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Founded in 1993

by Anthony Mollica

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ROSSELLA ABBATICCHIO

## Pros and cons of CLIL in contemporary foreign language classrooms: suggestions from an Italian ‘happy ending’

### *Abstract*

After more than 20 years of experimentation and practicing in Italy, CLIL can be looked at as a proper teaching method and no longer as some kind of short-run project. Still, planning a CLIL path properly involves many elements, means and strategies which must be constantly monitored and adjusted to both the needs of the students and the didactic aims of the teachers. It can be thus said that CLIL represents one of the latest evolutions of cooperative learning, where cooperation implies the relationship between the teachers involved as well as between the teachers and the students.

In most part of the CLIL experiences carried out in Italy, English remains the target language, though projects in some of the other major European languages have been run in many schools, especially those where foreign languages represent the main topic in the curriculum.

Therefore, the analysis will focus on a concrete example of a CLIL path, involving several high schools of Italy and of other European countries; approved for two editions by the EU because of the effectiveness of its implementation; and yet still not widely acknowledged.

### *Keywords*

CLIL, Italy, language learning, English, GLOCLIL projects.

### *1. CLIL in the contemporary Italian language teaching contexts: brief theoretical premises*

As well-known, the CLIL approach (Content and Language Integrated Learning) was firstly conceived in 1994 by David Marsh and Anne Maljers to indicate an integrated learning system which aims to provide the learner with a second or foreign language while teaching non-linguistic contents.

After almost 30 years from its birth, and also after 20 years of experimentation in Italy, CLIL can be looked at as a proper teaching method, and no longer as some kind of short-run project (Coonan 2002, 27; Coonan 2011; Cinganotto 2016, 84-100; Menegale 2023, 235-244). CLIL can be thus included among the communicative approaches in language teaching: but differently from the other ones, it involves that both students and teachers look at the foreign language as a means, a vehicle, and no longer as the main object of the teaching/learning process (Mohan 1986).

CLIL defines itself as a dual-focused education process (Marsh 2002, 66), since it requires teachers and students to pay attention to both non-linguistic subjects and the foreign language. As well-explained by Marsh and Nikula (1999,16):

CLIL can be carried out by the foreign language teacher, just as it can be carried out by a non-language subject teacher, but both must accept a fundamental point, namely that CLIL is about integration of language and content to enhance certain aspects of language acquisition, and is far more than just ‘using a foreign language’.

Speaking about a vehicular use of the foreign language, it’s probably interesting to focus briefly on what the Common European Framework of Languages defines as a vehicular language. As stated in the Framework, it probably sounds a bit like a ‘cover-definition’, including several experiences of teaching not necessarily related to CLIL (i.e. bilingual education, Content based Instruction, Full immersion programmes: Fishman 1976; Abbaticchio 2020, 85-107), which can be easily looked at as the ‘forefathers’ of CLIL. Similar teaching experiences have indeed been run in countries, such as Canada and Switzerland, where the presence of a bilingual community is well established. Some ‘smaller’ examples can be traced also in Italy, in regions such as Valle d’Aosta, Trentino Alto Adige and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, where all subjects are taught in two languages all year long and through the entire school cycle (from primary school to high school: see Lucietto 2008; Balboni 1999). The right definition here is that of bilingual education rather than proper CLIL, as in bilingual communities one of the two vehicular languages is in fact, for some of the speakers, a second language and not a foreign language, since it’s regularly used and spoken in the same area, thus more or less known to all the speakers.

As widely acknowledged, the main didactic aim of CLIL is to improve the quality of the language taught and learnt by increasing the time and the quantity of language exposure for all the students: but it can also lead to many more improvements in the educational process, if some requirements are observed. First of all, the foreign language adopted must be far more authentic than that taught in a traditional, ‘grammar-shaped’ language teaching context (where the linguistic situations presented to the students are very often of no practical use – i.e. role plays where students ask and give information about places where nobody needs to go or about things nobody intends to do). CLIL, instead, has to deal necessarily with the pragmatic needs of students in order to make them able to learn subjects such as maths or sciences or history; thus, the foreign language becomes

(...) the medium whereby language is used to reach other, non-linguistic objectives  
[...] the foreign language absolves a ‘natural’ function (in the eyes of the pupils) acquiring therefore greater authenticity (Coonan 2005, 6).

A further requirement of CLIL deals with the familiarity that students should have already with the non-linguistic content in their mother tongue: since they know at least something of the subject they’re going to learn in the foreign language, it will sound also easier and more interesting than the ‘traditional’ way of studying that foreign language they’re used to: therefore, there’s a good chance to avoid that sense

of deep uneasiness (known in Italian with the expression “filtro affettivo”) which arises in students when they have to face something completely new, therefore difficult to cope with. Furthermore, students should be completely concentrated on the non-linguistic subject: and by doing so, according to Krashen’s well-known rule of forgetting (1981), they’ll give no importance to the fact that by studying the main subject in a foreign language they are, in fact, learning the foreign language itself.

## *2. Planning a CLIL path in Italy: from fundamentals to variability of contexts*

Planning a CLIL path means keeping in consideration all the possible parameters, criteria and variables which could in a more or less relevant way influence the good end of the ‘path’ itself. Therefore, it becomes useful, but also necessary, to locate means and strategies in order to monitor all the teaching tools chosen for the whole duration of the project (Coonan 2002 and 2011). In order to give the CLIL path a coherent and logic aspect, the best didactic means of planning could be the curriculum, which puts all the didactic elements in a logic and coherent order and always keeps in consideration the importance of explaining the causes as well as the consequences of certain didactic choices (Balboni, Luise 1994).

In Italy as well as in many other countries, the planning of a curriculum for CLIL normally implies that at least two teachers (the language teacher and the non-linguistic subject teacher) are fully involved. These two ‘characters’ should work in pairs from the beginning to the end, following what in fact is an open didactic scheme (Freddi 1999). While planning a CLIL path, it becomes essential to focus on eight main elements:

- Context (real environment where CLIL takes place: sociological, cultural, economic and political aspects linked to the didactic context as well as the specific kind of school involved);
- Learning situation (role of the teachers and of their ability to work in pair, exact amount of usage of the foreign language and of the first language in teaching the non-linguistic subject: see Gilardoni 2023, 105-119);
- Didactic aims and scores (in the foreign language and in the non-linguistic subject);
- Needs (to be distinguished in perceived needs (as seen by the teachers from an objective point of view) and felt needs (as perceived and explicated by the students): Richerich, Chancerel 1977);
- Objectives (defined depending on the typology of students involved: adults, young learners, workers, curricular students and so on);
- Contents and means of linking foreign language and non-linguistic topics; this includes at least 3 possible approaches:
  - a. Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (C.A.L.L.A.), which uses non-linguistic topics in order to teach the foreign language (Chamot, O’Malley 1987 and 1994);

- b. Adjunct, which requires the students to gain some linguistic and non-linguistic pre-requisites (i.e. knowledge of the basic elements of both the foreign language and the non-linguistic issue) in order to take part to the learning process (Abbaticchio 2020, 85-107);
- c. Integration of Language and Content in Second\Foreign Language Instruction (I.L.C.S.) which focuses on some peculiar linguistic aspects while teaching the non-linguistic subject (Snow, Matt, Genesee 1989).
- Teaching methodologies (approaches chosen for presentation of contents and so on);
- Assessment (of students and thus of the efficaciousness of the CLIL approach itself).

As we can see, planning a CLIL path properly involves many elements, means and strategies which must be constantly monitored and adjusted to both the needs of the students and the didactic aims of the teachers. A peculiar reflection should always be done on which extra-competences the teachers involved should develop. In an idealistic situation – unfortunately it stays idealistic, though the many specific training paths created for teachers in Italy- both the teachers should have a good knowledge of the foreign language involved, thus the ability to recognize the linguistic problems that students could develop. On the other side, the language teacher should be aware at least of the basic elements of the non-linguistic subject. It can therefore be said that CLIL represents a proper evolution of co-operative learning, where cooperation involves the relationship between the two teachers and between the teachers and the students. CLIL teachers should also be aware of the cognitive, psychological and sociocultural aspects involved in the learning process as well as of the possibilities offered by technologies and interactive means (Coonan 2002). Thus, CLIL teachers are in constant need of updating courses which should provide them with the specific didactic techniques for both the foreign language and the non-linguistic subject. It is important to underline that these courses should make teachers aware that not all the means, contents and activities are suitable for all kinds of students: these should therefore be adjusted depending on factors such as age, social position, level of instruction and so on (Baker 1996; Snow, Brinton 1997).

The topic of the possible typologies of student deserves a bit more of discussion. The analysis of many CLIL Italian experiences has shown clearly that peculiar differences arise when teachers have to deal respectively with very young, adolescents or adult learners. It's commonly known that children look at their learning experience always with genuine curiosity and never or very rarely have problems to admit their mistakes and to adjust their way of acting (see Knowles 1990). The same level of spontaneity can be detected in pre-adolescent students, who still relate to teachers and schoolmates in an unproblematic mood – that is, without any fear of making mistakes and with no shame of being corrected. Things become tough, instead, when it comes to the analysis of the learning situation of adolescents who

have moved on to high schools: while children and pre-adolescents are very concerned about what the teacher thinks about their school behaviour, the students of this second category, in some cases expect to be involved in every decision which concerns them, including the teaching/learning procedures, though they clearly don't have the didactic know-how and experience required to decide about the curriculum. Things become even tougher when teachers have to deal with adults – i.e. workers in need to improve their linguistic competence due to professional or family reasons, such as the search of a new job or the migration to a different country (therefore moved by an instrumental motivation: Gardner, Lambert 1972). This type of learners are even more difficult to cope with, since they agree very rarely on changing their points of view or on admitting their mistakes or lack of knowledge, especially if they have to do this in front of a younger person, even if it's a teacher with a considerable experience (Demetrio 1990). The more frequent risk in such cases is the arising of a psychological block, which has to be avoided as far as possible, since it can lead to a general refusal for learning. It has been observed that in similar problematic contexts the CLIL approach acts more efficaciously than other more traditional approaches: firstly because, since the foreign language is not the main objective of the learning process but is rather an instrument to improve some knowledge the learners already have, they see it as something useful in order to get better scores in their working environment. Even so, learners' motivation and positive attitude towards the learning process remain a basic element, together with the learners' acknowledgement that they've gained some concrete advantages through the learning process (Shiels 1993). Another useful means to avoid psychological blocks in the learning process (at least in the first stages of a CLIL path) can be that of grading the exposure to the foreign language depending on the learners' level of competence: i.e., if learners have a basic knowledge of the foreign language, the amount of linguistic structures will be inferior to the information concerning the non-linguistic subject; vice-versa, if the teacher is dealing with learners whose curriculum puts the foreign language as main subject, the exposure to the language could be more intense, even oriented to its peculiar varieties (i.e. the specific code of the non-linguistic subject: Balboni 2023) while the non-linguistic topics could be introduced gradually.

For the majority of the CLIL experiences implemented in Italy, English remains the target language, though projects in some of the other major European languages are being run in many schools, especially those where foreign languages are the main topics in the curriculum.

In the following paragraphs the analysis will focus on a concrete example of a CLIL path, run in 4 different high schools both in Italy and in other European countries, approved twice by the EU thanks to the effectiveness of its implementation.

### 3. *The GLO.CLIL experience: teaching English through disciplinary contents*

#### 3.1 The project: general aspects and main aims

The Italian project known as GLO.CLIL (“Training teachers to design and share CLIL modules in a global village”) was carried out from 2010 to 2011, in its first approval, and from 2012 to 2013, in its second approval, by an Italian high school (I.T.C. “Romanazzi”, located in Bari, South Italy) as senior partner of a group of high schools of the same geographic area. The project was approved in the European Action “Leonardo da Vinci”, more specifically in the peculiar project field meaningfully named “Training teachers to design and share CLIL modules in a virtual global village”. This action is thus specifically addressed to teachers who concretely intend to develop a learning path by using CLIL methodology: therefore, the project GLO.CLIL aims at developing European VET teachers’ professional expertise according to the assumption that human resources play a relevant role in order to obtain a better educational offer and promote mobility throughout Europe.

In GLO.CLIL as well as in GLO.CLIL 2 all the project activities, addressed to secondary schools with different characteristics, have of course been based on the CLIL method and dealt with related themes and topics in order to boost English learning by teaching a variety of subjects, especially vocational ones, in the foreign language. The project recipients were both subject-teachers and teachers of English from secondary schools. Some of the partner schools were members of ENIS-European Network of Innovative Schools, which share a long-standing expertise on European projects ([www.gloclil.eu](http://www.gloclil.eu)).

The project can be looked at as a special opportunity for learning English (mainly) and other European languages as foreign languages, but also for the acquisition of content-subject knowledge and competences and for cultural and intercultural learning. In Italy, especially in the South, teachers were (and are still) in need of materials and, above all, of a constant training on how to approach CLIL in a pragmatic way, and more specifically to use it in the class also as a means of developing a significant communicative competence in the students (Gilardoni 2023, 105-119).

The job profile for a bilingual subject teacher, comprising of subject-related scientific and didactical requirements, is still not very clear (cfr. Coonan 2011). A further aim of the project has been, therefore, that of developing initial and in-service training of teachers in CLIL with reference to language and methodological acquisition, as well as to strengthen the development of teaching modules on a variety of subjects which could be part of the “global village”, in fact represented by a virtual village platform, expected to give CLIL-approach users the opportunity to get to know CLIL sources even in external contexts, such as in university courses with advanced-level students (Mazzotta 2023, 145-152).

The project also aimed to recognize and validate bilingual teachers’ competences by adopting the Europass Mobility Certificate (as far as competences acquired by the participants are concerned) and by using a competence validating format which has been progressively designed and issued by Host partners of the project for the eventual use of local authorities, in order to indicate the competences acquired by



participants as CLIL teachers (with reference to methodology-related competences). In both its editions, GLO.CLIL aimed to make participants aware of the methodological roots and consequent advantages of content and language integrated learning, to work on and examine different existing modules and to provide the participants with techniques suitable to build their own CLIL modules.

A large part of the training has involved a critical evaluation of available existing materials, both in printed and digital format. Participants have been asked to produce materials of their own, consisting of modules on different subjects, particularly on those related to the vocational field. Feedback have been gathered from the training tutors and the participants, who have been exposed to new practical techniques and then invited to critically evaluate the aims, procedures and outcomes of these techniques ([www.glocilil.eu](http://www.glocilil.eu)). Sessions have been conducted through mini-lectures and discussions, and participants have been asked to actively take part in groups, pairs and plenary sessions. Participants have then been invited to try out the new techniques and activities and send back reports and comments to the host training institution; they have also been given some guidance on how to disseminate new information to colleagues or teachers' associations in formal or informal in-service sessions.

The project, as partially said in the introduction to this paragraph, has been approved in two editions: the first, started in September 2010, and ended in December 2011; the second (named *GLO.CLIL 2*) started in 2012 and ended in December 2013.

### 3.2 Teaching English in GLO.CLIL: an example of modules' structure and contents

In both the editions of the project, the teachers involved have been asked to produce concrete samples of what, according to the theoretical premises they'd been trained to, could be a CLIL module.

