teaching; Resettled

1. Introduction

The approach to migration issues is generally similar everywhere, despite the differences existing in various geographical areas.

European countries, while adopting different approaches to Adult Education implemented according to their language and reception policies, align with a common line of action that is less concerned with literacy courses and more configured as an action aimed at the integration into the host society and also at professional (re)qualification (see World Development Report 2023; Dražanová and others 2020). In non-European traditional immigration countries (see Sinisi 2021; Dennison and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022; Dennison and Gedds 2021), however, resettlement does not mean controlled admission:

¹ This paper is the joint work of the two authors: Antonella Benucci is credited with paragraphs 1, 3 and 5 and Viola Monaci with paragraphs 2 and 4.

These countries determine the number and categories of immigrants that can be admitted each year. The categories are similar in the four countries: immigrants admitted for family reasons [...]; immigrants admitted for employment reasons [...]; and immigrants admitted for humanitarian reasons [...] (Battistella 2020: 5).

The United States has a long history of accepting refugees and is historically one of the countries with the highest number of resettled people in the world (see Pew Research Center data for 2020; Lorentzen 2014). This has not prevented the rise of nationalist and populist right-wing parties characterised by xenophobia even though two-thirds of Americans think that immigrants strengthen the country. In the U.S. and also in Europe (and Italy) there are 'nationalist' reactions against migratory flows: with some claiming migrants take jobs, occupy too many houses, exploit public health and contaminate national languages.

Since the 1980s, the United States has given preference to individuals with educational qualifications who intend to further their studies in the country or engage in entrepreneurial, professional, or highly skilled work activities.

In the United States – at least until 2024 –, the principle of *jus soli* applies, meaning citizenship is automatically granted to the children of immigrants, including undocumented ones, born in the United States. This differs from what happens in most of Europe, including Italy.

However, the executive order signed by President Donald Trump on January 27th, 2017, limited refugee arrivals to a maximum quota of 50,000 people per year and suspended admissions under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP).

The risk of poverty and social exclusion for non-EU immigrants is high and with a significant impact on local communities where, moreover, public opinion is split in two: those supporting immigrants' rights and those, on the contrary, accusing them of being a burden on welfare and of infiltrating criminal groups.

Not every country has a permanent policy on migration. European countries and Italy offer various and different courses delivered in both formal and informal contexts, in presence or online to recipients who generally possess low levels of education and low competence in the Second Language, however there is not a common interpretation of the promotion of plurilingualism and multiculturalism and the same sensitivity in taking on the problems of different types of adult audiences.

The current migratory flows are therefore posing challenges to European countries (Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, France, in particular), both for their economic attractiveness (Germany) and for their geographical location (Italy), as well as provoking social and cultural changes that often catch governments and organisations in charge of welcoming and organising projects aimed at the integration of immigrants unprepared.

Intercultural dialogue cannot take place without (inter)linguistic and intercultural skills, which are indispensable for a better coexistence between host societies and immigrants and which must be acquired with the help of professional figures such as those in the educational sector. Furthermore, without taking in consideration the immigrants linguistic backgrounds, there is the risk of a short sightedness

about the interaction process between immigrants and welcoming societies and there is the risk not to develop an intercultural and multilinguistic awareness (a key competence according to OCSE) that allows individuals to act in “intercultural communicative events” (see Balboni 1999, Balboni and Caon 2015). Therefore, interventions are also needed among host populations who may have different and conflicting beliefs and opinions on migration and its impact on society:

These public attitudes can create or constrain the space needed for sensible and creative policy responses, as well as community cohesion. As a result, governments, international organizations, and advocates have invested in myriad programs and campaigns to bolster solidarity and defuse negative reactions to forced migrants. Yet, as this study discusses, changing people’s minds is far from straightforward (Banulescu-Bogdan 2022: 5).

2. Research objectives and the “Fra Noi2” project

The survey was conducted within the “Fra noi2” project (project aimed at holders of international protection). As a matter of fact, many holders of international protection do not manage, after the training courses, to reach levels of linguistic autonomy for integration in the host community and for undertaking work activities (see Benucci and others 2021a; 2021b). This paper presents the results of a research aimed at verifying the effectiveness of the training offered in Italian L2 courses in order to suggest possible improvements not only for a first introduction to Italian society and for a basic threshold of autonomy, but also to overcome evident difficulties in the field of job placement.

