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GINEVRA BONARI

Perspectives of Italian L2 Teachers on Integrating Immigrant Women: Insights from a Case Study in Tuscany

Abstract

The identification of communicative needs relevant to the socio-cultural context in which immigrant women are situated represents a foundational step for language teachers when planning classes. Language educators must act as both facilitators and mediators, adopting an intercultural approach that integrates diverse cultural models. The goal is to teach the language with an emphasis on integration, thereby fostering connections between immigrant women and Italian culture through the target language. To this end, this paper presents research conducted in Tuscany to analyze the key experiences and perspectives that emerge from teaching Italian to immigrant women.

Keywords

Italian L2 Teachers, Immigrant Women, Extraordinary Reception Centers, Educational Linguistics.

1. Teaching Italian as a Second Language to Immigrant Women

Studies on the linguistic landscape in Italy, such as the Caritas (2001) survey, highlight that the integration of migrant languages has added a fourth axis to Italy's traditionally triadic linguistic structure (Vedovelli, Casini 2016). For Italian society, the introduction of new languages through migration poses serious issues, especially when it comes to building a democratic linguistic policy that fosters inclusive communication skills necessary for daily living in Italy (and Europe) and managing a multilingual national identity. Learning Italian as a second language (L2) is essential for assimilating newcomers into the community. Linguistic integration, in turn, is key to social integration, helping to reconfigure migrants' linguistic repertoires while respecting their original languages, cultures and migration goals (Benucci 2021). The language teacher plays a crucial role in this process, acting as an intermediary between the established society and newcomers, and facilitating the acquisition of L2 as both a language and a cultural bridge.

2. Methodology

Within the larger framework of adult education (Eda), this study adheres to a methodological approach based on the field of “intercultural linguistic education” (Risager 2007; Caon 2014; Borghetti 2016). The study polled more than 60 Tuscan groups that provide adult immigrant women living in the Extraordinary Reception Centers (CAS) with second language instruction in Italian. Responses were obtained from 42 teachers working in cooperatives, volunteer associations and Permanent Centers for Adult Education (CPIA) across several Tuscan cities, including Lucca, Massa Carrara, Pistoia, Pisa, Livorno, Florence, Siena, Arezzo and Grosseto. Data were collected via a 21-item questionnaire administered to teachers, designed to gather specific information on:

1. the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of both immigrants and teachers (items D1-D7);
2. communication dynamics and challenges in the classroom (items D8-D13);
3. key aspects of teaching Italian to immigrant women (teaching experiences, the approaches and methods for Italian as a second language (L2) designed for this specific audience) focusing on the socio-anthropological and language-teaching training of teachers (items D14-D21).

The questionnaire, created using Google Forms, produced empirical data that were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively with Microsoft Excel.

The research addressed the following hypotheses:

1. the role and importance of creating a supportive and cooperative classroom environment;
2. the impact of teachers’ language-teaching and socio-cultural training on the instructional process;
3. the need for an intercultural approach in lessons to foster intercultural competence among students.

3. Research Framework

The majority of teachers surveyed are female (67.4%), between the ages of 25 and 36 (25.6%), and report having specialized through bachelor’s degrees in Linguistic Mediation or master’s degrees in Communication Sciences, Educational Sciences, Primary Education Sciences or Modern Literature (49%). The students in their classes come from a wide range of nationalities: Africa (57.1%), Ukraine (50%), South America (33.3%), Pakistan (23.8%), Bangladesh (21.4%), Afghanistan (19%), Tunisia (16.7%), and smaller percentages (2.4% in total) from Hungary, Kosovo, the Philippines, Russia, Romania, Georgia, Albania, Macedonia, and India. Language proficiency levels in these classes are distributed across Pre-A1 (50%), A1 (64.3%), and A2 (54.8%)¹.

¹ To a lesser extent also B1, B2, C1.

