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STEFANIA FERRARI<sup>1</sup>, REBECCA ELENA VANELLI<sup>1</sup>

# Engaging with pragmatics in the classroom. Exploring L1, L2 and FL primary and secondary school teachers' knowledge, beliefs and practices<sup>2</sup>

## *Abstract*

Despite its crucial contribution to communicative competence, pragmatics has not yet gained a permanent place in the language classroom or in teacher education. To address this gap, the present work illustrates initial findings of an online survey designed to explore how practitioners in Italian mainstream education engage with pragmatics in the classroom. Twenty-eight teachers of Italian as L1 and L2, as well as forty teachers of German and Spanish as FL in primary and secondary schools, participated in the study. The analysis of the data offers an initial overview of the current state of pragmatics in language education within the Italian school context, highlighting both similarities and differences in L1, L2, and FL teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices. Additionally, the study identifies perceived challenges, providing essential insights for the design and implementation of teacher training interventions.

## *Keywords*

Pragmatics; teachers' cognition; Italian as L1 and L2; German and Spanish as FL; young learners; teacher training

## *1. Introduction*

According to the action-oriented model proposed in the CEFR, pragmatic competence is one of the three key components of communicative competence, alongside linguistic and sociolinguistic competence (Council of Europe, 2001:13; 2020:32). Pragmatics concerns the complex interplay between forms, social actions, and meanings in actual language use (Taguchi & Roever, 2017). From an acquisitional perspective, research on the development of pragmatics in first language (L1) acquisition suggests that this is a long-term process. The refinement of linguistic and

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is the result of close collaboration between the two authors. Stefania Ferrari is responsible for drafting Sections 1, 2, 4 and 5 while Rebecca Elena Vanelli contributed to Section 3. The research also involved Elisa Collauto, who collected data from teachers of Italian as L1 and L2 as part of her MA thesis, conducted under the supervision of Stefania Ferrari.

strategic skills continues into adolescence, or even beyond, partly due to the gradual expansion of social relationships (Cekaite, 2012). In contrast, the literature on interlanguage pragmatics indicates that exposure to a second (L2) or foreign language (FL) alone is insufficient for the development of pragmatic competence. However, interventions have been shown to have positive effects on learners' performance (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2012; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Given these findings, it is particularly important to promote the teaching of pragmatics in language education, especially for young learners. This would help strengthen both metapragmatic awareness and the ability to use language effectively in communication. For L1, this approach would address an area of communicative competence that is still under addressed in language education; for L2 and FL, it would ensure the acquisition of competences that would be difficult to develop through exposure alone, without explicit instruction. Furthermore, fostering interaction between L1, L2, and FL teachers could lead to valuable discussions on the similarities and differences between the various languages in learners' repertoires, thus encouraging more effective and inclusive teaching practices in mainstream education, with pragmatics potentially playing a pivotal role.

However, despite its centrality to language learning and the widespread consensus within the research community about its relevance to teaching, pragmatics is still rarely integrated into teacher development. In many educational contexts, it remains an area that teachers may have encountered but are not necessarily familiar with or equipped to teach effectively (Glaser, 2023). It is clear that if teachers lack sufficient knowledge of pragmatics or do not recognise its value in language teaching, they are unlikely to incorporate it into their practice. As the literature on teachers' cognition demonstrates, classroom practices are closely linked to what teachers know and believe (Borg, 2015). In some instances, teachers' knowledge and beliefs align with their teaching practices, while in others, there is a discrepancy. This mismatch can arise from a range of factors, including personality, classroom experience, institutional practices, and curriculum constraints (Borg, 2003). Moreover, differences between beliefs and practice can occur over time, as teachers may shift between different beliefs depending on the context or situation (Basturkmen, 2012). In the field of teacher education, investigating the relationship between teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices regarding pragmatics could provide valuable insights into trainees' needs. This would, in turn, inform the development of targeted training resources, facilitating the *pragmatic turn* in teaching that research advocates for.

With the aim of contributing to this issue, the present work discusses a survey designed to explore knowledge, beliefs, and reported practices of L1, L2, and FL teachers in primary and secondary Italian schools. The present paper discusses the initial findings from the piloting of the questionnaire, administered to teachers of Italian L1 or L2, and German and Spanish as FL working in urban areas of North-West Italy. In the following pages, after reviewing the existing literature on pragmatics and teachers' identity, cognition, and development (§2), the methodology used

in the pilot survey is outlined (§3). The main results from this initial dataset are then discussed (§4), followed by concluding reflections and implications for teacher education (§5).

