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IGOR DEIANA

Second Language Teachers' Education: the Case of the Italian CPIA

Abstract

This paper focuses on *Percorsi di Alfabetizzazione e Apprendimento della Lingua Italiana* (*Percorsi AALI*). *Percorsi AALI* are the Italian language courses for foreigners organised by CPIAs, which are the formal Italian schools for adults. The paper describes and compares the profiles of *Percorsi AALI* teaching staff.

Percorsi AALI teaching staff mainly consists of primary school teachers, but there are also some secondary school teachers and a small number of A23 teachers, who are the only ones to have a specialisation in teaching Italian as a second or foreign language.

Since teachers' education and professionalism have a considerable effect on the appropriateness of teaching methods and learning outcomes, focusing on these points is of great interest.

Keywords

CPIA, Percorsi AALI, Italian public school, adult education, Italian as a second language, language teaching, teachers' education, language education, teacher training.

1. Introduction

The *Provincial Center for Adult Education*, commonly called *CPIA* (*Centro Provinciale per l'Istruzione degli Adulti*) is the formal Italian school for adults¹. In the last decade CPIAs have been tasked with teaching Italian to adult immigrants. Thanks to their Italian language courses for foreigners (*Percorsi di Alfabetizzazione e Apprendimento della Lingua Italiana* or *Percorsi AALI*) CPIAs provide immigrants with the opportunity to learn Italian on a short course (200 hours). These courses are important not only because they help facilitate social and linguistic inclusion, but because they also offer a certificate in linguistic competence, required to obtain the long-term residence permit (Sergio 2011, Deiana 2021a).

¹ CPIAs were established by the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic No. 263 in October 2012 and better regulated thanks to the Ministerial Decree of 12th March 2015. CPIAs carry on the mission of the *Centri Territoriali Permanenti per l'educazione degli adulti* (CTPs), which at the end of the 1990s was the first formal Italian school set up to provide education to adults (Colosio 2015). CPIAs have three curricula courses: Italian language courses for foreigners (*Percorsi AALI*), the lower secondary school courses (*Percorsi di istruzione di primo livello*), and the upper secondary school courses (*Percorsi di istruzione di secondo livello*). They also have extra curricula courses (language courses and computer courses) (Pitzalis 2019).

As it has been underlined in different research projects (Gentili and Tassinari 2019, Borri and Calzone 2019, Deiana and Spina 2020a, Poliandri and Epifani 2020, Benedetti and Buffardi 2022, Deiana 2022), CPIAs have to face the challenge of teaching a various and mixed range of learners of whom illiterate and uneducated adults are the most vulnerable (Caon and Brichese 2019, Nitti 2020, Council of Europe 2022). This is even more evident in *Percorsi AALI*. These classes exhibit a greater heterogeneity as regards literacy and vehicular language. Furthermore, *Percorsi AALI* have some critical aspects including the most evident fact that the only levels assessed are A1 and A2 CEFR (Casi 2015, Cacchione 2021). In addition, there are various problems associated with the status of the students, job issues and family situation. Sometimes attending the lessons can be difficult due to the distance from the school, incompatibility with the class schedules or lack of devices, even if some CPIAs offer e-learning tools.

Percorsi AALI teaching staff are another issue. In fact, especially with regard to teaching Italian as a second language, they are said to not always be adequately prepared (Longo 2019, Poliandri 2020, Cacchione 2022). The teaching staff are predominantly primary school teachers, but there are also some secondary school teachers² and a small number of A23 teachers, who are the only ones to have successfully completed a structured course in teaching Italian as a second or foreign language³ (Deiana and Spina 2020b, Deiana 2021b). The fact that the majority of these teachers are not specialised in teaching a second language is a major criticism. Consequently, the paper explores the profiles of teachers of Italian as a second language in the CPIA.