As proved from the contents of the project website, the modules realized by the teachers involved have touched all the different fields and subjects normally included in the students' educational path (from Aerotechnics to Art History from a Math Perspective, from Computer Science to Geography related to food agriculture, from Philosophy and Antropology to Economics and Psychology: see [www.glocilil.eu](http://www.glocilil.eu) and [www.glocilil.eu/glo.clil2](http://www.glocilil.eu/glo.clil2)) and, consequently, also all the different varieties of English involved. That's why CLIL has been seen, in this specific 'path', as a quite useful instrument to teach also the specialized lexicons of a foreign language (Balboni 2002) also when the teaching/learning process is addressed to adults and professionals.

We will now introduce as an example one of the modules realized and personally analysed during a GLO.CLIL dissemination seminar. The module was on Psychology and was named "Underage drinking"; what follows is a part of the module, where the teacher who planned it explains the steps she followed in the classwork ([www.glocilil.eu/glo.clil2](http://www.glocilil.eu/glo.clil2)):

1.

Brainstorming: I will tell students to sit in a semi-circle and I will name two secretaries who will jot down the brain-storming main ideas.

First I will show this picture:

and I will ask the following questions:

- 1) What are the most common addictions among youth?
- 2) Which organs are affected by alcohol?
- 3) How dangerous do you rate / consider alcohol addiction?

Separate the class in four groups divided by addictions and ask them if they know the signs of the chosen addiction and ask them to guess which they may be.

Each group produces a list and then they compare the four lists.

2.

Step 2: INTRODUCING NEW IDEAS (around 40 minutes):

Our students will be made aware of addictions other than smoking and drinking. alcohol. We'll introduce the terms WORKAHOLIC, SHOPAHOLIC & CHOCACHOLIC. We will ask them the following:

“Did you know there are people who are addicted to work, shopping and chocolate? And people who spend many hours in the gym”.

Then write on the board the word Addiction and ask them if they know what it means. Ask them to give examples of various kinds of addictions, the possible causes and problems that can be caused. Ask students, What do you think addiction is? Comments and real-life anecdotes will be welcome.

These activities are, in our opinion, a concrete example of what working with CLIL implies in a ‘traditional’ class context. What is maybe more interesting from a linguistic point of view – apart from the full-immersion, also for the teachers, in the foreign language, even while instructing the students on what the activities will be – is the gradual, but progressive introduction of specific lexical terms (“workaholic”, “shopaholic”, “addiction”: see Cardona 2008; Nitti 2015, <https://www.dsu.univr.it/documenti/OccorrenzaIns/matdid/matdid866908.pdf>), which are usually already known to students (at least in their mothertongue, but also in their English form) from their out-of-school experiences, but which they had probably never related to their school studies.

A second point of strength shown by these pages is the constant involvement of students in every phase of the lesson: of course this should be a main point also in a traditional learning path, but CLIL somehow obliges teachers and students to create a cooperative learning and teaching environment (Caon 2023, 35-42), since – and perhaps this module shows it more clearly than other ones – some elements dealing directly with adolescents’ way of life are maybe better known to students than to teachers, and thus are a way



of motivating students strongly enough to participate actively in the whole teaching and learning process. This explains the teacher's intention to welcome real-life anecdotes, obviously referring to students' life out of the classroom.

#### *4. Conclusions: "a training for cooperative learning, an introduction to otherness"*

The advantages and the concrete improvements of integrating CLIL to the traditional teaching and learning processes have been stated and confirmed in more than one occasion. Still, some difficulties in planning and usage remain also after almost 30 years of training and practice with this methodological path, especially in some countries, when it comes to acknowledging CLIL as an official teaching method. Italy can represent an example of this partial "bad luck": indeed CLIL is still not yet officially inserted in the government educational programs, and should be gained from European actions and projects, which, good and well-organized as may be, are not long-lasting programs and can be renewed only in some cases (as it happened for GLO.CLIL project). Another problem concerns the role of teachers: since CLIL is not recognized as an official teaching path, teachers who gain the possibility of working with it (thanks to European projects) still have to do extra work in order to produce materials, since they can't do it during their normal job time. This, of course, affects also the economic pattern, since all the materials have to be produced and supported by the teachers in most cases, since the schools who can provide costless extra-material are still very few. Another question which stays problematic concerns the relationship between the teachers of the foreign language and the teachers of the non-linguistic subjects, who very often can't work together in harmony since they can't come to a compromise about what is more important in which moment of the learning path (Coonan 2002).

Still, the continuousness of reflections and studies on this methodological approach seems to confirm that adopting CLIL allows teachers and students to gain some meaningful advantages in terms of linguistic improvement as well as of better and positive acceptance of the intercultural dimension, which nowadays has become a turning point in planning every kind of educational program. With the words of Le Dreux, CLIL can be therefore looked at as

1. A workshop about mobility
2. A training for cooperative learning
3. An introduction to otherness.

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## Dual language programs: lessons learned in the trenches

### *Abstract*

This article reports on professional development experiences as teacher trainer in New York City schools, in particular with Dual Language (DL) programs. A successful dual language program appreciates and supports the cultural, linguistic, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students in our schools. The curriculum must incorporate these factors to ensure English language learners have the same educational opportunities as their peers (Gathercole 2016; Genesee, Hamayan 2006). Hence, the concluding reflections of the teacher trainer posits that any professional development offered to teachers, administrators, and parents needs to include aforementioned differences to be efficient.

### *Keywords*

Heritage language; English language learner; cultural inclusiveness; language objectives; content objectives

### *1. Introduction*

We need to dispel the myth that ‘sink or swim’ programs, otherwise known as total immersion programs, are better for students learning English as an additional language than bilingual programs. English language immersion programs have been popular in states with large immigrant populations. The assumption is that ELLs (English language learners) educated in English only, will learn the language better, faster, and will avoid the negative consequences of instruction in a language they do not understand. However, a closer examination reveals that immersion programs are grounded in value-driven notions of language and cultural superiority, and lack research backing. Immersion programs for ELLs in schools are an inappropriate, if not a harmful, choice (Garcia, Lawton, Diniz de Figueirido 2010; Garcia, Johnson, Seltzer 2016).

An alternative to an immersion program is a bilingual education program. Unfortunately, bilingual education is held responsible for dropout rates and very low literacy levels for ELLs born in and outside of the USA, and some supporters of English immersion programs eliminated bilingual education across the USA (Lindholm-Leary, 2017). As a result, the growth of English-only school mandates caused many schools to eliminate bilingual education programs in favor of English-only classes. The ‘bilingualists’ understand the theory behind the cognitive process

of second language acquisition and are knowledgeable of the research supporting SLA (August, Goldenburg, Rueda 2010; Wiley, Lee, Rumberger 2009; Valdes, Menken, Castro 2015).

The preservation of the mother tongue among ELLs is an asset that needs to be celebrated. If you enter a store or walk down the street in any community in the United States, it is likely that you will hear languages other than English being spoken. This is a part of everyday life for millions of US residents, yet, many Americans support English-only laws, stand against bilingual education, and wonder why recent immigrants don't 'want' to learn English. The rationales behind these viewpoints are not always based on facts or research. For example, many argue that preserving their heritage language – the language spoken at home, L1, among English language learners (ELLs) has negative consequences for them. In particular, they claim encouraging heritage language use prevents ELLs from learning English. Debates over how to best educate these students have been raging since the 1970s. A number of approaches have been tried to help children acquire English while simultaneously learning the rest of the school curriculum. Advocates of bilingual education – teaching academic content in two languages – claim it is the most beneficial approach in helping EL students to succeed (Alfaro, Hernandez 2016, 8-11).

Opponents favor an immersion method where the objective is to promptly transition ELLs to an English-only classroom. Support for immersion approaches has been based on a variety of rationales, including claims that bilingual education causes confusion, makes it more difficult for students to focus on learning English, and makes students less likely to embrace American values. However, most research indicates that, rather than causing a deficiency that ELLs must overcome, preserving heritage language yields a great advantage to these students, individually and to our broader society (Cheung, Slavin 2012).

A substantial body of research demonstrates cognitive advantages for those who are balanced bilinguals, adept speakers of their heritage and their new language. Those opposed to preserving heritage languages through public schools are both devaluing ELLs and their families, and taking away the bilingual students' cognitive advantage (Genesee, Hamayan 2016).

## *2. The rationale behind maintaining the heritage language*

Many people who are against bilingual education also believe that the academic content a child learns in language A, like the multiplication tables, does not transfer to language B, and children must then learn how to multiply again once they are proficient in English. The believers in immersion hold that bilingual education causes the brain to be confused – a zero-sum game where learning one language necessarily trades off with the capacity to learn another. Opponents of bilingual education also share the mistaken belief that the academic skills a child learns in one language will not transfer, and children must then relearn them in English. These beliefs may have been based on a crude understanding of how the brain

works (Baker 2011). Many more methodologically sound studies have shown that preserving heritage language benefits students (for further insights on benefits of heritage language retention see Filice 2010, 2006). Researchers who examined Latino students in a bilingual program with a morning curriculum in English and an afternoon curriculum in Spanish in Florida found that the relationship between bilinguals and the cognitive abilities of the students was positive (Valdes, Menken, Castro 2015; Sugarman 2012).

Rather than compromise brain power, bilingual education has been found to add to students' cognitive flexibility, allowing them to think about and apply the subtle meanings of different words in two (or more) languages (cf. Baker 2011). Furthermore, bilingual students, compared with monolingual students, have been found to develop complex skills, including readiness to see structure in patterns and a capacity to reorganize their thoughts according to feedback (cf. Beeman, Urow 2012). Researchers also found that bilingual students have an advantage in problem-solving that requires higher levels of attention and an understanding of numbers, in part due to a developed ability to create simultaneous connections among different symbols more effectively than monolingual students (Hattie 2012). Bilingual students possess an added advantage that goes beyond the sum of their parts. The complexity of the distinct structures and concepts of the two languages appears not to be additive, but, instead, multiplicative. Bilinguality multiplies the intellectual dividends that each language bestows on these students (cf. Gathercole 2016).

## 2.1 The bilingual debate

The debate between a pro-bilingual approach and an English-only perspective rages (Gandara, Orfield 2010; Garcia, Lawton, Diniz de Figueirido 2010; Hamayan, Genesee, Cloud 2013), but with politics and folk beliefs, not research, usually winning the debate. There is no evidence that indicates that ELL students have better test results by being in an English language immersion program.

Achievement outcomes were also compared from ELL students in Utah, Delaware and Texas (where bilingual education is offered) with those in Arizona (where it is not offered) on the NAEP. The results showed that there was a larger achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs in states that had an English-only policy (Rumberger, Tran 2010). Also, studies that analyzed literacy skills in their developing stages for Spanish-speaking ELLs in immersion classes showed that teachers who use the state-mandated English only approach succeeded with less than half of their student population. The remaining half needed more resources, time, and a variety of approaches (Blanchard, Atwill, Jimenez-Silva, Jimenez-Castellanos 2012). These findings challenge the appropriateness of immersion programs for ELLs. The research more convincingly supports the claim that immersion programs are NOT better than bilingual education.

What's ultimately at stake? ELLs are the fastest growing group in the public school system. But, these same students also have a higher dropout rate and a low-

er academic achievement gap than their peers (cf. National Education Association 2008). Many studies make a strong case for promoting educational approaches that preserve students' heritage languages as a way to both increase achievement and reduce dropout rates. Proponents of maintaining heritage language, while promoting students' acquisition of the English language, often call their approach 'English Plus' and argue that knowing more than one language should be viewed as an asset rather than a deficit. It is a curious thing that at many high schools, ELLs in one class will be actively encouraged to abandon their heritage language while native English speakers across the hall will struggle to learn German, French, Italian, Spanish or even Chinese and Arabic (Hamayan, Genesee, Cloud 2013).

## 2.2 Why is there a sudden interest in Dual Language Programs?

In an era of globalization and international competition when most countries recognize more than one official language, the goal should be to develop cognitive talents and linguistic skills in all communities. We should not foster policies that appear to stifle and discourage the participation of ELLs and poorer students in educational advancement. Because one cannot effectively separate language, culture, and learning, English language immersion programs had the unintended effect of devaluing immigrant cultures via language restrictions. These policies perpetuate assimilationist approaches in the education of ELLs. The goal of immersion programs is to foster a forceful abandonment of the native language and culture in order to be replaced by the dominant language and culture. This is known as the subtractive model when the students' language and culture are subtracted or eliminated (cf. Lindholm-Leary 2016a, 2016b, 2017). This was also done prior to *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Gandara, Orfield 2010; Powers 2008; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1972).

Linguistic and cultural competency is a crucial factor that provides students with the tools they will need in order to take advantage of globalization opportunities (Healy 2013; National Education Association 2008). Knowing how to use another language effectively depends in large part on knowing the cultures where those languages are used. The knowledge of other languages added to the English language provides students with all the globalization benefits once they leave school, including the exposure gained through international travel and the internet. The USA, which is a nation that grew with immigration, has a very low level in languages other than English compared to Asia, Europe, and Central and South America. It is the intention of this paper, (together with Flores, Murillo 2001; García 2001b; MacGregor-Mendoza 2000) to prove that education for Latino or Hispanic students in the USA needs to do a better job at integrating cultural, linguistic and educational components into the curriculum. The goal of dual language programs is to foster bilingualism, biculturalism and biliteracy for all students in a respectful and equitable manner (Hakuta, Butler, Witt 2000; Mahoney, MacSwan, Haladyana, Garcia 2010). The revised census of 2004 indicated that by 2050, people of color would make up 50% of the population in the USA (cf. National Center



for Education Statistics, 2004). The number of dual language programs is growing rapidly in the USA (Christian 1999; MacGregor-Mendoza 2000). While the vast majority of dual language learners are in English and Spanish; other languages are offered as well, such as Arabic-English, Korean-English, French-English, and Russian-English (Crawford 1992; Flores, Murillo 2001).

### 2.3 The rationale for dual language education programs

Research has shown that if students have a strong foundation in their native language, these skills can then be transferred to the second language. In the USA, Spanish is viewed as a language with a low social status, and, unfortunately, this leaves ELLs with a little incentive to learn and use their native tongue. This can put ELLs at risk for difficulty in acquiring literacy and academic language skills in English in school because the native language is not supported at home or in the community. On the other hand, native speakers of English obtain a strong foundation thanks to the support from the community. Those students who speak the mainstream language and are immersed in the second language in school don't run the risk of losing the development of their native language. Instructing ELLs in their native language while in a dual language program gives them a solid foundation to acquire English as a second language (Aquino-Sterling, Rodriguez-Valls 2016, 73-81).

ELLs who learn all academic subjects in their native tongue are better equipped to comprehend material than students in English-only programs because the instruction is provided in a language they have mastered. Those ELLs who learn academic vocabulary and literacy in their native tongue in elementary school are better equipped to close the cultural, linguistic and literacy gap compared to their mainstream counterparts by transferring their skills to English later on (Lindholm-Leary 2017).