## *2. Literature review: Teachers and pragmatics*

Research on teachers' cognition with a focus on pragmatics is comparatively new, and a limited number of studies have explored how teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and identity shape their daily practices regarding pragmatics, the majority of which focus on English.

With regard to teachers' knowledge and pragmatics, existing research consistently indicates that practitioners often lack sufficient theoretical and practical understanding. A number of surveys highlight the complex and varied ways in which teachers relate to pragmatics. Participants are generally familiar with communicative competence (which they consider highly relevant to their practice), but not with pragmatics itself. In other words, many teachers tend to equate communicative competence with speaking skills, oral proficiency, and fluency, rather than with the ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts (see Glaser 2023 for a review). In line with this, surveying secondary school EFL teachers in North-East Bulgaria, Ivanova (2018) reports that while all participants demonstrate familiarity with key aspects of pragmatics, such as politeness, and can identify a range of behaviors they consider inappropriate in certain cross-cultural encounters, nearly half of them fail to mention any specific speech acts. This could be due to unfamiliarity with pragmatic terminology, as terms like *speech act* are rarely used in course materials, where words such as *grammar* and *functions* are preferred. Accordingly, Savvidou and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2019) note that Greek EFL teachers recognise the importance of pragmatic issues like politeness and intercultural communication, but do not explicitly label them as such. Furthermore, teachers report teaching culture primarily through topics like food, festivals, folklore, and statistical facts, rather than focusing on sociocultural practices. Similarly, Khabcheche and Hamitouche (2022) show that Algerian TEFL trainees' pragmatic awareness is mostly theoretical. When asked to design a pragmatically focused lesson plan, few of the participants are able to apply their pragmatic knowledge. However, most express interest in this aspect of language teaching and acknowledge the need for more information and practical guidance on how to teach pragmatics.

In terms of teachers' beliefs, the studies mentioned above agree that teachers recognise the importance of pragmatics in effective language teaching, not only for language learners but also for native speakers. However, teachers themselves also generally acknowledge a number of challenges to its implementation, namely time and curriculum constraints, paucity of appropriate instructional materials, and perceived lack of appropriate knowledge. All these contribute to create limited confidence and thus a low level of integration of pragmatics in language teaching practice.

As far as teachers' identity is concerned, a few studies have explored whether native and non-native teachers face different challenges in teaching pragmatics. Cohen (2018) notes that while both groups share many of the same difficulties, non-native teachers often report a perceived lack of pragmatic knowledge or intuition, which makes them less confident when teaching situational variation and linguistic appropriateness, as opposed to linguistic correctness. Moreover, non-native teachers tend to feel less comfortable serving as a source of information on pragmatics in the target language, often feeling the need to consult native speakers or other resources (Savvidou & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2019; Hsie & Chuang, 2021). However, research suggests also that non-native teachers' multicultural backgrounds may provide them with an advantage in teaching pragmatics, often more effectively than some native speakers, who may rely exclusively on their intuition (Cohen, 2018). This implies that it is not the native vs. non-native distinction that determines the quality of pragmatic teaching, but rather the extent to which teachers are knowledgeable, aware, and open to pragmatic diversity (Ishihara, 2010). Regardless of nativeness, what learners need for effective development of their pragmatic competence is a skilled teacher who can offer suitable language models and engage learners with authentic input (González-Lloret, 2020). Therefore, teacher education and the availability of effective, research-based materials remain central to the successful implementation of pragmatics in language teaching.

In summary, despite the diversity of teaching contexts and data collection methods employed, this body of work underscores the critical role of teachers' identity and cognition in the effective integration of pragmatics into teaching practice. As a result, there is a clear need for professional development programs that equip teachers with knowledge about target language pragmatics, raise their pragmatic awareness, and introduce teaching strategies and materials. More recently, efforts have been made to include L2 pragmatics in language education, with the development of more specific guidelines for teacher training (for a review, see Cohen *et al.*, 2023; Glaser, 2023). However, despite the growing relevance of pragmatics in language learning on the whole, academic reports about pragmatics teacher training and education are still few. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to L1 and L2 teaching in mainstream multilingual classrooms, particularly for the Italian context.