The following reflections are based on the study of existing legislation governing CPIAs and on data offered by two surveys. The first survey, called *Indagine A23*, was conducted by a self-administered online questionnaire during the school year 2018/2019 and it involved 76 A23 teachers (Deiana 2021b). The second one (*Indagine Percorsi AALI*) was carried out from March to June 2020, and it involved 239 teachers who taught in the *Percorsi AALI* (Deiana 2021c). Both questionnaires, consisting of open-ended and closed-ended questions, were structured into several parts, of which we will consider the ones which concerned initial training, life-long learning, and teaching experience. Thanks to these findings, the paper describes and compares the profiles of A23 and primary school teachers. Since teacher training and education have a considerable effect on the learning outcomes of the students, it is extremely important to analyse these points.

² Mostly Italian and English teachers but there are some Mathematics, Science and Technology teachers and also Music and Art teachers.

³ After the reform of competition classes for teaching posts made in February 2016 (Decree of the President of the Italian Republic No. 19), for the first time, teachers specialised in teaching Italian as a second language were included in the Italian state school staff. Since September 2017, A23 teachers have been working only in CPIAs, where, with few exceptions, they make up a small part of the teaching staff (maximum 2) (Deiana and Spina 2020b).

2. Composition of the teaching staff

Indagine Percorsi AALI pointed out that primary school teachers seem to be the majority (153 out of 239), while secondary school teachers (49 out of 239) and A23 teachers are a minority.

Table 1 – *Percorsi AALIs' teaching staff*

CPIAs	primary school teachers			A23 teachers			secondary school teachers		
	2017 2018	2018 2019	2019 2020	2017 2018	2018 2019	2019 2020	2017 2018	2018 2019	2019 2020
ALESSANDRIA 1	6			2			2 Art teachers; 1 English teacher; 2 Music teachers		
ALESSANDRIA 2	3	6	9	2			2 Italian teachers; 2 English teachers		4 Italian teachers
BENEVENTO	2			-	1		6 Italian teachers; 7 English teachers		
CAGLIARI	25	27	25	-			Italian teachers and English teachers spe- cialised in teaching Italian as L2		
CASERTA	4			-			Italian teachers; English teachers		
CUNEO	7			2			2 Art teachers; 1 English teacher; 1 Music teacher		
FERMO	2			-	1		1 NS ⁵		
FORLI - CESENA	10			1	-		-		
IMPERIA	7	8	7	1	2		-	2 Italian teachers	-
LATINA	5			2			1 Italian teachers; 1 English teachers; 1 Music teacher; 1 Technologies teacher		
LECCE	11			2			20 Italian teachers; 13 NS	20 Italian teachers; 8 NS	20 Italian teachers; 9 NS
LIVORNO	7			2			2 Italian teachers		
MACERATA	4	5	11	1			NS		
MONTAGNA	4			2			-		
NAPOLI CITTÀ 2	4			-	2		13 Italian teachers		
NOVI LIGURE	3	6	9	2			2 Italian teachers; 2 English teachers		4 Italian teachers
PARMA	12			1			1 Italian teacher		
PORDENONE	3			1			-		
RIMINI	9			2			-		
TREVISO	30			2			80 teachers recruited outside the school staff		
VARESE	18			-			-		
VERONA	44			2			-		

Source: Deiana 2022

This trend was confirmed by several CPIA school offices (table 1). In fact, regarding the *Indagine Percorsi AALI*, they were asked to indicate the composition of their

Percorsi AALI teaching staff⁴. Regarding Table 1 it is easy to see some general tendencies. The aspect that all CPIAs have in common is that the majority of teachers are primary school teachers. However, table 1 points out a greater heterogeneity regarding secondary school teachers. Furthermore, it is interesting that there were never more than two A23 teachers. As we will see, this diversity is due to a regulatory gap.

3. *Legislation: a regulatory gap*

By analysing the CPIA legislation it is possible to see that there is no explicit reference to *Percorsi AALI* teaching staff. Neither the decree of the President of the Italian Republic No. 263 in October 2012 nor the Ministerial Decree of 12th March 2015 require a staff of specific and trained teachers for these courses. Teachers are not required to be specialised or trained in teaching Italian as a second language. Furthermore, there is also significant lack of specific training in teaching adults (Borri and Calzone 2019). Despite being the formal Italian school for adults, CPIA regulations ignore this point.