The linguistic, cultural and identity diversity in these classrooms—characterized by *superdiversity*, defined as “a condition distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants” (Vertovec 2007: 1024)—presents unique challenges. Such classes are referred to as “Classes with Differentiated Abilities” (CAD), where the “difference” observed across multiple aspects and levels becomes central to effectively managing language learning for all students (Caon 2008: XII). Students in these classes differ in learning styles, languages, cultures, world knowledge, age, gender, self-confidence, motivation, interests and self-discipline (Ur 1996).

The CAD framework (Iresom, Hallam 2001; Şalli-Çopur 2005; Caon, Meneghetti 2017) promotes viewing diversity as a valuable asset, with the teacher serving as a facilitator of learning. According to Caon and Tonioli (2016), teachers in such contexts must account for several factors:

1. The communicative use of the foreign language, especially in the early stages of interlanguage formation, as immigrant students often need practical language skills that meet their integrative and professional needs.
2. To improve learning and address actual requirements, language codes are integrated with non-linguistic resources, such as technology and multimedia.
3. The encouragement of socialization through cooperative learning, which highlights education as a social activity supported by communication, teamwork and inspiring assignments (Dolci 2006).
4. Encouragement of strategy-sharing and inference processes to develop metacognitive and metalinguistic skills.

Given the humanistic and socio-constructivist orientation of the CAD approach, fostering a collaborative classroom climate is essential. Activities should focus on cooperation and the principles of translanguaging (García, Wei 2014; Benucci 2021), viewing the presence of multiple languages as an asset. Teachers can help students recognize and use their entire linguistic repertoire by incorporating new language elements into their existing systems by implementing translanguaging principles (García 2017: 17-18). By utilizing their varied language resources in a variety of social contexts, children are able to communicate and participate in cross-cultural interactions, and their multilingual abilities are valued.

In this situation, the teacher serves as a bridge between the students' cultural background and the host community in addition to being a facilitator of L2 learning, as language input comes from both the instructor and everyday life (Balboni 2002).

4. Results

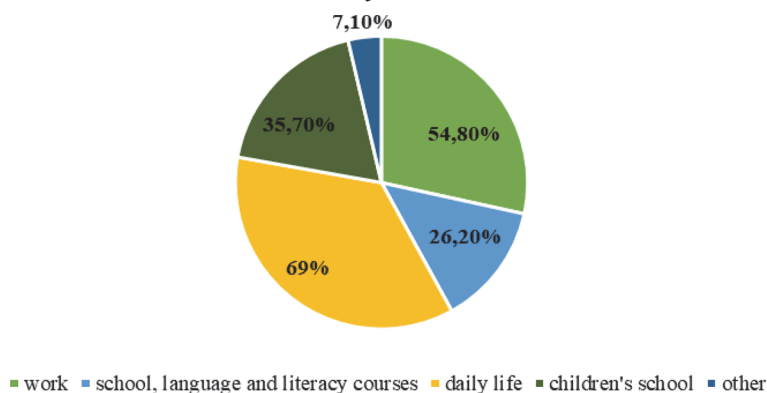
The questionnaire's results are shown in the paragraphs that follow, along with an analysis of them in light of the original study questions.

4.1 The Linguistic-Communicative Needs of Immigrant Women

A conventional training program in Italian as a second language would ignore the genuine communication needs of students, since every person sets out on a different migratory path with different objectives and driving forces. It is crucial for educators to create activities in the classroom that link language learning to students' interests and ambitions for integration. This approach should begin with an assessment of linguistic-communicative needs, followed by anticipating the contexts and domains where the L2 will be used. These contexts span the four main domains defined by the (CEFR 2001)²—public, personal, educational, and occupational.

Instructors should also think about the people students will be interacting with, the communication activities they will need to complete and the subjects and kinds of texts they will come across.