ELLs in dual language programs have very high levels of proficiency in their mother tongue and also obtain the same levels of proficiency in English, and may even surpass those ELLs that are instructed in English-only. Advanced levels of bilingualism result in enhanced academic achievement and general cognitive ability (Bialystok 2006; Hattie 2012; Lindholm, Aclan 1991).

Advanced levels of bilingualism resulting in enhanced competence gained by ELLs in Developmental Bilingual Education (DBE) programs is advantageous for reasons linked to globalization, cognitive development, and cultural understanding. If instruction in English-only were the best solution, one would not expect to find such significant gaps in the achievement of ELLs. Thus, educating ELLs in English-only is clearly insufficient to close the achievement gap. This was observed in the schools in New York City where professional development programs were conducted in the years 2017, 2018, and 2019. Three schools adapted a DL program while one decided to use a transitional bilingual education model. The NYSESLAT (New York State Exam of English) scores were much lower than in the other two schools where the DBE model was used. In addition, many long-term studies show



that when students spend longer periods of time in dual language programs, and when more instruction is provided in the native tongue, their academic outcomes improve (Block 2007; Lindholm-Leary, Howard 2008; Howard, Sugarman 2011; Thomas, Collier 2002).

#### 2.4 Cultural inclusiveness and understanding

Many decades of research have shown that additive bilingual programs correlate with achievement in the content area and proficiency in both the second language and the mother tongue (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, Chritian 2006; Lindholm-Leary 2001; Lindholm-Leary, Genesee 2010; U.S. Department of Education 2012). This also helps to increase their self-esteem and attitudes towards different cultures (de Jong, Bearse 2014; Lindholm-Leary 2016b; Lindholm-Leary, Howard 2008; Potowski 2007). The loss of the mother tongue is associated with lower levels of second language acquisition, poor achievement in school, and emotional and psychological disorders (Hammer, Lawrence, Miccio 2008; Lindholm-Leary 2014; Lindholm-Leary, Borsato 2006; Montrul 2016). Therefore, the outcomes for English language learners are more positive if they are given the chance to develop the native tongue and the second language at the same time.

Those who perceive native-tongue instruction as deficient in patriotism or counterproductive to high levels of academic achievement, should consider the following: If you were to go to another country where you do not speak the language, as much as you would want the instruction to center around the new language and move you to a conversational level, would it not be nice if, at least the initial instructions, could be provided in your language, so that you could ask questions in your language and better engage the learning process? Or would you prefer to be tossed into the pool and be told –possibly in a language you don't understand – to 'sink or swim'?

Prejudices exist among students who speak different varieties of the same language, but DL classrooms provide a supportive environment in which students can learn about dialect variation and also get to know speakers of different varieties of their own language. This can help in reducing biases since at times, the language used in their homes may be inappropriate in schools and vice versa. On another note, what is appropriate in schools may be totally unfamiliar to ELLs in their homes (Greensfield, Quiroz, Raef 2000). Many students may have difficulty fitting into the classrooms and benefiting from classroom instruction because teachers assume that they have the same funds of knowledge as mainstream students do. This makes it very difficult for many ELLs to link new learning to their prior experiences. Participation in a DL program provides them with experiences where different cultural norms and expectations are respected and practiced, and this, in turn, broadens their cultural competence.

DL learners use both their languages (L1 and L2) simultaneously to enhance their problem solving and critical thinking skills while learning new things. The multiple ways in which dual language learners use the combined resources of their

two languages for learning have been referred to in different ways: cross-cultural transfer, translanguaging (Garcia 2011), bridging (Beeman, Urow 2012). Teaching ELLs to use the native tongue enables them to participate in all classroom activities instead of being passive participants in the class (Bialystock 1991). In a related vein, teaching ELLs in the home language allows them to engage in instructional activities and not to sit on the sidelines. ELLs are often left on the sidelines when instruction is in English before they are competent in English. Engagement in classroom activities is critical for learning (Golderberg 2008).

The curriculum should value and reflect the languages and cultures that students bring to the classroom every day (Lindholm-Leary 2017). In order to accomplish this, it's important to include books that have authentic literature in both L1 and L2. This will promote bilingualism, biliteracy and biculturalism. Access to material and books in both languages is necessary in order for students to develop full linguistic and cultural proficiency in L1 and L2. Authentic materials also promote sociocultural development, which highlights comprehension. Students then see themselves as characters in the book and can compare and contrast themselves with their book counterparts (Phinney 1993). This supports an identity that is flexible both socioculturally and interculturally speaking. This development is as important as the development of language in a dual language program.

## 2.5 The source of bilingualism

In US schools, native English speakers and students who speak another language at home often interact. This generates bilingual students, who speak L1 at home and L2 in school. Consequently, bilingual education programs were originally based on the principle of assimilation to the US culture and adopting English as the primary language (Crawford 1992; Minaya-Rowe 1988).

Vygotsky proposed that a cognitive schema in a child to function in the world is bound by culture (Cole, Cole 2001). Children that come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds will either have to accommodate the schema they bring with them or create a new one. Duquette (1991) concluded that we need to understand children and allow them to express themselves instead of transitioning them to the mainstream culture (in the same way that monolingual English dominant children do at home and in society). The teachers who are asked to respond to these challenging needs tend to see the children as limited when in fact, they are not.

## 2.6 The benefits of a dual language program

Bilingual dual language programs are beneficial at different levels:

*Education:* DL classes are for all students, whether they are L1 or L2 speakers; upper, middle or lower Socio Economic Status (SES); elementary, junior high school or high school students. High levels of proficiency can be obtained in both L1 and L2 (Fisher, Frey 2010; Beeman, Urow 2012).

*Cognition:* Bilingual students are better abstract thinkers who can display high levels of originality and creativity while performing an academic task. They are keen users of the structure of L1 and L2, including grammar, semantics, pragmatics, morphology, syntax, phonetics and phonology. This facilitates reading development because they can now decode academic vocabulary (Crandall, Stein, Nelson 2012).

Bilingual people can comprehend and speak to others from a variety of cultural groups, and this enhances their world. They are exposed to different values, customs, and L2 speakers' ways of looking at the world and the communities they represent (Beeman, Urow 2012).

*Economy:* Many positions nowadays require proficiency in more than one language. Students that come from Spanish, Russian, French, German or Italian households are seen as resources that can be valuable to the economic relations between the USA and other countries (Hilliard, Hamayan 2012).

*Global:* Due to the global turmoil and countries declaring war towards one another, the USA can benefit from biliterate people that can aid in instilling peace in the areas where English is not spoken. If negotiations and debates were conducted in a variety of languages, then democracy could be protected while ensuring the well-being of the people around the world (Hamayan, Freeman 2012).

Added effective benefits are envisaged by supporting everybody in the school building in order to

- Improve delivery of instruction and learning,
- Decrease the number of students who drop out,
- Develop a better partnership between parents-teachers-communities while keeping the common goal of their child's education in mind,
- Use research-based best practices,
- Bring in consultants to provide ongoing workshops that show steady and positive growth,
- and improve race relations.

### *3. Professional Development. The flip-flopping of languages of instruction: to separate or not?*

Teachers need to go through rigorous training where all ELL students achieve high academic expectations. They need to be role models for and show respect, diversity, languages, ethnicity, religions and SES. Delivery of instruction should be one language at a time. Code-switching should be allowed for the students but not the teacher. Translations are not an effective method for learning L2 because the students will wait for the explanation in a language they understand and dismiss the L2.

On the one hand, it has been argued (Valenzuela 1999) that the use of each language should be strictly separated when teaching specific subjects. The more students are encouraged to use the non-English language, the more likely their proficiency in that language will be enhanced. On the other hand, there is a grow-

ing recognition of some benefits using both languages as a resource for learning (e.g. Cummins, Bismilla, Chow, Cohen, Giampapa, Leoni, Sandhu, Sastri 2005; Cummins 2007; Lyster, Collins, Ballinger 2009). The way to align these seemingly conflicting points of view is to let *the languages of learning* (used by the student) rely on and feed one another; but keep *the languages of instruction* (used by the teacher) separate (cf. Hamayan 2010).

It is important that established programs revisit their language allocation plans from time to time. While the schedule should be re-examined periodically, frequent changes are to be avoided because they can compromise program outcomes and result in teacher frustration. This is exactly what happened in the 2016-2017, 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years in three New York City schools (one in Queens, one in Manhattan and one in the Bronx) where the author<sup>1</sup> worked as a dual language professional staff developer by providing hands-on coaching, professional development and also conducted a book study with Beeman and Urow's (2012) text.

### 3.1 The Cognitive benefits of dual language programs and lessons learned in the trenches

According to Beeman and Urow (2012), the planning, the implementation and the coordination of a dual language program using a multifaceted and integrated approach will provide a much better delivery of the lesson, an assessment protocol, and professional development. Bilingualism provides better academic and cognitive benefits (Hakuta 1986). After all, bilingual people have more experience with the interpretation and analysis of language compared to monolingual people. Developing a high level of bilingualism allows students to become "linguists" and this provides the opportunity to compare and contrast the structure of L1, grammar and vocabulary to that of L2 (Bialystok, Hakuta 1994; Lambert 1984).

Administrators should also make sure that teachers who must coordinate with one another are given the time to do so in their schedules. This should be considered regular planning time, and it should not be disrupted by class coverage and other duties; it is essential time needed by DL teachers and coordinators to ensure the success of the program. Each pair of teachers needs at least 45 minutes of sacrosanct time built into each week's schedule dedicated to this purpose.

In the New York City schools where professional staff development was provided for three consecutive years, the weaknesses in the program were investigated and specific revisions to the curriculum were made. Data was used for this intended purpose (questionnaires, on-site professional development sessions that took place after school, co-teaching strategies, lesson plans and curriculum development for classes taught in Spanish) to provide feedback to help strengthen the program and never to punish teachers or question the legitimacy of the programs.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Buttaró.

### 3.2 Challenges faced by urban districts: Implementation

There is a tendency to forget that many of our students live in low-income housing, come to school hungry and may come from households where there is drug, alcohol or sexual abuse; where mom and dad have long working hours or may not be present and, on top of all of this, are also culturally and linguistically diverse (Laterneau 2001). It is worth highlighting that in 1996, the Latino population represented 11% of the USA population but this number will increase to 25% by the year 2050 (cf. Osterling 1998). In fact, migration to the U.S. is expected to increase from 2020 to 2030, from a level of 1,090,000 in 2020 to 1,450,000 in 2030 (cf. US Census Bureau).

Standardized tests cannot appropriately assess what DL students know in English or in content areas if tested in English, until at least grade 4 when they have gained enough proficiency in English. Teachers in DL programs need to gather information, both quantitative and qualitative, in a uniform way to show what their students know and can do in English and in their academic subject as they move through the grades to make a strong case for their program in the face of such testing demands.

Teachers should engage in meaningful conversations with the students and develop the role of facilitator to encourage a genuine development of higher-order thinking skills instead of memorization (Cornelius-White 2007; Klingelhofer, Schleppegrell 2016; O'Day 2009; Reznitskaya 2012).

### 3.3 Hiring and Recruitment of Teachers

There should be a clear and concise plan for hiring, preparing and assigning teachers to subject areas and/or grade levels. The language allocation plan should clearly describe the type of teachers who are needed at each level and what language they need to be able to teach in. It is not enough to have proficiency in only social language if you are teaching and discussing abstract academic subjects. In one of the interviews for a dual language position in one of the New York City schools, the professional development teacher<sup>2</sup> made sure that the following characteristics and skills were evident when helping the Principal select staff for a DL program (Freeman, Freeman, Mercuri 2004):

- A full understanding of what it means to maintain fidelity and commitment to the program
- Proficiency in all four domains of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the language of instruction
- Ability to work in cross-cultural settings
- Willingness to collaborate or team teach
- Willingness to find or develop resources
- Willingness to accept co-teaching in the classroom

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Buttaro.

During the professional development, it was ensured that the experienced DL teachers were prepared to act as resources for novice DL teachers. They served as coaches or mentors, modeling in the classrooms, and providing them with feedback on their teaching as they became used to working in a DL environment.

#### 4. *Planning Lessons*

It was noticed that both in the preparation of teachers at the university level and in the K-12 classrooms, there was still some confusion regarding the objectives. Lesson plans in DL classrooms involve double planning because teachers have to plan for both language and content learning to occur in tandem. Teachers also need to plan for two groups of students: those that learn through the use of L1 and those who learn through the use of L2. Teachers learned that they had to plan for multiple kinds of learning; in addition to the two primary sets of objectives related to language and content, there are secondary objectives related to cross-linguistic transfer; cross-cultural learning, and general learning. The breakdown is illustrated in table 1 (August, Carlo, Calderón 2002; Beeman, Urow 2012).

Table 1 – *Instructional Objectives in the DL Program*

<i>Instructional Objectives in the Dual Language Program</i>	
<i>Objectives</i>	
•	<i>Content objectives</i> that are based on state, district and school standards that apply to all students in the school or district.
•	<i>Language objectives</i> that include both academic and transactional (social) oral language skills and literacy.
<i>Secondary Objectives</i>	
•	<i>Cross-linguistic transfer objectives</i> that teach students how to make links between their two languages.
•	<i>Cross cultural learning objectives</i> that promote a true understanding of a culture other than one's own and being able to function in an effective way while in it.
•	<i>General learning objectives</i> that are linked to study skills, learning strategies, and time management.

Content objectives should be cognitively challenging, grade and age appropriate. They should also be aligned with district and state standards. It is important to not water down the content objectives when planning for instruction for students in the DL program.

#### 4.1 Language Input

The students immersed in L2 possess language functions such as fluency and grammar that are not nativelike. This is why formal instruction in L2 is crucial at the beginning stages of L2 acquisition. Comprehensible input is obtained by incorporating the following (cf. Larsen-Freeman, Tedick 2016):

- Speech patterns that are slower
- Speech patterns that are simplified
- Speech patterns that are repetitive
- Speech patterns that are expanded
- Speech patterns that are paraphrased
- Use gestures (TPR) and language production that are highly contextualized
- Check for understanding
- Check for confirmation
- Scaffold dialogue in order to negotiate meaning
- Interpretations of role, intent and sequence should be limited where and when possible

Likewise, integrate the following sheltered techniques:

- Enhance the visual and auditory connection by including pictures, charts, graphs and realia
- Model the use of language by letting students make connections between what is being taught and their prior knowledge
- Let students become the facilitators (practice oracy/oral language development)
- Use alternative forms of assessment, besides multiple-choice formats. Portfolios are a wonderful way for students to see their progress, and teachers can check for understanding
- Bring outside sources, supplement, complement materials, that allow comprehensible speech and the opportunity to scaffold skills to negotiate meaning and make connections between course content and prior knowledge
- Allow students to act as mediators and facilitators
- Provide comprehensible speech, scaffolding, and supplemental materials

## 4.2 Language Objectives

There is a distinct difference between language that is content obligatory and content compatible. This distinction was first introduced by Snow, Met, Genesee (1989). 'Content obligatory language' is language that is essential for communicating about specific topics in each academic domain, such as science or mathematics. In general, content obligatory language includes the following:

1. Specific and often technical vocabulary that is integral to the content you are teaching.
2. Sentences of grammatical patterns that are commonly used to talk about specific subjects.
3. Discourse patterns and text genres that are typical of how to talk or write about topics in different academic subjects – such as expository text characterized by reading and writing about specific topics; narrative text, which is common when writing about social studies topics, and sequential or procedural texts.