The *Comunitas Consortium* was established in 2009 with the aim of creating a flexible but permanent form of cooperation among its members. It brings together local institutions throughout Italy to develop, coordinate and implement initiatives aimed at the study and development of knowledge of migratory flows and at assistance in the path of stay and integration of immigrants, specifically applicants and holders of international protection.

The *Fra Noi2*² Project is a project for the integration of people with international protection (political asylum or subsidiary protection) into local communities; it brings together a set of strategies, opportunities and tools to support people in their pathways to autonomy and the reconstruction of their planning and decision-making capabilities.

It was created because the welfare system has not yet proved to be capable of offering immigrants opportunities for inclusion once the reception periods in the various systems (Siproimi now SAI, Cas etc.) have ended.

² “Fra Noi2” (supported by FAMI) started in 2020. It involves more than 40 associations devoted to welcoming services, such as SPRAR, local institutions, and associations/cooperatives in the not for profit sector.

The research, quali-quantitativa, had the objective of detecting the correspondence between the approaches and the methodologies used by the teachers delivering Italian as Second Language courses and the needs of the beneficiaries.

The survey was carried out through questionnaires administered in approximately 20 institutions including consortia, cooperatives and foundations that are part of the network of contacts provided by the *Communitas Consortium*. *Communitas* indicated the realities in which the survey instruments were to be administered on the basis of the criticalities found at the end of the training provision; the questionnaires were proposed to a sample of respondents (both teachers/mediators and beneficiaries) in order to standardise them.

A total of 198 questionnaires were administered and collected, of which 171 were filled in by the beneficiaries and 27 by teachers/mediators, all of whom were Italian nationals.

The administration of the questionnaire to the beneficiaries was carried out by the teacher/mediator both in presence and online, via the Google Meet platform, recording all answers on a Google Form questionnaire. The analysis of the data was completed via Excel with the contribution of Dott. Luca Bottone.

3. Teachers and beneficiaries' questionnaires: results

The interviews were conducted with the collaboration of the *Communitas Consortium*, which provided support for preliminary contacts in: Lombardy, Piedmont, Liguria, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Marche, Lazio, Campania, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily.

There were two questionnaires, with both closed and open questions: one aimed at teachers and mediators, consisting of 30 items concerning personal data, professional training, methodological approaches, teaching materials used and needs; the other aimed at beneficiaries, consisting of 23 items concerning personal data, relationship with Italy and Italians, study needs and requirements, objectives and satisfaction with the courses attended.

85% of the teachers were female, 35-44 years old, and stated that they mostly knew English and a small percentage Arabic (only 4%), they had previous experience in teaching Italian, mainly in cooperatives and associations or in FAMI projects, etc.; only 11% stated they had had experience as mediators.

The interviewees work mainly with beneficiaries with A1 and A0 level of Italian, 67% of them use a "bridge" language during lessons (English, French 21%, Arabic 10%).

The majority used teaching materials including: material found in Internet (32%), unpublished material (31% vocabulary and grammar exercises), published material (24%) or material provided by the organisation (13%).

Teachers stated that they have little time to create materials, so they consider it necessary to receive more 'visual material' both for illiterate learners as well as for other levels.

Cultural reflection is not high on the list of activities carried out regularly (in contrast to conversation activities, educational games and role play).

The criticalities highlighted are mainly discontinuity of attendance but also gaps in basic education, difference of levels in the same class-group, lack of study habits; 77% would find useful to provide courses of Italian for specific purposes.

59% of the teachers interviewed taught during the pandemic and used mainly audio-visual material, but found disinterest, inattention, lack of motivation (29%), and difficulties in using devices (25%).

As far as the beneficiaries interviewed, they are all male, mostly between 25-34 years old, but also between 17-20; the most common nationalities are Afghan (14%), Benghazi (11%), Ukrainian and Pakistani (9%).

25% per cent have no educational qualification and few have a secondary school diploma or a lower secondary school certificate.

81% intend to stay in Italy even though few of them have relatives in the country. 78% have learnt Italian in courses (mostly language courses): in 57% of the cases, the previous learning of Italian took place in the course and in the CIPIAs; the most present levels are A1 and A2. Almost all interviewed possess self-awareness with respect to their knowledge of the Italian language, since well over half of them declare to know Italian: a language they appreciate and of which they had no previous knowledge (26.2%), except for football related language (24.4%).