To date there are still no regulatory guidelines for *Percorsi AALI* teachers. This gap is even more significant for A23 teachers for whom there is no regulation which establishes where they have to teach (lower secondary school, upper secondary school, or CPIA) or what they have to do (Deiana et al. 2021).

It seems that where teaching Italian as a second language is concerned the lack of guidelines and clear institutional choices is a constant feature.

4. *Primary school teachers vs. A23 teachers: a comparison*

As it has already been stated, only A23 teachers are required to have completed a structured course in teaching Italian as a second language. The requirements for becoming an A23 teacher⁵ clearly state that it is necessary to have a humanities degree among those indicated in a specific list, and to have taken certain exams or ECTS, such as general linguistics, modern language teaching, Italian linguistics, Italian literature, Latin literature, geography and history. In addition, a formal qualification in teaching Italian as a second or foreign language recognized by the Ministry of Education is required. This has an evident and positive impact on their training.

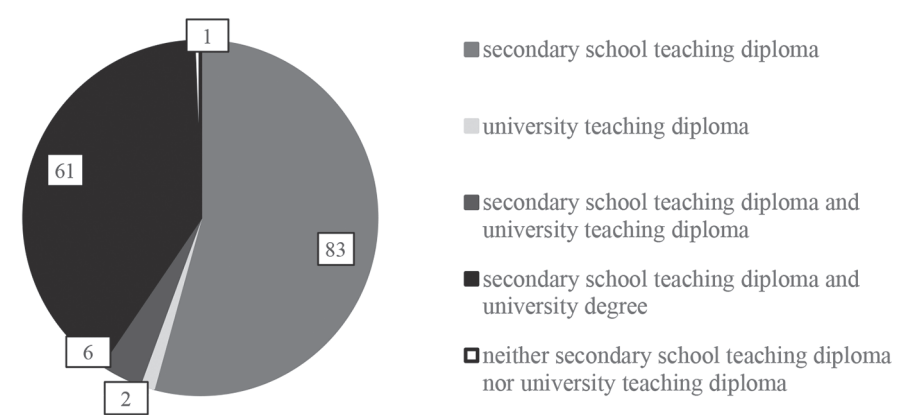
However, the situation is not the same for primary school teachers, who, unlike A23 teachers, are not trained in teaching Italian as a second language. According

⁴ Only a small part of CPIAs answered this request. While some responded in a short time by providing a precise description of the staff employed in *Percorsi AALI*, in some cases school offices reported that this information could not be shared (Deiana 2022).

⁵ Requirements for being an A23 teacher were established by the decree of the President of the Italian Republic No. 19 in February 2016, and updated in May 2017 (Ministerial Decree n. 259). Please refer to this last document for further information.

to the outcome of *Indagine Percorsi AALI* (fig.1), it is evident that there is a great diversity in their initial education.