‘Content compatible language’ is language that is not essential for talking or learning about specific academic subjects but can be used during content lessons to expand students’ vocabulary, grammar and discourse skills.

#### 4.2.1 Academic Language

Academic language has many definitions (cf. Bailey, Butler 2002; Scarcella 2003). Chamot and O’Malley (1994: 40) define it as follows: “The language that is used by teachers and students for the purposes of acquiring new knowledge and skills ... imparting new information, describing abstract ideas, and developing students’ conceptual understanding”. Academic language varies depending on the subject. Task production requires students to show competency in a variety of language functions. Below is a list of examples:

- To argue for or against a point of view in a persuasive way
- Compare, analyze and contrast
- Offer an argument in a logical way
- Analyze differing points of view
- Synthesize and interpret/integrate information
- Evaluate alternative points of view and factual information
- Justify a prediction, as in a science experiment on the metamorphosis of a butterfly
- Hypothesize about the causal relationship between events
- Follow or give complex directions
- Justify one’s point of view/debate different points of view

#### 4.3 Circumstances that may lead to the loss of language equity in dual language programs

Calderon (2002, 121-146) indicates that there are tendencies that diminish the opportunities for equity and success. A few of these tendencies stand out:

- DL programs where there are more books in English than in Spanish
- DL programs where English is viewed as more important than Spanish
- DL programs where more time is spent on English instruction than Spanish instruction (especially during state testing time)
- Teachers do not have the academic background to teach in Spanish
- Teachers do not have enough literacy skills to teach in Spanish
- Teachers are not offered enough days of professional development
- Lack of high literacy levels in L1 and L2 for all students
- Lack of materials in Spanish which causes teachers to translate lessons at home (this is very time consuming and ineffective as well).
- The difficulty in picking up the Spanish lesson where the English lesson leaves off and vice versa.
- Time to work on the development of rubrics and graphic organizers in Spanish.



The above tendencies are directly connected to the Spanish language since most of the Professional Development sessions and materials are always in English. In addition, getting to know your students is important since, for example, there are different regional accents and varieties of the Spanish language that the students, teachers, administrators and staff speak. This affects their history of immigration as well as their cultural backgrounds from central and South America. An effective and successful DL program needs to develop oracy (oral language skills) that offers students both structured and unstructured opportunities to develop oral language proficiency (Saunders, O'Brien 2006; Schleppegrell 2013; Montrul 2016).

### *5. Assessment of Dual Language Programs*

Teachers can use formative and summative assessments to evaluate student performance. The formative assessment is an evaluation that takes place during instruction so that the instructor can adjust the instruction for students as the lesson is taking place. Summative assessment occurs at the end of the marking period, semester or year to show how students are making progress that is expected. Examples of typical summative assessments include state assessments, district assessments, end of unit tests, and so on (Cummins, Bismilla, Chow, Cohen, Giampapa, Leoni, Sandhu, Sastri 2005, 38-43).

Peer and self-assessments make learners aware of their own progress and also help the students become independent learners. Performance indicators are statements of how the students express their learning; and this is determined by their proficiency level in the language of instruction.

#### *5.1 Authenticity of assessments and portfolio contents*

It takes time to reflect authenticity of assessment, and it should be based on the classroom and outside-of-class activities like field trips. This is a joint activity that both the teachers and students work on to show academic progress while learning the new language. In the portfolios, the students can select samples of their projects to show their growth and learning throughout the year. They can have access as they observe the measurable growth while developing ownership of their projects and use rubrics to assess their knowledge of the four domains of L1 and L2. The items mentioned below can be displayed in their respective portfolios (Freeman, Freeman, Mercuri 2004):

- Narratives in both their L1 and L2
- Reading logs that show proficiency levels in L1 and L2
- Pictures/images that show their proficiency levels in their comprehension.
- A videotape/or audiotape that reflects their input and output in both L1 and L2
- Dialogue journal conferences between the teachers and the students to show progress as they are acquiring L2.

- Provide samples of good-better-best work as well as unacceptable or mediocre work so that everyone involved has an idea of how their projects will be assessed and evaluated.

5.2 Assessment of ELLs' language development: What are the common denominators in errors that show up in their four domains (Listening / Speaking/ Reading/ Writing)?

A serious concern is the rapid assessment of ELLs to measure development in L/S/R/W skills. In many schools, it is done shortly after their arrival in the USA. Research clearly indicates that it may take between 7-9 years for a student to develop English Academic skills (Collier, Thomas 2001). If ELLs are tested in L2 too soon, the standardized tests will not show a true assessment, thus undermining the students' capabilities. DL programs need to show progress for the use of L1 and L2 in an equitable way. A multiple-choice test format does not truly assess higher-order thinking skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (cf. Urow, Beeman 2011). These tests do not measure the language capacity in a DL class, especially if the tests are translated from English into Spanish, making them culturally and linguistically biased. Many students come from countries where open-ended questions are asked in an oral and written test. They do not have the exposure to multiple-choice test taking and do not truly represent what actually happens in the classroom on a daily basis (Arter, McTighe 2001; Oller 1997).

### 5.3 Strategies for understanding in DL programs

The teacher's background knowledge and how he/she explains the lesson can be an impediment or clear road to the students even if the topic or subject are different. The following techniques are useful for ELL's understanding without translating the text(s).

- Speech patterns need to be slowed down.
- Sounds need to be enunciated in a clear form.
- Do not raise your voice.
- Long and complicated sentence clauses need to be broken down into short sentences with a simplified explanation of how to do something.
- Repeat, paraphrase, and clarify any new material, or the explanation of task.
- New vocabulary needs to be emphasized by providing a visual and auditory connection (saying it and writing it on the board).
- Display an idiomatic expression chart together with the word walls in L1 and L2 plus a cognate wall. This will help students' understanding, and it will enhance the explanations for those students who are at the entering or emerging stages of second language acquisition.

Many books are available for children's literature; however, many of them are extremely difficult because of the excessive use of idiomatic expressions or unrelatable topics (such as reading about Alaska). Time is of the essence here, with one day in English and one day in Spanish; there might not be enough time to explain it all.

Other texts do not allow for the rich conversations that are necessary for oral language development or might be too simple for the students.

#### 5.4 Literacy skills identification in L1 and instruction adjustment

Research has indicated that the higher the literacy skills are in L1, the easier it is to transfer them to English (cf. August, Hakuta 1997; Cummins 1981). In all three schools, there were cases where it was better to teach the student in L1 while in other cases, the student could receive instruction in L2. If the student's literacy levels were highly developed in L1, then the student could develop L2 literacy skills faster than the student enrolled in ESL programs only. This happens because the skills that are taught in L1 can transfer to L2 and learning in L2 (cf. August, Carlo, Calderon 2002). When L1 students are mixed with L2 students, the instructor has to make sure to avoid the typical "sink or swim" method that many were exposed to in the decade of the 1960's.

#### 5.5 The development and teaching of literacy skills

August, McCardle, Shanahan (2014) reviewed research on effective instruction and noticed that more attention was focused on reading skills, and that the latest research with ELLs shows how the strategies mentioned below have proven to be advantageous. These work well for all L2 learners, not just ELLs.

- "Phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, oral reading, fluency reading comprehension and writing" (August, McCardle, Shanahan 2014, 41) need to be explicit.
- Frequent use of repetition with the variety of pitch, tone, intonation and pronunciation.
- The use of TPR to act out verbs.
- The use of pictures, images or other visual aids that illustrate the meaning of words in a variety of contexts.
- The material has to match the reading level of the students and offer proper scaffolding to support understanding.
- The interaction of the book between the teacher and the students should enhance understanding.
- Teachers need to preview the material before showing it to the students and ask questions about it.
- The use of graphic organizers also enhances students' comprehension. All three schools tried it and noticed a difference.
- Since the students need to practice the language, 80% - 90% of class time should be dedicated to students' practice of the language and teachers should speak less (this is still a challenge in all three schools).
- Since students have a variety of levels in all four domains in both L1 and L2, differentiation of instruction is crucial in order to accommodate the needs of the student.

- Homophones cause confusion; therefore, teachers need to provide explicit instruction that clarifies vocabulary and concepts. All types of visual aids should be used and the use of TPR helps to build the meaning of words. As per Baker, Lesaux, Jayanthi, Dimino, Proctor, Morris, Newman-Gonchar (2014: 3), academic vocabulary words need to be taught “intensively across several days using a variety of instructional activities”.
- Rather than using a decoding approach, a better impact on reading comprehension can be obtained by emphasizing meaning. This develops background knowledge where the teacher offers a teacher-made definition of key vocabulary and uses the new terms in sentences. This is accomplished by providing extra details to the stories and more questions for the students to answer throughout the reading process.
- With writing, teachers need to model how to revise a piece. By using the keyboard instead of paper and pencil, students can improve the quality of their writing (all three schools provided computer labs for the students to use during the week).
- Baker, Lesaux, Jayanthi, Dimino, Proctor, Morris, Newman-Gonchar (2014, 3) also recommend that teachers provide “regular, structured opportunities to develop written language skills”.

The problem with the dual language programs in all three schools was that they were superimposed to the structure of a monolingual class (Calderon 2001a, 2001b). A whole reform is needed because they are not remedial, they are not for students that display behavior issues in a monolingual class and then transferred to a dual language one. They do not offer a subtractive bilingual model but rather an additive one; therefore, the mindset of administration, teachers, staff and parents needs to change, and this can only take place if the whole school building and set up are reformed.

In all three schools, teachers reported the following comments: “I am afraid to elicit higher- order discussions in Spanish because I don’t know enough vocabulary.” Or, “If it’s not in the manual, I’m afraid of asking questions in Spanish”. Or “We don’t have enough math books in Spanish, so we can use key terms in English and I let the students explain it to the other students.” Moreover, other observations emerged, such as, spelling and grammatical errors in the teachers’ comments on yellow post-it notes placed on students’ work and the students’ work that was posted as well. Teachers confused the s, c and z; they don’t always use the accents and many of them are unaware of the rules of accentuation in speech (*aguda/grave/esdrújula* and *sobre esdrújula*). There’s a big difference between *papa* (potato) and *papá* (dad); *sí* (yes) and *si* (if).

## 6. *The effects of the two most popular DL programs*

There are two types of DL models used; the first one is 90/10 where 90% of the instruction is offered in L1 (students' mother tongue) and 10% in L2. With each year that passes, the percentages also change, the second year 80% of the instruction is given in L1 and 20% in the students' native tongue (L2), and so on and so forth. The second model is 50/50 where 50% of the time the instruction is offered in L1 and the other 50% of the time the instruction is offered in L2. This starts in Pre-K and continues until the fifth grade. The three schools have the 50/50 model where instruction is offered completely in Spanish on day one and completely in English on day two; then, on Wednesday and Thursday, Spanish and English are taught respectively. Spanish is offered on Friday, and week two starts with English and continues with Tuesday in Spanish; Wednesday in English, Thursday in Spanish and Friday in English. Since the week has five days, the schools use this rollercoaster model to provide equity (see Tab. 2).

Table 2 – *Language distribution schedule*

<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>
Spanish	English	Spanish	English	Spanish
English	Spanish	English	Spanish	English

Lindholm-Leary (2001) noticed the following:

- Students enrolled in the 90/10 model had higher levels of proficiency in both L1 and L2 compared to the students in the 50/50 model. The professional development teacher shared this research with all three schools but they opted to remain with the 50/50 model with alternating days.
- The students enrolled in the 90/10 model also had a higher level of proficiency in Spanish than the ones enrolled in the 50/50 model.

Although this research was shared in all three New York City Schools during professional development sessions, they opted for the 50/50 model.

### 6.1 The DL curriculum and linguistic justice

All parts of the Language Arts (LA) block need to be authentic and true models of language that are appropriate from age, cultural and linguistic aspects in the texts. Dual language proficiency continues to evolve and expand in the six to seven years that a child is in elementary school DL programs and preferably, throughout high school as well. We learn and use our two languages interchangeably in the context of our two cultures. Sometimes we behave according to the blended norms from both cultures. If, for some reason, students feel that the non-English language is not important, this will affect their perception and performance in the classroom and at home as well. Linguistic justice needs to be evident in both languages and both

cultures. The only way to achieve this is by having a program design and an implementation process that is strong, sustainable and solid (Calderon 2001a, 2001b).

An effective curriculum is one that has a thematic unit and revolves around the students' lives. Buttaro (2004), Crawford (1992), and Hamayan and Freeman (2012) indicate that the USA has students that come to school not speaking the language of the school (in this case, English). It is essential that instruction be embedded in authentic language that is both meaningful and interesting to students. In fact, as Filice (2002, 62) affirms, "if authentic material reflects interests of students, then learning becomes meaningful, worthwhile and enjoyable".

## *7. Conclusion*

Dual language programs should do justice to both languages and cultures based on a strong program design and implementation (Calderon 2001a, 2001b). The curriculum should involve thematic units that stress issues important in the students' lives. Crandall, Stein, Nelson (2012) and Crawford (1992) remind us that the United States is only one of many nations that must deal with issues of students coming to public schools not speaking the schooling language. In particular, the United Nations has spoken directly on the rights of a minority group and its language. Consequently, dual language programs are:

- NOT subtractive. These programs promote native literacy skills and balanced bilingualism.
- NOT remedial programs. These programs are quality program designs for standards-based education while promoting proficiency in two languages.
- NOT compensatory programs. These programs educate first class students who are able to achieve at the highest levels and who are bilingual. These programs need to be at the core of school and/or district efforts.
- NOT superimposed on traditional school or district structures or on an infrastructure that was set up for an existing bilingual program. The structures need to be re-orchestrated, redesigned, and integrated to make time for and do justice to the two languages.
- NOT superimposed on existing mind sets of an "enrichment" versus a "remedial" model.

Based on the previous arguments, the design of a linguistic justice and dual language curriculum program is an urgent national claim.

Beyond the individual students, maintenance of heritage language benefits all of society in important and different ways. A multilingual workforce will make the nation more competitive economically, eliminate the shortage of foreign language teachers, and it will yield significant political, national security and diplomatic benefits. As a nation, we would be well served if the question about ELLs were re-framed, away from "Why don't they just learn English?" to, "How can we develop a multilingual society that lives peacefully and cooperates economically in this inter-

dependent world?” Currently, there are many that seem to understand this concept (cf. Healy 2013). In essence, “language is the bridge between the brain and society” affirms UNESCO and as such a human right (cf. Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Indeed, “ensuring linguistic rights is about giving people the freedom to use and learn their languages and to reaffirm their own identity, dignity and participation in society” (UNESCO).

Many school districts have developed dual – language schools not only in Spanish, for its large Hispanic population, but also in Russian, Arabic, and Mandarin. Bengali and Polish are underway as well. Waitlists to get into these schools are common as parents have learned the benefits of bilingualism. The teachers, most from other countries, teach the regular subjects like mathematics, reading and social studies, while speaking only the foreign language. At first, they may use TPR and pictures and videos to communicate, but within a few months the students quickly learn to understand them. The students in these DL are graded normally and have to take the same standardized tests as their peers. Schools are not suffering from any of the deficits predicted by those that claim that bilingualism harms children. While that may still be a common theory, many have declared it bankrupt.