### 3. Methodology

To address the gaps identified in the previous sections, an online survey was designed to investigate how language teachers approach pragmatics in the Italian mainstream classes. The study is part of the project *Oggi facciamo pragmatica*<sup>3</sup> (Ferrari, 2022), which aims to gather research-based data to inform teacher training

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and action research initiatives focused on pragmatics in Italian mainstream education. Specifically, the present work addresses two main research questions: In the Italian school context, what are the similarities and differences across L1, L2, and FL teachers in terms of knowledge and beliefs about pragmatics? How is pragmatics implemented particularly in terms of input selection and use?

The research questions are addressed through a discussion of the initial findings from a pilot version of the survey. The questionnaire consisted of 29 items, organized into several sections: biographical information (teaching experience, target language competence, training experience); reported teaching practices (classroom settings, activities, competences and abilities, materials, assessment); knowledge and beliefs about pragmatics (definition of pragmatics, pragmatic learning and teaching, identity, curriculum, self-efficacy, practical constraint); and teaching practices (assessing a student production and selecting input materials). The survey combined closed-ended items, statements to which teachers had to agree or disagree with, open-ended questions and practical tasks.

The survey was administered online via professional contacts with primary and secondary schools. Engagement in this pilot study was voluntary and informants were not selected through controlled sampling. A total of 68 teachers participated: 5 teachers of Italian as a L1; 23 teachers of Italian L2; 18 teachers of Spanish and 22 teachers of German as FL. The teachers were from primary and secondary schools located in urban areas of North-West Italy. Additionally, six participants took part in the follow-up interviews to evaluate the comprehensibility of the questionnaire and further explore some of the issues that emerged. Table 1 details informants' characteristics.

Table 1 – *Participants*

	<i>Italian L1</i>	<i>Italian L2</i>	<i>Spanish and German FL</i>
Language	1 NS primary; 4 NS secondary	23 NS	22 German (18 NNS; 4 NS); 18 NNS Spanish
Teaching experience			
Less than 10 years	1	10	15
More than 10 years	4	13	25
Training experience			
Pragmatics	–	2	–
Other topics	2	12	14

Regarding teachers' biographical data, several relevant trends emerge. All Italian as L1 and L2 professionals were native speakers, whereas FL teachers were mainly nonnatives. The latter assessed their level of proficiency between intermediate and advanced. As for contacts with the target language, FL teachers reported low exposure: surprisingly, less than half had regular stay abroad experience, contact with native speakers, or frequent use of language books or movies in the target language.



Concerning training, the majority of participants reported limited professional development related to pragmatics: only half of the total sample attended at least one course in the last two years, while a third of the informants did not report any experiences. Most of the training they attended focused on topics such as assessment, literacy development, classroom management or technology-enhanced digital teaching. Notably, only two teachers of Italian L2 mentioned training related to pragmatics, specifically regarding inclusive teaching and plurilingual approaches. These initial biographical data confirm the gap in pragmatics training for teachers in Italy and emphasize the limited exposure of nonnative FL teachers to the target language outside the classroom.

#### *4. Results and discussion*

Due to space limitations, this section focuses on two aspects investigated: teachers' knowledge and beliefs about pragmatics and practices in input selection and use.

##### *4.1 Teachers' responses to the questionnaire*

Before presenting the survey data, it is useful to report on the different reaction to the questionnaire of the three groups of teachers. As mentioned earlier, the number of participants is unbalanced across languages, with only 5 L1 Italian teachers completing the survey. Although over 20 teachers registered on the questionnaire platform, only 5 went beyond the biographical information section. In the post-questionnaire interview, L1 Italian teachers reported a certain degree of discomfort in participating in the study. The survey was perceived as difficult to understand: in some cases, the terminology was unfamiliar, in other teachers stated they did not know what to answer. One L1 teacher even mentioned that she did some online research on pragmatics and admitted to copy the definition. In contrast, FL teachers generally appreciated the questionnaire, finding it clear, comprehensive, assessing it as a useful opportunity to reflect on their own teaching practices. This data suggests varying levels of familiarity with pragmatics across the three groups of teachers.