Figure 1 – Primary school teachers: initial education



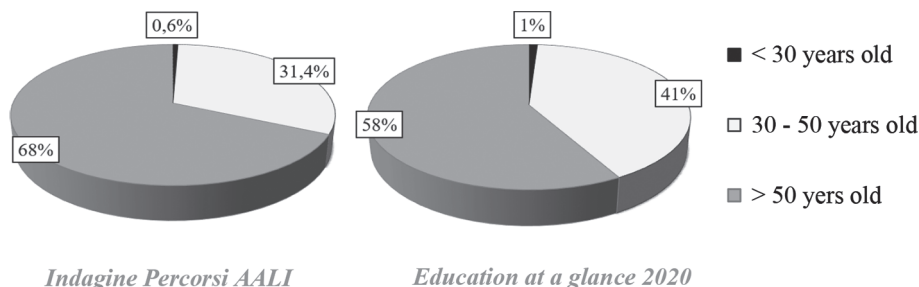
Source: Indagine Percorsi AALI

When looking at teaching certification, only 8 primary school teachers have the university teaching degree: *Laurea in Scienze della formazione primaria*. The majority of primary school teachers (144 out of 153) have the secondary school teaching diploma, the so-called *Diploma magistrale*. Despite the fact that 61 out of 144 have a university degree (many in subjects not strongly related to teaching), this data highlights how the majority of the teachers belong to the *scuola magistrale* generation. This means that they achieved this title before the teaching requirements reform in 2001⁶. On the one hand it implies that they have a vast experience of teaching pupils, but, on the other hands it underlines some weaknesses in their initial education. In fact, the *scuola magistrale* did not concentrate on specific subjects such as language teaching, linguistics, or adult education therefore primary school teachers lack this in their initial education. The difference between these two teaching certificates means a difference in language education. In fact, although there are some critical issues (Gallina 2023), the *Laurea in Scienze della formazione primaria* offers a general approach to the themes and problems of Italian linguistics.

Furthermore, the high percentage of teachers with a *diploma magistrale* highlights the fact that primary school teachers who work in CPIAs belong to a different generation from their colleagues who work in primary schools with children. In primary schools the percentage of teachers who have a university teaching diploma is higher. This tendency is even more evident if we compare the average age of the primary school teachers in our sample with that of the teachers who work in primary schools with pupils (OECD 2020).

⁶ This reform established that to become a nursery or primary school teacher it would be necessary to complete a four-year, later five-year, university degree: *Laurea in Scienze della formazione primaria*.

Figure 2 – Primary school teachers' age: CPIA vs Primary School



This difference could confirm the claim that some teachers did not choose CPIA for vocational or professional interests. In fact, as declared by several CPIA headmasters (Borri et al. 2019), certain CPIA teachers decided to teach adults because they were tired of working with children and teenagers. Similar outcomes have been pointed out by *Indagine A23*. Some A23 teachers declared that several of their primary school colleagues had moved to CPIAs because they did not want to work with pupils anymore.

If we bring our attention back to primary school teachers' education, it is clear to see that they lack training in teaching Italian as a second language. This is even more evident according to *Indagine Percorsi AALI*: only 20 out of 153 teachers have completed a structured course in teaching Italian as a second or foreign language.

While focusing on initial education has pointed out vast differences, the same cannot be said about life-long learning. In fact, in both cases the vast majority (88% of the A23 teachers and 87% of primary school teachers) declared that they had attended at least one training or refresher course in teaching Italian as a second language.

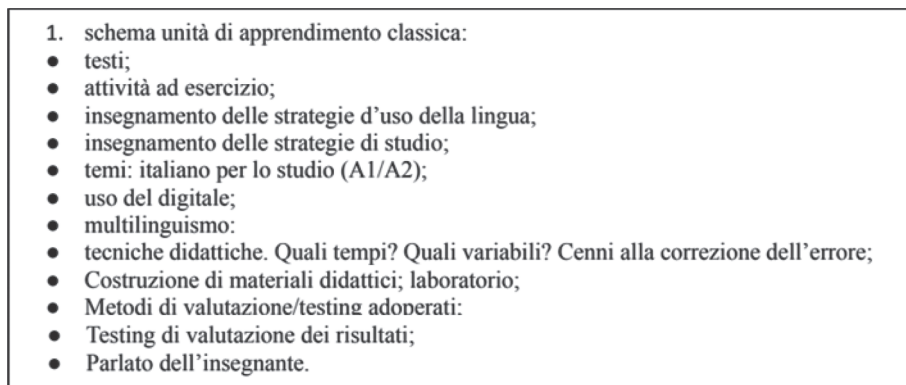
Although this data highlights that teachers are interested in life-long learning, it is necessary to focus on one important critical aspect. The strong link between initial education and the actual understanding of what is covered in the training sessions cannot be ignored. In fact, having solid language education can help teachers to focus on their own learning gaps by identifying the aspects that need to be consolidated. Furthermore, poor initial education can have a negative impact on the application of what is taught during the training sessions, which can be misinterpreted or misunderstood. Sometimes, it can even influence the planning of training courses, or the topics covered. In fact, when the majority of the participants do not have an elementary level language education, training sessions usually concentrate on more general and basic subjects.