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LETIZIA CINGANOTTO

## L'Intelligenza Artificiale per la didattica dell'italiano LS in una iniziativa di formazione internazionale per docenti

### *Abstract*

The contribution stems from the scientific debate on Artificial Intelligence (AI) in language education and in teaching Italian as a second/foreign language, highlighting its potential for personalization, immediate automated feedback, and increased learner participation and motivation.

The study examines a training initiative on AI topics for teaching Italian as a foreign language, aimed at a sample of Italian language teachers in Mexico. These teachers were invited to experiment with several AI tools, including the Curipod platform and the AIDI chatbot.

Participants were given a questionnaire to collect their perceptions and reactions regarding the use of AI in teaching Italian. The responses were very encouraging, showing a perceived added value of AI for lesson planning, particularly for personalizing learning paths, providing automatic feedback, fostering collaboration, and developing the four Modes of Communication provided by the Common European Framework for Reference of Languages, Companion Volume (CEFR CV), especially production, interaction, and vocabulary enrichment. The conversational practice activity through creating simulated learning scenarios was especially appreciated, as it can help improve linguistic and communicative competence by encouraging learner participation as a true "social agent."

The main challenges that emerged were the need for specific training on AI-related topics and the importance of sharing experiences and teaching practices within the teaching community to support the gradual integration of methodological innovations driven by the AI revolution.

### *Keywords*

Artificial Intelligence, Italian as a foreign language, chatbot, Curipod, AIDI.

### *1. Introduzione*

L'Intelligenza Artificiale (IA) sta rivoluzionando il mondo dell'istruzione e della formazione, coinvolgendo inevitabilmente anche l'ambito dell'educazione linguistica.

Fondata sull'informatica, l'Intelligenza Artificiale si articola in molteplici sotto-discipline, tra cui spiccano il *machine learning* (apprendimento automatico), che consente ai sistemi di riconoscere schemi e apprendere dai dati, il *deep learning* (apprendimento profondo), che sfrutta grandi quantità di dati per simulare processi decisionali analoghi a quelli umani, e l'elaborazione del linguaggio naturale (*Natural Language Processing* – NLP), finalizzata all'analisi e all'interpretazione semantica dei testi mediante algoritmi avanzati.



In questi ultimi anni, i sistemi digitali alimentati dall'IA hanno raggiunto un grado di sofisticazione tale da superare il mero funzionamento meccanico, assumendo forme di interazione che imitano i comportamenti sociali umani. Questa evoluzione incide profondamente sulle abitudini della vita quotidiana, sulla comunicazione e sull'apprendimento. Un esempio significativo è rappresentato dai chatbot come Siri o Alexa, che, attraverso algoritmi di apprendimento automatico, sono in grado di comprendere le richieste dell'utente e di fornire risposte reattive in modo naturale (Smutny, Schreiberova 2020).

Nel settore dell'istruzione, ha preso forma un ambito di ricerca interdisciplinare noto come *Artificial Intelligence in Education* (AIEd), volto a ripensare le pratiche educative e i processi di apprendimento e insegnamento, mediante l'impiego di tecnologie basate sull'IA (Xu, Ouyang 2022). In questo contesto l'Intelligenza Artificiale può assumere ruoli differenti: può rappresentare essa stessa un oggetto di insegnamento diretto, agire da mediatore, o fungere da supporto integrativo alle attività didattiche.

Secondo Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019), l'IA applicata all'educazione trova impiego in quattro ambiti principali: la personalizzazione e l'adattamento del percorso formativo in funzione delle esigenze individuali; la valutazione intelligente con feedback mirati; la profilazione e la previsione delle performance degli studenti; l'implementazione di sistemi di tutoraggio intelligente (*Intelligent Tutoring Systems* – ITS). Tali applicazioni prendono forma nei chatbot basati su NLP, in grado di simulare il dialogo umano e proporre percorsi di apprendimento interattivi e personalizzati (Fryer et al. 2017). Inoltre, i sistemi di *learning analytics* integrati in piattaforme come Moodle permettono la raccolta e l'analisi dei dati relativi alle attività degli studenti, offrendo agli insegnanti strumenti utili per monitorare i processi di apprendimento, formulare previsioni sui risultati e apportare interventi correttivi tempestivi e mirati (Alonso-Fernández et al. 2019).

Nel campo dell'insegnamento e apprendimento linguistico, l'IA sta progressivamente conquistando un ruolo centrale in ogni ordine e grado di istruzione. Infatti, attraverso la didattica tradizionale non sempre si riesce a garantire una comunicazione autentica e efficace: gli strumenti di IA possono rappresentare un valore aggiunto in questa direzione. L'impiego di chatbot nell'apprendimento delle lingue, ad esempio, consente agli studenti di esercitarsi nella conversazione e nell'interazione tra pari, spesso limitate nell'istruzione formale (Jeon et al. 2023). La possibilità di operare in ambienti di apprendimento dinamici e interattivi, che simulano situazioni e scenari reali, favorisce il miglioramento della *fluency* e della *accuracy*, rispettando i diversi stili cognitivi, le preferenze e i ritmi individuali, nonché l'*agency* dell'apprendente come vero "agente sociale" (Piccardo, North 2019).

Numerosi studi hanno evidenziato l'efficacia delle piattaforme di *Intelligent Tutoring Systems* nell'ambito dell'apprendimento linguistico, in cui la pratica costante e il feedback tempestivo, soprattutto nelle prime fasi del processo di apprendimento, si rivelano elementi imprescindibili per l'acquisizione di concetti complessi (VanLehn 2011).

L'importanza del feedback nell'apprendimento linguistico è ampiamente riconosciuta in letteratura: Hattie e Timperley (2007) lo definiscono come uno dei catalizzatori più potenti per l'apprendimento, purché sia continuo, correlato a compiti ben definiti,



specifico, coerente con gli obiettivi, stimolante e capace di coinvolgere attivamente lo studente.

Le capacità analitiche e predittive dell'Intelligenza Artificiale, applicate alle performance linguistiche individuali, consentono a docenti e tutor di ottenere una visione dettagliata dei progressi dei singoli apprendenti, facilitando la personalizzazione degli interventi didattici. Qualora emergano difficoltà nell'acquisizione di strutture linguistiche specifiche, l'IA è in grado di rilevare tali criticità, offrendo supporti supplementari e adattando in tempo reale i contenuti proposti. Questo approccio orientato ai dati (*data-driven*) contribuisce in modo significativo a migliorare la qualità dell'apprendimento, rispondendo in maniera efficace alle esigenze individuali degli studenti e promuovendo, dunque, il successo formativo (Dede et al. 2016).

Inoltre, le piattaforme educative basate sull'IA favoriscono l'accesso a un'istruzione linguistica di elevata qualità, grazie alla loro natura scalabile, flessibile e inclusiva, rivelandosi, pertanto strumenti strategici per la promozione dell'equità educativa a livello globale (Collins, Halverson 2018).

Gli ambienti didattici potenziati dalla tecnologia e dall'IA sono in grado di incrementare la motivazione, l'*agency* e la partecipazione degli studenti. In particolare, si possono menzionare tra i numerosi vantaggi: una maggiore autonomia e personalizzazione, un ampliamento delle opportunità comunicative, una valorizzazione delle competenze digitali pregresse, una maggiore efficacia nell'insegnamento basato su contenuti, come nel caso della metodologia CLIL (*Content and Language Integrated Learning*) (Cinganotto 2021; Cinganotto 2025), una esposizione a materiali interculturali, una maggiore rilevanza della lingua target e l'introduzione di pratiche valutative alternative (Cinganotto et al. 2024).

Nel contesto dell'educazione linguistica, l'integrazione degli strumenti di IA si articola attraverso una vasta gamma di tecniche e strategie didattiche. All'interno delle classi di lingua seconda/straniera, le attività digitali non sono limitate alla presentazione, alla pratica o alla valutazione, ma comprendono anche la creazione, la produzione e la pubblicazione di contenuti, promuovendo così un apprendimento attivo, partecipativo e autentico (Cinganotto, Montanucci 2025).

L'IA nell'educazione linguistica può veramente aprire a docenti e studenti l'accesso ad una pluralità di nuovi mondi, in precedenza sconosciuti, stimolando la "curiosità, la scoperta e la meraviglia all'alba dell'Intelligenza Artificiale" (Fei-Fei Li 2024).

## 2. L'iniziativa di formazione internazionale

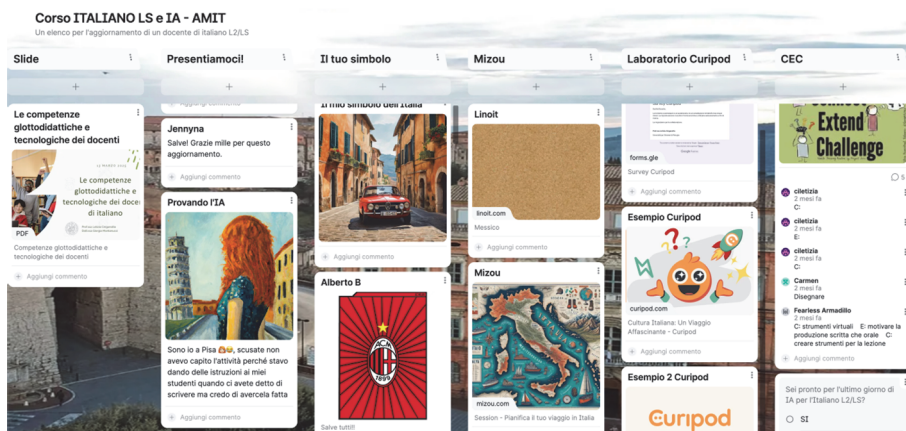
Il presente contributo concentra l'attenzione su una iniziativa di formazione della durata di 15 ore, rivolta a docenti di italiano LS in servizio presso le scuole e le università messicane.

Il corso, erogato interamente online nel mese di marzo 2025, mirava a guidare i partecipanti nella scoperta e sperimentazione di strumenti e piattaforme di IA per l'italiano come lingua straniera, per una successiva integrazione all'interno dei vari contesti di insegnamento.

Le percezioni e reazioni dei partecipanti sull'uso dell'IA sono state raccolte e esaminate attraverso strumenti quantitativi e qualitativi, nello specifico attraverso un Google Form e una griglia di valutazione delle interazioni con un chatbot. I commenti liberi sono stati categorizzati in base all'analisi tematica utilizzando la *Framework Analysis* (Goldsmith 2021).

Il padlet dedicato all'iniziativa rappresentava l'ambiente di apprendimento in cui poter riflettere e sperimentare i vari *tool* proposti, favorendo dunque, la creazione di una comunità di pratica di docenti entusiasti e appassionati di tecnologie per la didattica dell'italiano.

Fig. 1 - Il padlet del corso



Il padlet stesso ha rappresentato il primo strumento di familiarizzazione con l'IA, attraverso la funzione "text-to-image", che permette di generare immagini in modo creativo e originale, accompagnandole con un testo o una didascalia, come il ritratto di un partecipante, Gustavo nello screenshot di seguito, oppure i simboli dell'Italia e del "soft power italiano", come la vespa, o la moka.

Fig. 2 - "Text-to-image" in Padlet



### 3. Una piattaforma di IA per la progettazione didattica: Curipod

Tra le varie sperimentazioni effettuate con i corsisti, si cita in questa sede il percorso didattico progettato con Curipod, una piattaforma di IA che permette di selezionare la lingua target, il *grade* di riferimento, in base al sistema K12, il *topic* e gli obiettivi di apprendimento.

La piattaforma Curipod, sperimentata con successo anche in ambito di valutazione (Moreira, Teles 2024), si distingue per le sue molteplici funzionalità. Questo strumento consente di generare presentazioni, attività, domande e feedback in base agli obiettivi di apprendimento predefiniti e agli interessi degli studenti. Uno dei vantaggi immediati di Curipod è la sua interfaccia intuitiva: docenti e studenti ne apprezzano la facilità d'uso e la rapidità di accesso alle varie funzionalità.

La caratteristica più interessante è la possibilità di progettare intere lezioni, complete di diapositive e attività interattive, a partire da un semplice prompt testuale fornito dall'insegnante. Specificando l'argomento della lezione e il livello scolastico di riferimento, il sistema IA genera una proposta didattica strutturata, composta da slide modificabili. Gli studenti possono accedere ai contenuti tramite un codice QR e interagire rispondendo in tempo reale alle domande e agli stimoli proposti.

Lo strumento utilizza l'IA per analizzare l'input del docente e generare contenuti pertinenti, accurati e personalizzati, avvalendosi di tecniche di elaborazione del linguaggio naturale, quali riassunto testuale, parafrasi, domande e risposte, descrizione di immagini e rilevamento di oggetti.

È possibile personalizzare ulteriormente i materiali, integrando immagini, video, audio, animazioni e altri elementi per rendere le lezioni più coinvolgenti. Una funzionalità particolarmente utile è la possibilità di importare presentazioni PowerPoint o Google Slides preesistenti e potenziarle con attività interattive come sondaggi, nuvole di parole, domande aperte e disegni.

Curipod impiega, inoltre, l'IA per fornire feedback adattivi e indicazioni personalizzate agli studenti durante lo svolgimento delle attività, garantendo coerenza con i criteri stabiliti e facilitando il processo valutativo. Il feedback generato da Curipod tramite tecniche NLP e *Machine Learning* comprende analisi del sentiment, classificazione e generazione di testi, e apprendimento per rinforzo.

Infine, Curipod promuove la creazione di una comunità di pratica: da un lato, i docenti possono condividere idee ed esperienze, consultare e commentare le lezioni degli altri utenti; dall'altro, lo strumento mira a stimolare la curiosità e il coinvolgimento degli studenti, favorendo al contempo lo sviluppo dell'*AI literacy*, l'approccio critico e consapevole all'IA (Sbardella, Montanucci 2024).

### 4. Il percorso di italiano LS con Curipod

Ai corsisti è stato proposto un percorso di italiano LS sulla cultura italiana, generato da Curipod con il seguente prompt: "crea una lezione di italiano LS rivolto a apprendenti adulti di livello intermedio, sulla cultura italiana, con riferimento ai principali simboli della lingua, dell'arte, delle tradizioni e della cucina".

Di seguito il feedback di Curipod sulla lezione generata, che sottolinea alcuni fraintendimenti e luoghi comuni, come la “romanticizzazione” di alcuni aspetti, senza una piena comprensione delle origini, della storia e del significato dei simboli culturali italiani. Con l’obiettivo di superare queste credenze errate, Curipod propone un percorso “hands-on” laboratoriale, attraverso un viaggio immersivo alla scoperta della cultura italiana.

### *Learning objective*

The learning objective of this lesson is to explore and appreciate various aspects of Italian culture, including its language, traditions, and cuisine.