20.3% feel discriminated in the street, in public transport, at school, at work, at the market, at the hospital and when looking for a house; 38% would like to be able to communicate effectively, 34% would like to find a job and have as their primary goals those of obtaining a language certificate (26%) and a driving licence (25%).

They consider learning Italian for specific purposes to be useful in 62% of cases.

About half of the beneficiaries attended courses during the pandemic and experienced problems with connection, comprehension and concentration (data confirmed by the teachers' answers as well).

Only 38.7 % felt that the teaching methodology met their training needs, 62 % would like more training in Italian for special purposes.

This suggests a lack of adequacy of the materials and methodology used given the type and needs of the learners.

4. Training issues and perspectives

The data collected evidence of the need for specific training of teachers to deal with the communicative problems of the beneficiaries (see Benucci and others 2021a, 2021b; Benucci and Grosso and Monaci 2021; Benucci and Grosso 2021), which are of a substantially different nature from those of other groups of learners: as a matter of fact, most of the teachers interviewed state that they need to be trained to manage intercultural, multilevel, multilingual reflections addressed to people who are often not used to studying.

In courses devoted to seekers/holders of international protection, the necessity to improve the material used, the methodology and the theoretical-practical approach also in accordance with the most recent European research emerges (Dryden-Peterson 2015, Shapiro and Farrelly and Curry 2018), in order to set up an adequate training both of the teachers and of the beneficiaries.

From the data of this survey, it emerges that literacy courses need to be flanked by language and cultural training interventions for specific areas and professional contexts, given that the low qualification of EU mobile workers (cf. Wadsworth 2010) is caused not only by the difficulty of recognising and formally verifying qualifications and acquired skills, but also and above all by the lack of adequate skills profiles for professions that require good L2 knowledge.

L2 proficiency is, however, only obtained when the host country provides a high-quality offer of training and language teaching services: quality in the design of linguistic educational tools such as syllabi, curricula and teaching materials, but also theoretical-practical ones such as specific training courses for teachers, company tutors, etc.

An Open University study (Gillespie and others 2016) acknowledged the importance of technology and the use of social media in migrants' journeys, stating that modern technological resources can at least partially make up for the lack of information that pushes people to rely on illegal and dangerous solutions: their conscious use can in fact significantly improve the stages of inclusion. The pervasiveness of the Internet in societies, the number of smartphone owners, the massive use of instant messaging applications must also have a role in education. Nevertheless, the data of the present survey show that at least as for the usage of these tools, there is little satisfaction and little positive outcomes, as stated in the questions related to courses delivered online during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Dealing with the complexity of relationships and meanings of concepts such as contact and cultural identity, multilingualism and language insecurity, education and lifelong learning, makes it possible to highlight the essential role that motivation plays in the general learning process and specifically in the second language acquisition process. The analyses of the questionnaires administered in the survey evidences that internal motivation is low.

Motivation is centred on emotional, metacognitive, personality, lifestyle and systemic-relational meaning attribution aspects but it takes concrete form in relation to the types of audience, their profiles and the psychosocial constructs of attitudes and learning spaces. A correct training offer must aim at developing stable motivation, the desire to invest in the future and self-determination, at producing attitudes of self-reflection and self-promotion so that the learner becomes capable of perceiving his/her own competence in tackling certain tasks, in judging the possessed skills and in evaluating his/her own ability to succeed: these are fundamental aspects also in the sphere of work. It is also directly linked to elements on which internal and external variables intervene, such as: age, culture of origin, level of ed-

education, psychological state of denial/acceptance of life in the host country, host environment, more frequent communicative interactions, etc.

Educational approaches must stimulate the cognitive capacities developed by adults by presenting clear and simple objectives, using texts linked to everyday experiences and life, without pursuing the acquisition of a simple and defined linguistic mastery or of single and isolated disciplinary contents, but rather of a linguistic and mental repertoire in which all linguistic and cultural knowledge and experiences, however partial, play a role and interact with each other in everyday communication as well as in sectoral communication.

It is useful to plan teaching that is implemented in mixed and differentiated abilities classes with the use of activities (tasks) with comprehensible input. They should respect the learners' preferred styles of learning, with appropriate teaching techniques, with contextualisation and explication of the objectives, assessing not grammatical correctness but the learners' ability to complete the task.