Chart 1 – *Areas of interest in the classes*



In particular, jobs like housekeeper, waitress, cook, assistant cook, dishwasher, bartender, pastry chef, pizza chef, beautician, and, to a lesser extent, jobs like farmer, tour guide, seamstress, call center operator, shop assistant and mediator are among the professions that female students are most interested in, according to the study (54.8%). Significant interest is also shown in educational opportunities, including language and literacy classes (26.2%); daily life activities (69%) (such as contacting healthcare providers, making appointments, and filling out forms); involvement in their children's education (35.7%); and healthcare and the residency permit application process, which are categorized as "other" (7.1%). The chart below provides a visual summary of these findings.

² Which variety of Italian should we teach? In terms of diatopic variation, it is essential to consider that the local dialect will be the first contact with the migrant's L2, which is why it is appropriate to include activities focused on understanding dialect and regional traits in the lesson. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (hereinafter CEFR) recommends presenting diatopic varieties at the most advanced levels (C1) but if we consider other documents, it is possible to present texts that display already in A1 level classes regional phonetics features (Minuz 2014).

It is essential that, especially in Italian courses, the acquisition of the L2 goes through an enrichment of the linguistic repertoire and the recognition of the contexts of use of a vaster spectrum of linguistic varieties and registers (Quercioli 2004), with the aim to provide linguistic preparation also to those who use sectorial language or simply a higher linguistic variety (from B1 onwards): focusing only on basic communication skills it is a reductionist perspective, present in actual teaching materials for immigrants (Vedovelli, Villarini 2003). At the lower levels, however, it must be considered that immigrants often carry out work tasks that are not very 'demanding' from a linguistic point of view which do not allow the natural evolution of interlanguage formation (Pallotti 1998). This factor goes together with other realities, such as the role in the family, a condition of marginality that does not favor interpersonal relationships and communicative development and integration.

Language becomes the tool for expressing feelings "to tell oneself to others, to say something about oneself and one's history, [...] also an opportunity to express shared discomfort due to the unbearable silence that migration brings with it [...]" (Favaro 1996: 117)³, and to redeem oneself on a personal as well as professional level. The decision to learn the language of the host country for women with children is also due to the desire to recover their parental role (Solcia 2011) by following their educational path and trying to understand the functioning of the Italian school system.

The importance of acquiring daily communicative autonomy is also found in the healthcare sector. Health literacy, i.e. "the ability of individuals to understand, critically appraise and use information related to their health" (WHO 2021), becomes central not only for linguistic understanding *strictu sensu* but also at a cultural level, a factor for which it often happens that women belonging to certain religions are often reluctant to be visited by a man, due to ideologies imposed by the family or sometimes self-imposed because they are crystallized within their own vision of the world. This consideration shows the urgency of creating a language course that allows people to escape from a condition of dependence (often on their husband and/or children) and social and communicative isolation, creating opportunities in which everyone can express their thoughts without the mediation of no other external (and often unwanted) point of view.

4.2 Communication in the Classroom

Other survey parameters were considered in the questionnaire, including the use of the bridge language (D10), a criterion selected on the basis of the intrinsic characteristics of CAD.

³ Original text: "per raccontarsi alle altre, dire qualcosa di sé e della propria storia, [...] l'occasione anche per manifestare il disagio condiviso per l'insopportabile silenzio che la migrazione porta con sé [...]"

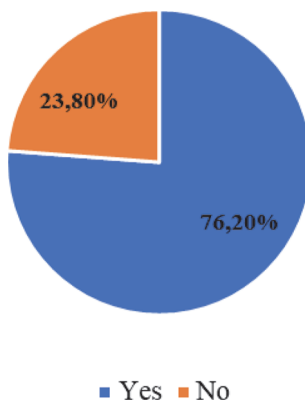
Chart 2 – *Use of the bridge language by the teacher*