##### *4.2 Teachers' knowledge and beliefs*

The unfamiliarity of teachers with pragmatics is further confirmed by an analysis of their responses to items assessing their knowledge. When asked to provide a definition of pragmatics, only 9 out of 28 Italian L1 and L2 teachers and 30 out of 40 FL teachers responded. The majority of these answers were either intuitive, overly general, or unclear. Most teachers defined pragmatics as 'the ability to use the language in communication' or 'the ability to reach communicative goals', thus equating it vaguely with communicative competence or success. Only one teacher of Italian L2 and 5 FL practitioners included terms such as *context*, *interaction* or *socio-cultural appropriateness* in their definition. Similarly, when solicited to indicate what students should learn in language classes, all teachers reported 'learning to commu-



nicate' and 'learning to interact' as the most important aspects. However, when detailing responses, L1 and L2 Italian teachers seemed to relate 'communication' with 'comprehensible production' or 'ability to produce clear and intelligible texts', while FL teachers tended to interpret interaction as 'fluency' or 'basic language skills'. The data briefly discussed confirm, at least for the informants considered, a lack of grounded conceptual knowledge in pragmatics, thus suggesting the need for more pragmatics focused theoretical training.

In terms of beliefs, despite the fuzziness in the use of terminology and the vagueness of definitions, all informants agreed on the importance of communicative competence and pragmatics in language learning. They also acknowledged the relevance of both classroom instruction and opportunities to use the language outside the classroom in authentic situations. Moreover, when considering the interaction between pragmatic learnability, learners' proficiency level and age, all teachers agreed that pragmatics can be taught either to young learners and from the elementary levels.

Regarding efficacy in teaching pragmatics, informants rated themselves as sufficiently capable, though they demonstrated a relatively feeble degree of self-confidence. In contrast, when questioned about critical challenges they face in teaching pragmatics, the three groups of informants identified different issues. Surprisingly, L1 Italian teachers pointed to 'the level of proficiency' of their students as the greatest criticality, remarking their 'poor repertoire' and 'little ability to use spoken language' as main challenges. L1 teachers appeared to confuse pragmatics with vocabulary and speaking skills, furthermore they partially contradicted themselves, as they did not rate the level of proficiency as an issue in previous survey questions. L2 and FL teachers mentioned instead 'lack of time' and 'insufficient teaching materials' as major barriers. L2 teachers emphasized the need for effective teaching strategies, while FL teachers stressed the need for authentic materials that align with students' proficiency levels. Interestingly, also FL teachers referred to 'proficiency' as an issue, they framed it in terms of mismatch between textbook and learners' actual proficiency level, or the wide proficiency differences amongst students in the same class. None of the informants autonomously identified syllabus demands or exam preparation as limitations to teaching pragmatics. However, when explicitly asked, it emerged that L2 Italian teachers considered this as an issue, while FL and L1 Italian teachers did not.

#### 4.3 Input selection and use

Concerning classroom input, teachers reported using a variety of sources alongside textbooks, with a notable reliance on digital, audio and video materials. For L1 informants, additional textbook materials were the main supplementary resources, while FL professionals commonly used songs, radio or tv programs, and films as common additional sources. In contrast, L2 teachers preferred photocopies or self-made materials. When asked to explain their choices, all teachers indicated the need to integrate content missing from the textbooks or to enhance learners' moti-

vation, either by 'arising curiosity' or by 'proposing more engaging activities'. While these were the primary reasons for L1 Italian teachers, some L2 and FL informants mentioned additional factors. For instance, 1 out of 23 L2 teachers and 8 out of 40 FL professionals emphasized the importance of improving both receptive and productive skills. Additionally, 2 out of 23 L2 teachers explicitly stated the need to enrich exposure to contextualized language use. Finally, 12 out of 40 FL informants declared the need of introducing students to culture. However, despite this broader range of reasons provided by L2 and FL teachers, none of the informants used specific pragmatic terms: they generally referred to 'a truthful view of language in use', 'authentic language' and 'immersion in the culture'. Overall, while all teachers acknowledged the relevance of broadening classroom input, each group of teachers motivated their choices differently: L1 informants prioritized motivation, L2 participants communicative needs, and FL teachers cultural immersion. In any case, the majority of the responses provided did not explicitly connect the use of additional input with enhancing learners' pragmatic competence or awareness.