Multimodality, an aspect that has arisen from the development of information and communication technologies, is very important for this type of audience, as it exploits the possibilities offered by the para-verbal and visual components of communication in the teaching/learning process.

It is also advisable to promote active participation (experiential learning) of the learner, since experience is a resource for learning especially in adults, regardless of the starting level of education: they have a store of knowledge on which new learning must be based. Adults need control over the learning process and feedback from the teacher, a educational linguistics approach that is not punitive but constructive which requires responsibility, effort of concentration, commitment and adequate motivation.

Ideal teachers should become facilitators, they should help in the construction of knowledge at the expense of mere knowledge of notions, they would encourage analysing and evaluating ideas and personal schemes, they would help and develop critical thinking and awareness, adding new to old knowledge by also taking on the role of linguistic-cultural mediators.

The preparation for the professional integration of immigrants can also exploit the principles of Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) with a close concatenation between theory – language learning and practice – learning a profession in which the content of the subject becomes the focus of attention, an approach that also offers the possibility of increasing the quantity and quality of exposure to the second language and favours an interactive type of education (teaching materials oriented in this sense are now many, Benucci and Maiorano 2015 i.e.).

5. Conclusions

The range of initiatives carried out in the field of second language literacy at European (and Italian) level (Grosso 2021) are often characterized by periodicity,

non-homogeneity and inadequacy to the real needs of European societies, and especially of immigrants, reasons why the hoped-for results are rarely achieved.

The Fund for Asylum Migration and Integration (FAMI) in recent years has financed ambitious projects that have achieved excellent results but have not promoted the effective Education of Adult immigrants: the cause is not only the episodic nature and the lack of systematisation of the results obtained, but can be found in the still insufficient consideration of the development of adequate communication skills and the entrusting for their achievement to non-experts in the field. It is no longer acceptable to continue declaring the importance of immigrants speaking the language of their host countries, possessing high educational qualifications and job skills, without dedicating the necessary resources, time and qualified people to achieve these goals. Education programmes designed specifically for immigrants are insufficient in duration, objectives, and lack of teachers with adequate knowledge of the target audience and of how to make the education process a meaningful experience.

Psychological and sociological factors also complicate the situation: while Sweden is the European country where people do not see immigration primarily as a threat, Italy is the first country where people fear the effects of immigration and tend to link it to the area of crime. Refugees, asylum seekers, resettled, etc. with a university degree or at least a high level of education reduce the fear of immigration and contribute significantly in almost all European countries to producing positive attitudes towards immigration except in Italy and Greece: this data should lead to much broader reflections than those mentioned here and should sooner or later be properly analysed.

This type of recipient therefore poses important educational challenges, both to the teachers who conduct the courses and to the institutions: first and foremost, the correct identification of the learner's profile (see Minuz and Borri 2016, Grosso 2021) then setting up a more participatory and needs-centred teaching offer, including recipients' needs and expectations (such as being able to face a job interview). Integration into the workforce is an essential condition to avoid the failure of the migratory project: the communication skills necessary for the immigrant worker are primarily linguistic, but also pragmatic and cultural. These skills are not only needed to secure a job but also to retain it, improve social conditions, and interact with natives and colleagues. Decoding instructions is often crucial for the proper execution of professional tasks and for ensuring workplace safety.

Specifically, there is a need for: a focus on the individual since one cannot disregard the analysis of the individual characteristics and needs of the beneficiaries, taking due account of their background. Consequently, any action undertaken must be structured on the basis of this analysis, with the aim of enhancing the abilities and inclinations of each individual; of transferring informal competences from a community perspective. Tacit knowledge and informal competences must be transferred and strengthened, with the aim of fostering the relational dimension of the individual, both in the social, non-formal context and in the work context; a Data

Driven Learning³ (DDL) as training must be based on a pedagogical model that places the learner himself themselves at the centre of learning, with the aim of creating an inclusive atmosphere that stimulates participatory learning.

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³ On this regard, a well known quote by Tim Johns, pioneer of the Data-driven Learning Approach: "cut[ting] out the middleman as far as possible and [...] giv[ing] the learner direct access to the data" (Johns 1991: 30).

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