Chart 2 reveals that 76.2% of the teachers interviewed use a bridge language (henceforth BL) to facilitate communication. Among the languages that are indicated as vehicular, English is the most used both for historical reasons and as a language typologically more similar to Italian than those of their repertoires. The responses indicate that the functions that are traced back to the use of BLs are essentially the ‘interpersonal’ one to *improve understanding of the topic explained, so that communication is effective, to encourage feeling welcomed*; the ‘metalinguistic’ one to *combine and differentiate two language-cultures but also to motivate students who see the teacher’s interest in their original context, to promote multilingualism and intercultural competence*; a ‘personal function’, to *be empathetic towards female students*; a ‘referential function’ as a *vehicle of understanding Italian cultural aspects*; an ‘instrumental function’ to *better explain grammar, to explain the meaning of some words⁴ more immediately*.

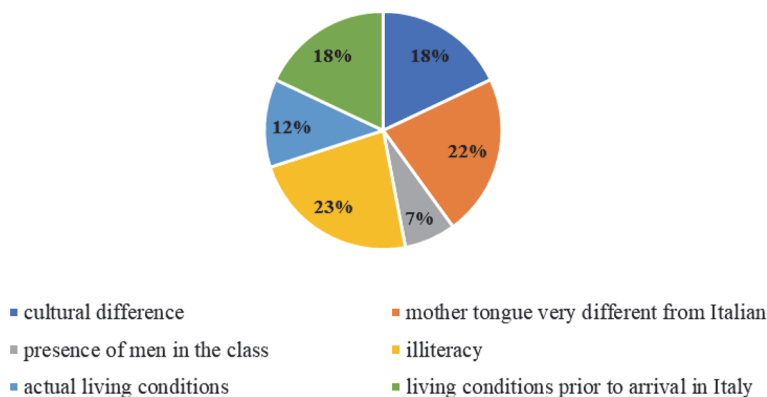
23.8% of them prefer not to use the BL because it is *more profitable, female students are pushed to pay greater attention and research the meanings of words*, and that is the reason why they resort to other methods: *looking for simpler terms in Italian to explain a concept and to always encourage the use of the language; using images or finding synonyms that make learning easier; to avoid not only communicative but also cultural misunderstandings*.

Another characteristic of CAD concerns the possibility that episodes characterized by stereotypes and/or prejudices occur (D12). 45.2% of the teachers have witnessed situations in which the communication interfered with an objective vision of the world and the stimuli produced in reality. In the highlighted situations (D13) there is the need to find solutions for the correct management of the multiculturalism of the class, particularly in moments in which the teacher finds himself managing a critical environment arising from aspects linked to culture, with particular

⁴ The functions of the BLs identified in the research are traced - and partly reworked - according to the model presented in Cognigni (2019: 127-130), which concerns the explication of the six-dimensional functional model of Jakobson and Halliday presented in Balboni (2015: 123-7).

reference to religion (*some Arab women do not attend school due to the presence of men in class and the male teacher; some Muslim students did not adhere to Ramadan and were judged by the others who instead strictly follow it*); also linked to life episodes that occurred (*a girl explained the abuse suffered in Libya in a mixed class of women and men*); even the presence of certain topics reproduced in manuals and/or other teaching materials (*body parts and health are topics that must be treated in a non-judgmental way in a comparative perspective and with a good class atmosphere; homophobia, sexism, polygamy*). Therefore, it is appropriate for the teacher to adopt an intercultural approach (Candelier 2007) to propose different cultural models and gender practices, comparing them with those present in the cultural traditions of the migrants (Cognigni 2014), as it is crucial to understand the link between reality and culture of origin and reality and culture of the host community. This finding is in line with what emerges from D14, in which the teachers expressed that the adoption of this approach *allows for greater knowledge of the traditions and experiences of the students; stimulates comparison between source culture and language and the target language without ever judging the differences; promotes language teaching training to manage different situations and cultures*. This awareness primarily concerns the language teacher, who must be aware of the linguistic-cultural diversity that characterizes the physiognomy of the Italian class and, subsequently, act as a guide in the learning process and acquisition of the intercultural competence. This competence, in fact, from the perspective of intercultural education can teach how to 'observe', understand the differences and avoid misunderstandings or prejudicial positions that can affect communication (Battaglia, Caon 2020) in order to communicate effectively in situations based on the own knowledge, skills and attitudes.