### *Lesson summary*

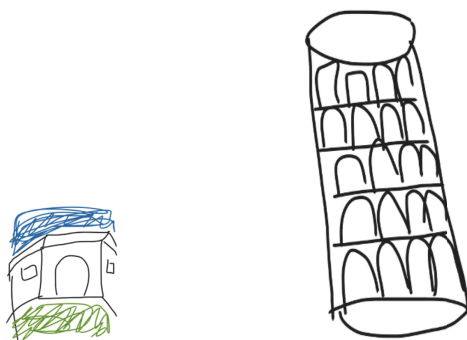
💡 Most common understandings: “Students generally understand the iconic elements of Italian culture such as architecture (Colosseo), cuisine (pizza), and places (Venezia, Perugia). They recognize famous landmarks and associate Italy with its rich historical and cultural heritage”.

✳ Most common misconceptions: “Students confuse specific cultural or historical facts, like attributing general architectural styles or food items directly to certain cities without clear differentiation. Some also romanticize aspects without a deep understanding of their origins or significance.”

📋 Action item: “Organize an ‘Italian Culture Day’ where students can participate in cooking Italian dishes, building models of Italian landmarks, and presenting on different aspects of Italian culture. This hands-on experience will help clarify misconceptions and deepen their appreciation and understanding of the topics discussed.”

Tra le attività proposte ai corsisti, quella più apprezzata è stata la funzionalità del disegno, che consente la transcodificazione dell’input, integrando la dimensione ludica: i corsisti si sono divertiti a esprimere in forma grafica le loro idee sull’arte italiana. Di seguito l’Arco Etrusco di Perugia e il Colosseo di Roma disegnati da due partecipanti.

Fig. 3 – *Simboli dell’arte italiana disegnati dai corsisti*



Tra le altre attività proposte da Curipod, vi è un task di produzione scritta, con feedback automatico, che identifica eventuali errori di tipo morfo-sintattico e grammaticale e incoerenze di tipo semantico e suggerisce proposte di miglioramento, come nell’estratto seguente, in cui un partecipante individua la gastronomia e l’architettura come simboli

della cultura italiana, e l'IA fornisce suggerimenti per un ampliamento della produzione scritta, che, per esempio, può essere effettuato anche in asincrono e in cartaceo.



**Quale elemento della cultura italiana ti affascina di più e perché?**

**Answer:** gastronomia e architettura

Mi piacciono molto gli edifici e il loro aspetto, mi piacerebbe anche provare i piatti tipici di quella regione.

**Feedback:** Ottima scelta! 🍷🏛️ Hai identificato due aspetti fondamentali della cultura italiana.

- Prova ad approfondire cosa ti affascina di più della gastronomia o dell'architettura specifica.
- Cerca di collegare i piatti tipici alle regioni italiane che ti interessano.
- Spiega come questi elementi italiani si confrontano con aspetti culturali del tuo paese.

### 5. Il questionario somministrato ai partecipanti

Ai partecipanti è stato somministrato un questionario finalizzato a comprendere le percezioni e le reazioni dei corsisti sull'uso dell'IA nella didattica dell'italiano LS, con particolare riferimento alla piattaforma Curipod.

I partecipanti erano 51 docenti tra i 45 e i 60 anni per il 54,9% e tra i 30 e i 45 anni per il 21,6%.

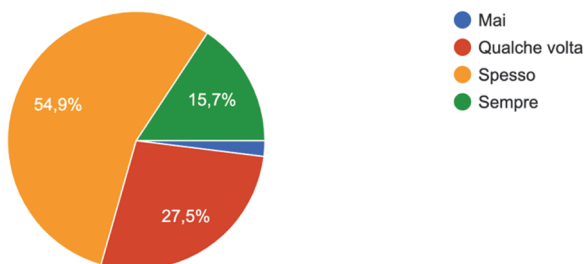
La maggior parte di essi insegnava nella scuola secondaria (52,9%), ma nel campione vi erano anche docenti in servizio nelle università e nell'istruzione degli adulti.

Più della metà dei rispondenti utilizzava già "spesso" le tecnologie per la didattica e il 27,5% "qualche volta", come illustrato nella figura 4.

Fig. 4 – Frequenza dell'uso della tecnologia nella didattica

5. Con quale frequenza utilizza strumenti digitali nella didattica?

51 risposte

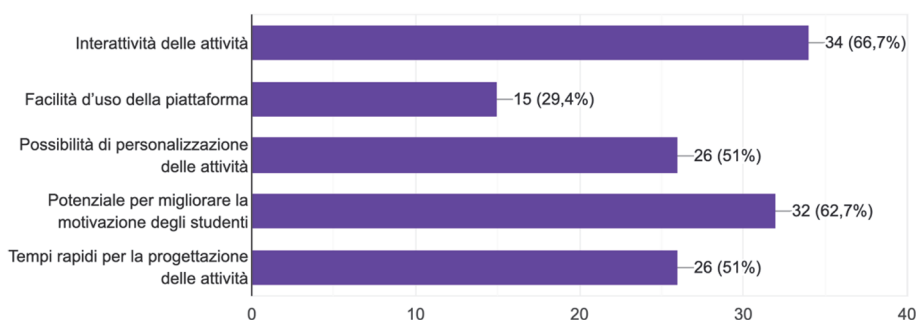


Una domanda del questionario mirava a comprendere le caratteristiche di Curipod più apprezzate dai partecipanti. Il 66,7% dei rispondenti sottolinea l'importanza dell'interattività delle attività, mentre il 62,7% ne rileva il potenziale per migliorare la motivazione degli studenti. Il 51% mette in luce la possibilità di personalizzare le attività e i tempi rapidi per la progettazione didattica.

Fig. 5 – *Frequenza dell'uso della tecnologia nella didattica*

7. Quale aspetto di Curipod le è sembrato più interessante? (Selezionare più opzioni)

51 risposte

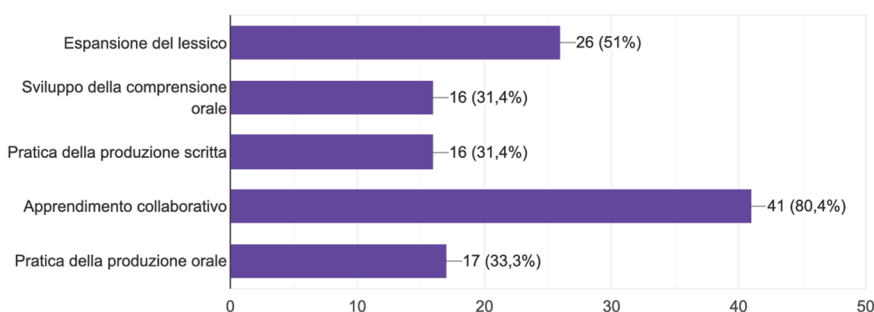


I partecipanti ritengono che la piattaforma Curipod possa essere utile soprattutto per l'apprendimento collaborativo (80,4%) e per l'espansione del lessico (51%).

Fig. 6 – *Obiettivi di apprendimento sviluppati con Curipod*

10. Per quali obiettivi di apprendimento ritiene che Curipod possa essere utile? (Selezionare più opzioni)

51 risposte

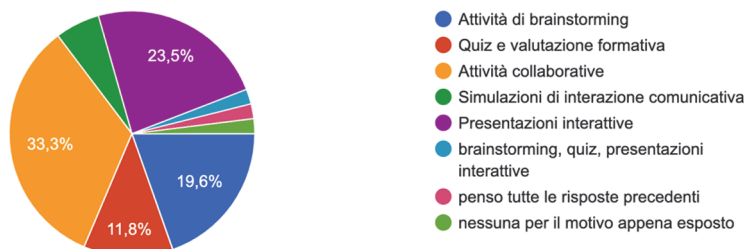


In riferimento alle varie attività didattiche che si possono integrare in Curipod, i partecipanti menzionano soprattutto le attività collaborative (33,3%), le presentazioni interattive (23,5%) e le attività di brainstorming (19,6%).

Fig. 7 – *Tipologie di attività con Curipod*

12. Per quale tipologia di attività pensa di usare Curipod nel suo contesto?

51 risposte

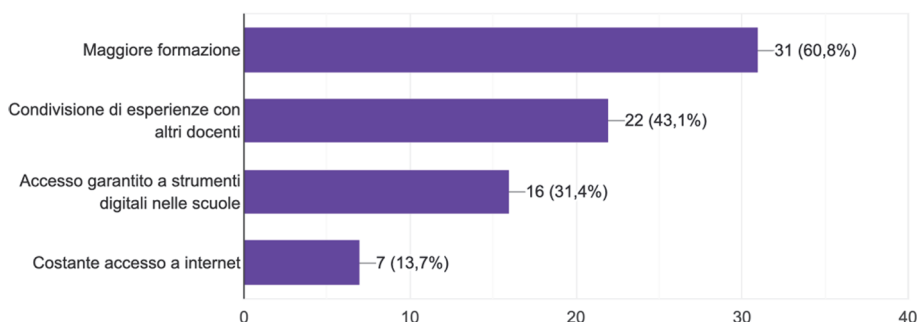


In base alle opinioni dei partecipanti, per una più ottimale integrazione di una piattaforma come Curipod nella didattica dell'italiano, sarebbero necessarie una maggiore formazione (60,8%) e una maggiore condivisione di esperienze con altri docenti (43,1%).

Fig. 8 – *Sfide per l'integrazione di Curipod*

14. Quali elementi faciliterebbero l'adozione di Curipod nella sua pratica didattica?

51 risposte



I commenti liberi dei rispondenti, esaminati in base alla *Framework Analysis*, mettono in luce alcune peculiarità della piattaforma, ritenute significative e utili, nello specifico:

#### a. Coinvolgimento e interazione

La piattaforma viene giudicata molto dinamica e interattiva, in grado di coinvolgere e divertire gli apprendenti, aumentando i livelli di attenzione e partecipazione, attraverso *brainstorming*, prompt per la discussione, sondaggi e quiz in sincrono, come testimoniano i seguenti commenti:

Sicuramente porta molto coinvolgimento degli studenti, le attività interattive come sondaggi, nuvole di parole e quiz in tempo reale aumentano la partecipazione e l'attenzione degli studenti.



Gli insegnanti possono utilizzare i sondaggi e le domande aperte per capire in tempo reale il livello di comprensione della classe e adattare l'insegnamento di conseguenza.

Stimolazione della discussione: le domande aperte e i brainstorming possono essere utilizzati per avviare discussioni in classe e incoraggiare il pensiero critico e una verifica rapida dell'apprendimento.

Utile per stimolare la curiosità.

#### b. Supporto ai diversi stili di apprendimento

Attraverso questa piattaforma i partecipanti pensano di poter assecondare i ritmi e i tempi di apprendimento di ciascuno studente, attraverso l'approccio multimodale che utilizza testi, immagini, video, suoni, ecc., come sintetizzato nei commenti seguenti:

Uno strumento che presenta numerose potenzialità. Sicuramente da sperimentare per potenziare le attività di apprendimento per gli studenti.

Potrebbe supportare studenti con diversi stili di apprendimento, grazie alla possibilità di integrare immagini, testo e interazioni.

È uno strumento interessante se si può accedere non tanto a internet, quanto a dispositivi tecnologici (tablet, pc) da parte degli studenti.

È intuitivo e facilmente accessibile, un buon punto di partenza per creare materiali interessanti da sottoporre agli apprendenti.

Lo ritengo uno strumento con un grande potenziale.

#### c. Supporto per la metodologia CLIL

Lo strumento Curipod viene considerato una interessante modalità per l'implementazione della metodologia CLIL, soprattutto in un contesto non italofono, come quello messicano, dove l'insegnamento della lingua si coniuga in modo quasi naturale con quello della cultura, una delle 4 C alla base del CLIL (*Content, Communication, Cognition, Content*) (Coyle 2005), come si evince dai seguenti commenti:

L'attività CLIL può essere facile da realizzare.

Curipod è una risorsa utile per la metodologia CLIL ma può essere utile a qualunque insegnante.

#### d. Strumento per il feedback correttivo e costruttivo

Curipod utilizza impostazioni anonime nella visualizzazione delle interazioni dei partecipanti, in modo da abbassare il filtro affettivo e favorire la partecipazione, senza l'ansia di essere giudicati o di commettere errori. Il feedback viene dunque, elicitato in modo corale, attraverso la mediazione del docente, che interrompe il flusso delle interazioni online attraverso la discussione, la riflessione e la condivisione. I commenti di seguito riportati mettono in luce questa interessante funzionalità:

Il feedback per lo studente dopo le attività di dipingere.

Sicuramente un punto a favore è dato dal fatto che il procedere dell'attività è guidato e controllato dall'insegnante, inoltre le attività sono *friendly*, in quanto le risposte sono anonime per i partecipanti e visibili solo all'insegnante.

Ritengo Curipod uno strumento di facile fruizione nell'ambito di una didattica digitale già avviata, supportata e condivisa, laddove gli ausili tradizionali siano già stati ampiamente dematerializzati nell'uso comune, sia da parte dei docenti che da parte degli alunni.

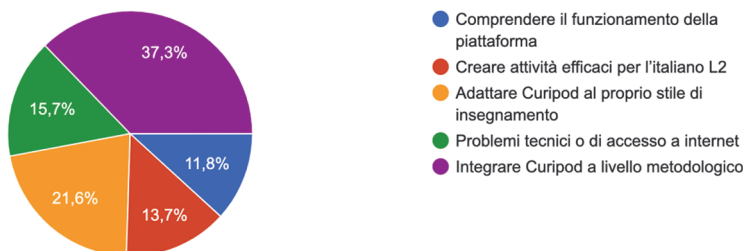
È uno strumento fantastico, motivante, coinvolgente, ricco di stimoli, favorisce la curiosità e il lavoro cooperativo.

Tra le principali difficoltà rilevate dai docenti, si menzionano la capacità di integrare Curipod a livello metodologico nella progettazione didattica (37,3%) e la capacità di adattare Curipod al proprio stile di insegnamento (21,6%). Di fronte alle sfide dettate dalla rivoluzione dell'IA è infatti, necessario adottare un atteggiamento flessibile e aperto alle innovazioni e ai cambiamenti, per un ripensamento continuo delle proprie capacità didattico-metodologiche e del proprio stile di insegnamento.

Fig. 9 – Difficoltà nell'integrazione di Curipod

8. Quale aspetto le è sembrato più difficile da gestire?

51 risposte



## 6. AIDI

Ai partecipanti è stata proposta una sessione di interazione in sincrono con AIDI ("AI per il Dialogo in Italiano"), un *Large Language Model* realizzato dal gruppo di ricerca dell'Università per Stranieri di Perugia, in collaborazione con l'Università Telematica degli Studi IUL, finalizzato alla pratica conversazionale in Italiano L2/LS sulla base di scenari di apprendimento simulati significativi e reali, come al ristorante, tra amici, al colloquio di lavoro (Cinganotto, Montanucci 2024).