A valid example is the one-day training session organised by Cagliari CPIA⁷ (fig.3). The proposed topics are the same that are covered in the teaching Italian as a foreign or second language courses. On the one hand, it seems that CPIAs try

⁷ The one-day intensive course was taught by Fernanda Minuz an highly experienced researcher and trainer. Please refer to Circolare N° 191 (21st of March 2023) of Cagliari CPIA.

to make up for teachers' lack of initial training. On the other hand, they seem to neglect the teachers, such as A23 teachers, who have already done training courses and would prefer to examine new and stimulating topics in depth.

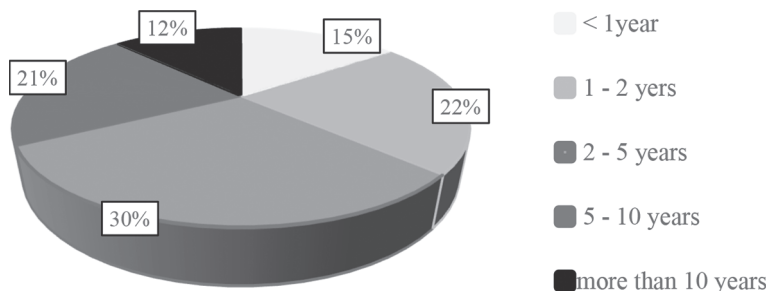
Figure 3 – *Cagliari CPIA training course April 2023*



In addition, *Indagine A23* and *Indagine Percorsi AALI* pointed out that there is a strong link between initial education and previous experiences in teaching Italian as a second or foreign language. All the A23 teachers had already taught Italian as a second or foreign language⁸. They had worked in private language schools in Italy and abroad, on courses organized by the charities for asylum seekers and refugees, on extracurricular projects organized in schools (primary and secondary schools) and university language centers.

Furthermore, according to the outcomes of *Indagine A23* (fig. 4), it is possible to observe that 33% of our sample were teachers with at least 5 years' experience.

Figure 4 – *A23 teachers' experience in teaching before the CPIA*



Source: *Indagine A23*

The same cannot be said for primary school teachers. In fact, 75 teachers (almost half of our sample) affirmed they had not taught Italian as a second or foreign lan-

⁸ In order to complete the structured course in teaching Italian as a foreign or second language required to become an A23 teacher, it is necessary to have gained a minimum of 400 hours teaching experience.

guage before teaching at a CPIA, which implies that *Percorsi AALI* were their first experiences as teachers of Italian as a second language. Poor training, amplified by lack of experience is an issue that cannot be ignored. In addition, some more criticisms came out focusing on the 78 teachers who declared that they had already taught Italian as a second language. They had an inferior range of teaching experiences. In fact, they mainly taught Italian as a second language in primary schools or as volunteers. This is due to the fact that there are specific requirements for teaching Italian as a second language in private schools or at university.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion our data shows a situation that could have a negative impact on the quality of *Percorsi AALI*. Since teachers' education is strongly linked to high-quality teaching and appropriateness of teaching methods, the weaknesses highlighted cannot be ignored.

While the tendencies that came out about A23 teachers show good education and consolidated teaching experience, what has been pointed out about primary school teachers reveals serious criticisms concerning the lack of specific training in teaching foreign adult students.

Taking into consideration the regulatory gap underlined in paragraph 3, it is clear that the Italian government has to work on CPIA legislation and in particular on establishing specific and trained teaching staff for *Percorsi AALI*. What has been done up to now is not enough. It is essential to recognize and enhance the role of language education in teacher training.

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