In the last part of the questionnaire, the critical elements of the teaching process are highlighted (D15). Regarding the language teaching aspects, it emerges that it is essential to present activities based on authentic materials and focused on everyday life topics, as highlighted in the previous paragraph, always starting from the analysis of the linguistic-communicative needs of the learners. It is, thus, essential to *deal with topics of daily life, civic education, human rights and healthcare, possibly using authentic material; consider the language domains and communication situations that immigrant women face on a daily basis*. The psycho-affective aspects highlight *the need to be as empathetic as possible towards them because there may be cases of trafficking or delicate family situations; work hard on creating the class group, in order to also encourage peer learning in CAD*. The need to be trained on socio-cultural aspects is evident as several factors can influence the learning process (D18) as shown in Chart 3.

Chart 3 – *Factors that influence learning*

D19 elucidates that contexts are often related to the religious sphere (for instance, *with female students belonging to certain religions (Islam) it is almost impossible to have lessons because they do not attend knowing that the teacher is a man. A decision sometimes imposed by others (husband and/or family and sometimes self-imposed)*), but also to family dynamics, which are often intertwined with hierarchical cultural settings for which the role of women is marginalized and relegated to take care of the family and children (for example, *women are often involved in family dynamics and in the management of children, which is why the lessons are increasingly attended by men*). Effectively, the role of the teacher becomes fundamental as a creator of a free environment, neutralized from any stereotype or prejudice. The importance of the training they receive on the anthropological and cultural aspects of the immigrants' countries of origin is confirmed by 85.7% of the teachers; 14.3%, on the other hand, declare that they need extraordinary courses so that they can be aware of the repetition of certain dynamics that reproduce and that are accepted within their societies, obviously because of the cultural precepts and ideologies they have.

5. Conclusions

The study highlights the particular difficulties faced by language instructors in fostering social integration by exposing the substantial complications involved in teaching Italian as a second language in Classes with Differentiated Abilities (CAD). A customized strategy that focuses on the communication requirements and motivations of learners is necessary for CAD lessons because immigrant women come from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This study emphasizes how crucial it is to perform a preliminary assessment of these needs in order to establish a welcoming and encouraging learning environment.

The results also highlight the importance of marginalization and gender. Due to their experiences of social and economic marginalization, many immigrant women encounter additional difficulties that go beyond learning a language. Given this background, it is crucial for educators to comprehend the sociocultural elements in-

fluencing the educational experiences of their pupils. Teachers who receive training that takes into account these sociocultural factors are better able to meet the needs of immigrant women, whose struggles and tales stem from a complicated migratory journey that started long before they arrived in Italy. Given that it promotes intercultural competency, which improves language acquisition and meaningful integration into society, an intercultural educational method is not only advantageous but also necessary.

Even though every woman has a different background, language and set of goals, they are all working toward the same goal: integration and the fulfillment of their migratory dreams. Immigrant women are empowered both socially and individually by language, which is the key to social integration and gives them the necessary abilities for autonomous communication. Thus, Italian language classes provide as more than just a linguistic link; they are a means for these women to improve their lives, seek autonomy and make contributions to society. Immigrant women are becoming crucial players in stabilizing migratory dynamics in the contemporary migratory landscape. They traverse a protracted integration process characterized by successes that validate their autonomy in directing their migration initiatives. The research emphasizes that immigrant women in these pursuits requires language programs that go beyond functional learning, embracing cultural empathy and a commitment to building inclusive communities. This holistic model allows language instruction to act as both a social instrument and a catalyst for the empowerment of immigrant women in Italy.

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