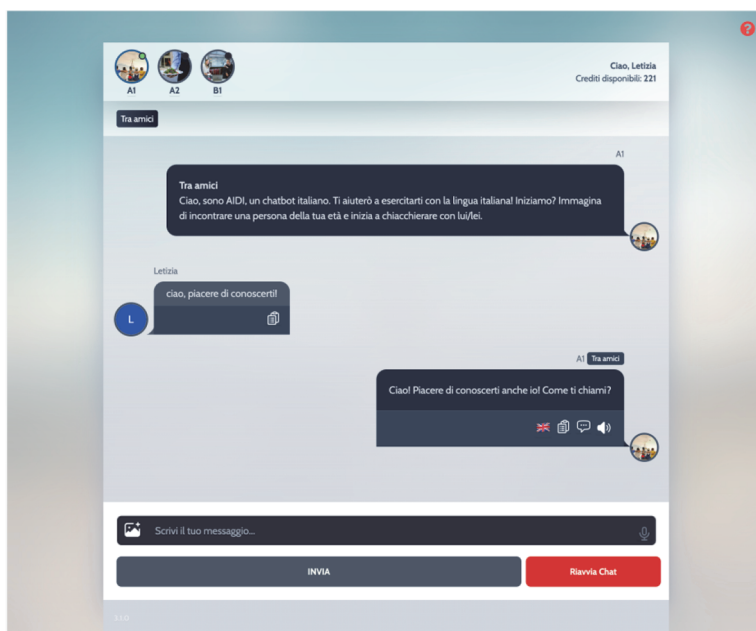
Il chatbot, che è stato già sperimentato con successo con un campione di studenti cinesi dell'Università GMU e con un campione di apprendenti dell'Associazione OSDIA (*Order of Sons and Daughters of Italy in America*), è stato addestrato sulla base del Profilo della Lingua Italiana (Spinelli, Parizzi 2010) e del Quadro Comune

Europeo di Riferimento per le Lingue, Volume Complementare (2020) ed è sottoposto ad un processo di continua validazione da parte del gruppo di ricerca.

“Addestratori di IA e creatori di test sono impegnati in una lunga partita per esplorare i limiti delle macchine intelligenti, in varie dimensioni” (Cristianini 2025, 53).

Questa citazione ben sintetizza il continuo lavoro di studio, ricerca e validazione delle interazioni del chatbot, attraverso vari strumenti di analisi quantitativa e qualitativa, finalizzati al miglioramento continuo delle prestazioni linguistico-comunicative e all’addestramento della macchina per la creazione di nuovi scenari di apprendimento.

Fig. 10 – *Interfaccia di AIDI*



Al termine della sessione di interazione con AIDI, ai partecipanti è stata sottoposta la griglia di valutazione riportata di seguito, nella quale sono state inserite le medie dei punteggi riportati dai rispondenti.

In particolare, il chatbot è considerato facilmente accessibile, stimolante e divertente, in grado di rispondere all’interlocutore in tempi brevi. La media dei punteggi dei vari descrittori è incoraggiante, anche se ci sono margini di miglioramento nella ridefinizione dei prompt, continuamente riformulati dal gruppo di ricerca, in modo da renderli sempre più performanti e naturali.

Fig. 11 – *Griglia di valutazione dell'interazione con AIDI*

Criterio	Descrizione	Punteggio (1-5)
Accuratezza delle risposte	Il chatbot fornisce risposte corrette e appropriate al contesto	3
Fluidità dell'interazione	Le risposte del chatbot sono naturali e coerenti con la conversazione	3
Personalizzazione	Il chatbot adatta le risposte al livello linguistico dell'utente	3
Ricchezza linguistica	Il chatbot utilizza un lessico vario e strutture grammaticali adeguate	3
Supporto didattico	Il chatbot offre spiegazioni e suggerimenti utili per l'apprendimento	3
Comprensibilità	Le risposte del chatbot sono chiare e facilmente comprensibili	2
Coinvolgimento	L'interazione con il chatbot è stimolante e motivante	4
Gestione degli errori	Il chatbot è in grado di correggere gli errori e fornire feedback utile	3
Tempo di risposta	Il chatbot risponde in tempi adeguati senza eccessivi ritardi	4
Accessibilità	Il chatbot è facile da usare e accessibile su diverse piattaforme	5

## 7. *Discussione e conclusioni*

Il presente contributo ha inteso esaminare le percezioni dei corsisti in relazione all'uso dell'Intelligenza Artificiale, nello specifico della piattaforma Curipod e del chatbot AIDI nella didattica dell'italiano LS, a seguito delle sperimentazioni proposte durante l'iniziativa di formazione.

I partecipanti, molti dei quali utilizzavano già le tecnologie nella didattica, hanno molto apprezzato le funzionalità dell'IA come valore aggiunto nella didattica dell'italiano, in quanto strumento di facilitazione della progettazione didattica e catalizzatore della motivazione, della partecipazione e dell'interesse.

L'IA può infatti, stimolare la produzione e l'interazione nella lingua target, soprattutto attraverso la modalità di visualizzazione anonima, che abbassa il filtro affettivo e favorisce la *Willingness to Communicate*. Il feedback del docente può risultare particolarmente efficace all'interno di questo ambiente di apprendimento, grazie al supporto delle potenzialità dell'IA.

I corsisti hanno messo in luce l'aspetto collaborativo degli strumenti di IA, che consentono sia ai docenti che agli studenti di scambiarsi idee e riflessioni e collaborare nella progettazione didattica e nella pratica conversazionale.

La personalizzazione dei percorsi di apprendimento è fondamentale nelle classi di lingua e l'IA può sicuramente favorire questo aspetto, progettando risorse di-

dattiche funzionali alle specifiche esigenze degli apprendenti e agli stili cognitivi di ciascuno.

L'IA è anche considerata molto utile nella implementazione della metodologia CLIL, soprattutto in riferimento alla sfera culturale, una delle quattro dimensioni centrali del CLIL: l'IA consente di costruire scenari simulati che ripropongano situazioni e simboli del *soft power* italiano, costruendo “ponti virtuali”, attraverso mondi immersivi nei quali la tecnologia riesce a riprodurre e a simulare la realtà.

I partecipanti riconoscono la necessità di un ripensamento della didattica alla luce delle potenzialità dell'IA: è necessaria una specifica formazione sui temi legati all'*AI literacy*, per una integrazione sempre più efficace e non episodica dell'IA nell'educazione linguistica e nella didattica dell'italiano LS. A questo scopo, lo scambio e la condivisione di idee e esperienze didattiche potrà contribuire alla creazione di comunità di pratica che possano aiutare a superare le sfide della Società della Conoscenza e della Quarta Rivoluzione Industriale.

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VINCENZO DAMIAZZI, MIRIAM MORF<sup>1</sup>

## Using artificial intelligence to support written production skills in German as a foreign language: the case of *DeepL Write*

### *Abstract*

The paper aims to explore the potential and limitations of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in enhancing written production skills in German as a foreign language (GFL) using the AI tool *DeepL Write*. The objective is twofold: firstly, to demonstrate how AI can provide a concrete opportunity to expand written production practice in GFL courses; secondly, to provide critical tools and operational strategies for the informed and pedagogically sound use of new technologies in the classroom. The paper is thus divided into two parts. The first presents a theoretical analysis of the objectives to be pursued in the context of the potential development of written production skills through AI tools and defines the objectives and methodology chosen for the practical part. The second part comprises practical didactic and methodological considerations, which were used to carry out a pilot study. The conclusion presents the results and discusses them.

### *Keywords*

German as a foreign language – writing skills development – generative AI – *DeepL Write*

### *1. Introduction*

The development of written production skills constitutes a fundamental element in both university education and work-oriented training. The ability to write appropriately entails a proficiency of skills that extend beyond mere grammatical correctness and involves the capacity to adapt language to the context and the audience, to organise ideas in a clear and coherent manner, and to utilise precise and relevant vocabulary (Gregg, Steinberg 1980). It is also essential to be aware of the communicative purpose of the text – whether it is to inform, explain or argue – and to respect the conventions of the text type (Gansel, Jürgens 2002, 57-62). Furthermore, effective writing requires the ability to reread and critically revise the text, thus ensuring accuracy and expressive effectiveness. Taking these factors into consideration, it can be deduced that the enhancement of written production skills constitutes a substantial challenge, especially within the framework of foreign language education (Börner, Vogel 1992; Kic-Drgas 2022; O'Brien 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the result of a joint discussion. Vincenzo Damiazzi was responsible for chapters 2.1, 3, 5 and 6, while Miriam Morf drafted paragraphs 1, 2, 2.2 and 4.



In GFL teaching practice, the development of written proficiency was historically accorded minimal priority (Siebold 2014, 58). The direct, audiolingual and audiovisual method was mainly based on lessons that excluded the use of writing, similar to the communicative approach, which focused on developing oral language skills (Krings 2016, 107). It is only recently that foreign language teaching has achieved a holistic understanding of communication, capable of equally integrating all four fundamental skills (Ciepielewska-Kaczmarek 2011, 268-269; Wolff 2009, 7), which can now be identified in the two macro areas of production and reception in the Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CV-CEFR) (Council of Europe 2020).

The importance of fostering written production skills at intermediate (B) and advanced (C) levels of the CEFR is credited to the accelerated development of cross-border information and communication technologies. These have resulted in the emergence of novel language qualification profiles across a wide range of professional domains, wherein the capacity to produce and comprehend written texts assumes a pivotal role (Gansel, Jürgens 2002, 125). For instance, one may consider the significant proportion of international communication based on the production of written texts, or the numerous media-related professions in which the deliberate application of linguistic rules and an understanding of text types and genres are essential (Dulisch 1998, 59). Even at academic level, given the exponential growth of exchange programmes for teachers and students (e.g. Erasmus), there is an increasing need for the development of writing skills. The full spectrum of academic writing (ranging from the transcription of lectures to the composition of short assignments and culminating in the production of essays and dissertations) necessitates the development of scientific language skills and proficiency (Ehlich, Steets 2003; Kissling 2006) that cannot be taken for granted, particularly at language levels above B1. Connected to the evident challenges associated with writing, particularly at advanced levels, there is a discernible issue concerning the reduction of written production activities within educational programmes (Marx 2023, 481). In these areas, where language skills are increasingly linked to specialised content, textbooks often make extensive use of subject-specific language, mainly in written texts used for written comprehension exercises. The imbalance between reception and written production activities is mostly due to constrained teaching time, a circumstance that is disadvantageous for the execution of written exercises. These necessitate not only a considerable investment of time in writing, revision and evaluation, but also specific preparation on the characteristics of different genres and text types. Consequently, while proficient written communication skills are paramount for independent linguistic use, they often remain confined to upper-intermediate and advanced learning frameworks.

In view of the pivotal function of written production skills in educational and professional trajectories, there is a compelling need to investigate innovative tools that can facilitate their enhancement – among others, generative applications based on AI hold considerable promise. These technologies have reached a stage of advancement that necessitates constant pedagogical updating, and their utilisation in educational settings signifies a paradigm shift that necessitates critical examination and deliberation (Ham 2024,

467-468). The notion of prohibiting or limiting the implementation of AI in educational institutions appears to be in opposition to the present reality and the requirements of learners, who are already engaged with digital instruments that exert a significant influence on their academic and linguistic progression (Şentürk 2023) and that contribute to the shaping of their media literacy (Kerres 2017, 2024).

The integration of AI in educational settings presents a range of possibilities, including the personalisation of learning pathways, the automation of specific stages in the correction process, and the stimulation of linguistic creativity (Hartmann 2021, 684-687). Concurrently, challenges are also emerging, encompassing risks of plagiarism, reliance on digital tools due to the erosion of cognitive skills (George, Baskar, Srikanth 2024), stylistic flattening, and loss of originality in written production. This scenario gives rise to a complex and multifaceted picture, in which the use of generative AI lies at the centre of both desirable and problematic practices, with consequent repercussions on the quality of teaching and learning. A pervasive concern among educators pertains to the notion of losing authority over the learning process. This sense of disorientation, already partly triggered by the general digitalisation of teaching, is exacerbated by the introduction of AI, which many perceive as a tool that could replace, rather than support, the role of the teacher (Chan, Tsi 2023). It is therefore essential to promote a vision of AI as a complementary resource, capable of supporting and enhancing teaching, without replacing human expertise or the educational relationship. This issue is rendered even more salient by the finding that learners consider AI feedback to be less important than that from teachers (Gruber 2023, 159; Tian, Zhou 2020).

The paper aims to address these challenges and is articulated into two main parts: one focused on theory, the other on practice. The first one offers a conceptual exploration of the aims connected to the possible enhancement of writing skills using artificial intelligence tools (section 2) and introduces both the objectives and the methodological framework adopted for the practical phase (section 3). The second part includes pedagogical and methodological reflections (section 4), which serve as the foundation for a pilot project (section 5). The final section summarizes the findings and discusses the outcomes.

## *2. Developing written production skills with AI tools*

In the contemporary digital era, technological devices and artificial intelligence systems have become an integral part of the daily professional activities of a significant portion of the world's population (Kovács 2023). This raises important questions about the potential for developing written production skills through computer-based learning, particularly through e-learning programmes or with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools (Hartmann 2021). However, general language courses tend to favour communicative approaches, often neglecting writing activities (Feist 2008, 1-2). This phenomenon is further evidenced by the predominance of a conceptually oral written language<sup>2</sup> in the writ-

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<sup>2</sup> The terms 'conceptual writing' and 'conceptual speech' were coined in the mid-1980s. The former refers to a conceptually written language, realised through a phonic-acoustic channel, as in the case of

ing activities proposed in textbooks (Marx 2023, 483). Despite an increase in the complexity of vocabulary and grammar, writing activities at intermediate and advanced levels continue to be linked to personal experience and are characterised by a dialogic nature, with minimal distinction between informal and formal language use. The complexity of writing tasks, coupled with the time-intensive nature of completing them, often makes it challenging to incorporate them into the conventional classroom hours. Moreover, the development of written skills that are appropriate to professional or academic contexts is not generally identified as a primary objective for many GFL learners, who are focused on developing oral interactional skills (Feilke 2016, 129; Krings 2016, 107). This may provide a rationale for the relative scarcity of specific writing courses offered by universities, schools and language institutes, in comparison to the greater availability of conversation courses. In this scenario, the employment of generative AI programmes for the purpose of developing written production skills could signify a strategic opportunity. However, for such tools to be pedagogically effective, they should be integrated within a didactic framework that emphasises not only the final product but also the process of writing itself (Murray, 1972).

A process-oriented approach (*prozessorientierter Ansatz*) to writing instruction is widely recognised for its pedagogical effectiveness, particularly in the context of second and foreign language acquisition (Kertes 2018; Kadmiry 2021). Rather than focusing solely on the final written product, this approach emphasises the various phases of the writing process – including planning, drafting, revising, and editing – as integral components of skill development. According to Merz-Grötsch (2010), the teaching of writing should not be reduced to the correction of final texts but should instead involve structured guidance through successive stages, allowing learners to experience writing as a dynamic, recursive activity. This method fosters metacognitive awareness, enhances autonomous learning strategies, and supports the development of linguistic accuracy and textual coherence over time. Moreover, process-oriented writing encourages the integration of peer feedback and collaborative revision, which not only improves language output but also deepens learners' engagement with content and form. In the classroom context, such an approach creates space for formative assessment and allows teachers to scaffold instruction in a way that aligns with the individual learner's needs. By treating writing as a process rather than a one-time event, educators can cultivate more reflective, confident, and competent writers (Sarhady 2015).