When asked to select which of two suggested input materials – either a textbook dialogue or a spontaneous interaction – they felt was most relevant for their students, differences emerged between L1, L2, and FL teachers. L1 and L2 teachers struggled with the task: none of the L2 teachers responded to this item; L1 teachers provided inconsistent answers (1 chose the textbook dialogue, 1 chose the spontaneous interaction, 2 did not choose any). Italian L1 and L2 teachers also avoided justifying their choice, with some commenting that neither of the dialogues were 'linguistically interesting', which suggests limited familiarity with spoken samples as teaching materials. A partially different picture emerged from the FL teachers. A higher number of participants did the task (31 out of 40). Although the responses were again fairly evenly split between the two options, FL teachers offered a wider range of justifications. Those who opted for the textbook dialogue considered it a better choice, as it was seen as 'easier' and 'more comprehensible' for learners, 'without dialect variations' and 'more aligned with language used by students'. In contrast, those who opted for the spontaneous interaction referred explicitly to pragmalinguistic phenomena, opportunities for exposure to different language varieties, and the chance to introduce students to culture and facilitate cultural comparisons.

## 5. Conclusion

This work reported on a pilot survey developed to explore pragmatics and language teachers' cognition in Italian primary and secondary education. Despite some limitations, such as the small number of participants, the data provided valuable insights into the knowledge, beliefs, and practices of L1, L2, and FL teachers in Italy. These results both confirm trends observed in previous studies conducted in similar contexts and offer new contributions to the ongoing discussion on the pragmatic training of teachers.

Three main findings can be highlighted. First, our informants appeared to have limited conceptual knowledge regarding pragmatics, with L1 Italian teachers showing more pronounced gaps than their L2 and FL counterparts. This was evident not only from the paucity and narrow scope of responses to some open-ended items, but also from the vagueness of the terminology used. Many teachers tended to equate communicative competence with pragmatics, or to define it in terms of fluency, accuracy, and language skills. Terminological clarity is a key issue for teacher development, as it plays a central role in both learning and training. Terminology serves as a vehicle for restructuring teachers' intuitive knowledge into scientifically grounded concepts, and is a necessary prerequisite for them to effectively act as knowledge mediators in classroom practice. The data underscores the need to strengthen teachers' theoretical understanding of pragmatics across all language groups, while also emphasises the urgency of standardising theoretical frameworks among different language professionals working with the same students. A shared understanding and a common language regarding pragmatics is essential for ensuring coherent teaching practices, particularly in multilingual and multicultural classrooms.

Secondly, with regard to teachers' beliefs, while the overall attitude towards pragmatics and the role that teachers can play in fostering students' pragmatic awareness was positive – even at elementary levels and with younger learners – informants acknowledged their lack of confidence in implementing pragmatics and identified several challenges in doing so. Interestingly, none of the participants cited a lack of theoretical knowledge as a primary obstacle. Moreover, the three groups of teachers did not perceive these challenges equally. L1 Italian teachers mostly pointed to students' limited linguistic and interactional skills, an issue that cannot be directly addressed through teacher training. In contrast, L2 and FL teachers identified challenges related to teaching strategies and materials, which are issues that could be successfully addressed within targeted teacher training programmes. These findings suggest that teacher training should not only focus on pragmatic theory, but also on developing practical teaching skills, such as the selection of materials and the adaptation of teaching strategies to meet the pragmatic needs of students.

Finally, regarding input selection and use, although all teachers are accustomed to supplementing textbook materials with additional resources, their primary aim is not to enhance students' pragmatic awareness but to integrate teaching content, motivate students, or promote language skills. Only a few L2 and FL teachers explicitly mentioned providing students with exposure to contextualised language or culture. In practice, L1 teachers struggled to recognise the value of spoken interaction in their teaching, while many L2 and FL participants preferred to offer their students simple, comprehensible language samples rather than pragmatically and culturally rich materials. This suggests that teacher training should include practical guidance on analysing teaching materials, helping teachers to identify achievable teaching goals related to pragmatics. Moreover, fostering closer collaboration among the three groups of language professionals could enrich their collective ex-

pertise, creating a more integrated approach to teaching pragmatics and supporting more effective language instruction.

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight the importance of developing teacher training programmes that not only address theoretical aspects of pragmatics but also meet the practical needs identified by teachers. These include access to authentic materials, greater confidence in teaching pragmatics, and the development of practical, evidence-based strategies. Training should focus not only on expanding teachers' theoretical knowledge but also on building their confidence in teaching pragmatics through effective, concrete practices. Furthermore, closer collaboration between L1, L2, and FL teachers represents a valuable opportunity to enhance students' pragmatic competence and to create a more integrated and culturally sensitive learning environment.

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