## 2.1 Objectives for the development of written production skills based on the CV to the CEFR

As discussed above, while the pedagogy of writing emphasises the importance of free and creative writing for the development of writing skills (Faistauer 2010, 283), teaching prac-

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a public speech or a sermon in church. The latter refers to a conceptually oral language, even if realised in graphic form, as in the case of a text message or WhatsApp message. Further information on these two concepts may be found in the works of Koch and Österreicher (1985; 1994; 2007), while a more in-depth discussion of their reception model based on the language of proximity and distance can be found in Feilke and Henning (2016).

tice shows that, even in the early years of learning, writing primarily plays a role as an intermediate skill (*Mittelfertigkeit*) rather than a specific skill (*Zielfertigkeit*) (Ciepielewska-Kaczmarek 2011, 269). In the domain of foreign language education – and particularly in the context of GFL – instrumental writing assumes a predominant role. This approach involves the use of writing as a means of developing fundamental skills and as a pedagogical tool to facilitate the achievement of further linguistic goals (Fischer-Kania 2008, 484). Writing facilitates a process of reflective engagement with content, concepts, contexts, registers, functions and forms, contributing to the advancement of cognitive and linguistic structures (Klein, Boscolo 2016). As Königs (2018) also emphasises, the focus of GFL teaching tends to be more oriented towards communicative phenomena, centred on a conceptually oral language that is close to everyday speech, as opposed to authentically written language, which is conceptually more distant from colloquial language (Koch, Österreicher 1994, 588). Even in cases where GFL teaching includes both oral and written production exercises, the reference model remains a singular standard variety corresponding to the written language employed in Germany. This model is representative of only a small part of the language that is used in practice and does not consider any type of variation, including diastratic or diaphasic variations (Sinner 2014, 136-141). These variations are essential for the development of written production skills – especially at advanced levels – as they allow students to consciously adapt their language according to the recipient, the text type and the communicative purpose, as also highlighted in the CV to the CEFR (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – *Indicators for overall written production in the Companion Volume to the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020, 66)*

	Overall written production
<b>C2</b>	Can produce clear, smoothly flowing, complex texts in an appropriate and effective style and a logical structure which helps the reader identify significant points.
<b>C1</b>	Can produce clear, well-structured texts of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues, expanding and supporting points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion. Can employ the structure and conventions of a variety of genres, varying the tone, style and register according to addressee, text type and theme.
<b>B2</b>	Can produce clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to their field of interest, synthesising and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources.
<b>B1</b>	Can produce straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within their field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence.
<b>A2</b>	Can produce a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors like “and”, “but” and “because”.
<b>A1</b>	Can give information about matters of personal relevance (e.g. likes and dislikes, family, pets) using simple words/signs and basic expressions. Can produce simple isolated phrases and sentences.
<b>Pre-A1</b>	Can give basic personal information (e.g. name, address, nationality), perhaps with the use of a dictionary.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the transition from intermediate level (B) to advanced level (C) is accompanied by a substantial progression in writing proficiency, marked by an increase in textual complexity and a concurrent development in communica-

tive awareness. At level B2, students should be able to produce clear, well-structured texts on a variety of topics, demonstrating their ability to summarise and critically evaluate information, particularly on topics of personal or professional interest. The transition to level C1 requires a significant improvement in textual and linguistic competence, as well as knowledge of different registers, styles and tones, which can be adapted to the text type and the target audience. The level of proficiency designated as C2 is characterised by complete proficiency of writing and suggests not only the advanced use of the language, but also full discursive and stylistic competence. Therefore, an integrated teaching approach is required and must combine metalinguistic awareness, exposure to authentic models and guided practice.

In order to develop written production skills, it is essential that learners are able to identify the distinctive features of various text genres (e.g. emails, argumentative essays, reviews, newspaper articles etc.) and text types (informative, narrative, appellative texts etc.) in relation to structural components, lexical choice, degree of formality and communicative purpose, thereby highlighting knowledge and skills in the field of textual linguistics<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the development of solid written production skills necessitates an in-depth understanding of the sociolinguistic aspects of language. This knowledge is essential for understanding and consciously managing variations in register, tone and form. With regard to the above-mentioned objectives in the field of textual linguistics and sociolinguistics, generative AI tools provide significant support and assistance, as will be illustrated below.

## 2.2 Writing with AI: examples of AI-based applications for text generation

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hermann Paul (1920) emphasised that language is based on the reproduction of pre-existing elements, thereby laying the theoretical foundations for the concept that is now central to automatic text generation technologies. According to this concept, comprehensibility and communicative effectiveness depend on the use of already known and shared linguistic structures (Meier-Vieracker 2024, 134-135). Generative language models, when trained on a wide range of textual data, have been shown to produce contextually appropriate linguistic outputs based on probabilistic combinations of previously learned elements

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<sup>3</sup> According to the classification proposed by Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), textual linguistics is divided into three main areas. The first is textual semantics, which analyses the meaning and conceptual organisation of the text. The second is textual pragmatics, which deals with the communicative functions and effectiveness of the text in contexts of use. The third is textual syntax, which studies the ways in which meaning is expressed through syntactic structures. Textual semantics and textual syntax are, on occasion, grouped together under the concept of textual grammar (Gansel, Jürgen 2002, 113). The knowledge offered by this area is particularly relevant for the development of written competence in students of GFL, as it provides useful tools for understanding and producing mechanisms of textual cohesion and coherence (Siebold 2014, 60). In addition, the findings of research in the domain of textual pragmatics are also of critical importance for the pedagogy of writing. The comprehension of the communicative function of texts and their characteristic features facilitates an approach to writing as a situated practice, wherein linguistic form is inextricably linked to the text's purpose and genre (Portmann-Tselikas 2000, 832).



(Hartmann 2021, 686). Communicative requirements, expressed through natural language prompts, are interpreted by the model as a textual context from which to generate formally correct and often stylistically effective responses. Despite the absence of semantic understanding in the human sense, the model exhibits a capacity to simulate textual coherence and cohesion that surpasses that of rule-based systems. This suggests a performance that, within the limits of its capabilities, appears communicatively credible. This renders such tools highly beneficial for the purposes of practising and improving one's writing skills in a foreign language. AI tools, when integrated into a well-defined pedagogical framework, have the potential to expand the traditional concept of literacy from the proficiency of discrete skills to the ability to skilfully construct one's writing using multiple digital features and resources (Ironsi, Ironsi 2024). This can promote participatory engagement in online contexts and critically assess the impact of emerging technologies on literacy processes and outcomes (Darvin, Hafner 2022).

Below are some examples of AI-based applications for text generation that may have an impact on writing in foreign language teaching. The selection of examples was based on the availability of a complimentary online version of the application, suitable for utilisation in a classroom setting or for individual study.

One of the lesser-known AI tools among learners and teachers is *Artikelschreiber*<sup>4</sup>, a free online platform that integrates an article search engine and a text generator, based on intelligent algorithms and Natural Language Processing (NLP) technologies. The system has been programmed to generate an article by entering a primary and secondary keyword in English or German. However, it has been observed that the article is largely derived directly from the original text identified as the source. Another example of a generative application is *Blog Idea Generator*, which uses the Generative Pre-trained Transformer 3 language model to suggest ideas related to a specific topic, making it an easy-to-use tool for training creative writing (Harmann 2021, 689-691). *Essaybot* behaves in a similar way, offering writing support features by suggesting relevant text fragments based on a given topic, as well as paraphrasing tools aimed, among other things, at circumventing plagiarism detection systems. Another NLP-based tool is *QuillBot*, which allows paraphrasing and text revision in its free version. The paid premium version offers supplementary features, including grammar checking, automatic summarisation and citation generation, making it a very useful tool in academic settings. A comparable level of performance is offered by *Wordtune*, a content generator that, in a manner analogous to *Gemini*, employs sophisticated NLP technologies to enhance the expressive quality of texts. *Wordtune* is available in a free version, which suggests learners lexical and syntactic alternatives. Paid versions (premium and business) are also available, and these include additional features such as sentence length adjustment and style modulation.

Among the most well-known and recent applications, which have also been studied for possible use in education, are *ChatGPT*, *Bing Copilot* and *Gemini* (Akan

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<sup>4</sup> The Internet addresses of the software mentioned in this section are listed at the end of the paper with the names of the providers, after the bibliographical references.

2025; Falk 2024). These applications have significant similarities in their use of generative AI and NLP technologies, offering multimodal functionality and complex conversational capabilities. Although these tools are already largely used by students, they are not particularly useful in teaching writing for text revision. This is because they do not visually highlight the changes and improvements made, making it difficult and unintuitive to understand exactly what has been changed. Tools such as *LanguageTool* and *DeepL Write* are much more effective for this purpose (Hassler, Wegmüller 2024, 26-28). Despite the evident similarities between the two tools, *LanguageTool* is distinguished by the presence of two distinct dialogue windows. The first of these is designed to address only formal errors, while the second functions as a paraphrasing tool. In the initial window, words containing spelling and grammatical errors are corrected, and these errors are highlighted in red. Words which could be improved are highlighted in yellow. Within the paraphrasing window, three distinct styles are available for selection: formal, standard and simple. In comparison to *LanguageTool*, *DeepL Write* is not designed to identify formal errors, but rather to offer effective and fluent rephrasing suggestions that are tailored to the chosen register. This makes this tool particularly useful in teaching writing in a foreign language, especially for paraphrasing texts and helping students acquire sociolinguistic and textual linguistic skills, which is also the main reason why it was chosen to conduct the pilot study.

### 3. Objectives and methodology

The integration of *DeepL Write* as a pedagogical instrument within the framework of advanced GFL classes enables educators to encourage more conscious reflection on the communicative and formal dimensions of written production. *DeepL Write* facilitates the process of reviewing and refining one's own written compositions, proposing alterations that can be examined and integrated by the student (Hassler, Wegmüller 2024, 27). On this basis, students do not merely receive a 'corrected text', but rather an immediate and detailed feedback that stimulates metacognitive activity on their own writing process. It is the responsibility of educators to provide guidance to students in the use of the software, with the objective of improving their audience-oriented writing skills and respecting the characteristics of text genre and thematic register. Such a practice is well-suited to the paradigm of action-oriented learning, wherein the utilisation of digital tools becomes an integral component of the learning process.

From a practical standpoint, *DeepL Write* allows users to edit a text in their desired style (*Schreibstil*), tone (*Ton*) or formality (*Anredeform*). Users can select either from four distinct styles: simple, business, academic and casual; four different tones: enthusiastic, friendly, confident and diplomatic; or two levels formality: informal, formal (cf. Figure 2). After the selection of either style, tone or formality, the software then rephrases the text, highlighting linguistic suggestions that are consistent with the aforementioned choices in green. This aspect assumes relevance



in advanced language training, where control of stylistic nuances becomes a key indicator of communicative competence (Günther 2007, Moraldo 2023).

Figure 2 – *DeepL Write* dialogue box for setting style, register or level of formality

The screenshot shows the DeepL Write interface. On the left, there is a text input area with a German paragraph: "Über ein Tempolimit diskutiert man in Deutschland schon ziemlich lang – und meistens emotional. Dabei ist 1953 ein wichtiges Jahr. Damals fand unter Kanzler Konrad Adenauer eine große Deregulierung der Geschwindigkeit statt: Menschen in Pkw und auf Motorrädern durften überall in der Bundesrepublik so schnell fahren, wie sie wollten und konnten. Westdeutschland lebte seinen Mythos der Autobahn. Anders in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: Dort waren 100 Stundenkilometer auf Autobahnen das Maximum, 80 außerhalb von Orten und 50 in Orten." Below the text is a character count "546 / 2000". On the right, there is a settings panel titled "Set a writing style" with buttons for "Simple", "Business", "Academic", and "Casual". Below this is a section "Set a tone" with buttons for "Enthusiastic", "Friendly", "Confident", and "Diplomatic". At the bottom of the settings panel are buttons for "Reset" and "Apply".

Another notable feature of *DeepL Write* includes the possibility of selecting synonyms or alternative expressions to modify the lexical items suggested by the tool. This feature facilitates the enrichment of vocabulary and the development of expressive variety. Furthermore, *DeepL Write* enables the rephrasing of sentences and the shortening of paragraphs, thereby enhancing clarity and textual coherence. These tools are useful for both proofreading and producing more effective texts in terms of communication.

However, it is imperative to underscore that the utilisation of tools such as *DeepL Write* should never evolve into an automatic reliance on technology. The educational value of the system lies in the students' ability to engage critically with the system's suggestions, whether accepting, rejecting or adapting them in accordance with their own linguistic discernment. In this sense, AI acts as a feedback generator rather than a substitute for the human writing process. The educational objective is not for a software to substitute students, but rather to aid them in refining and improving their texts, thereby fostering their autonomy and linguistic proficiency (Schiff 2021).

Another critical aspect is the phenomenon of so-called AI 'hallucinations' (Salvagno, Taccone, Gerli 2024), i.e. incorrect or decontextualised suggestions generated by the system. Such episodes require constant intervention by the teacher, who is responsible for educating students in the vigilant and conscious use of AI. This approach constitutes a component of a more extensive digital and critical literacy, which is becoming increasingly apparent in the contemporary language teaching landscape.

On the base of these premises, our pilot study was structured around three principal research questions with a focus on the use of AI for the improvement of written production in German. The key questions are as follows:

- a) How can artificial intelligence support the development of written production skills? – This question explores the potential of AI, in particular *DeepL*

*Write*, in helping students improve the quality of their writing and reflect on their own texts;

- b) How can teachers integrate *DeepL Write* into advanced GFL teaching to promote writing activities that are appropriate to the target audience, text type and theme? – Here, the focus is on the active role of the teacher in the methodological and targeted use of the tool as an integral part of teaching.
- c) How can students use *DeepL Write* as a feedback generator, intended as a support (and not a substitute) in the learning process? – The focus is on student autonomy and their ability to critically use the automatic feedback received, leveraging it within a pathway to language awareness.

For the pilot study, these research questions were contextualised within a process-oriented approach (*prozessorientierter Ansatz*) to writing. Based on the theoretical reflections of Merz-Grötsch (2010), it aims to make the writing process transparent and manageable, helping learners to progressively improve their skills. This approach differs from traditional approaches focused on the final product and instead concentrates on the process of text production itself.

The aim of the teaching activities is not the production of a finished text, but rather the promotion of metacognitive reflection on the writing process itself (Sommer 2020, 17-34). The exercises are designed to accomplish three fundamental objectives. Firstly, they seek to broaden the students' existing knowledge. Secondly, they are intended to facilitate a thorough analysis and address any language difficulties that the students may have in a targeted manner. Thirdly, and finally, they are intended to optimise the final product. Considering this, the production of multiple versions of the same text is not only anticipated but also encouraged. These variations provide valuable information about the level of knowledge and specific training needs of each learner.

The teaching programme is divided into a series of stages that follow a logical and pedagogical progression:

- The preparatory phase (*vorbereitende Phase*) aims to activate students' prior knowledge and gradually introduce them to the task of written production. In this stage, reading and text analysis strategies are used to stimulate interest and familiarise students with the text type that is the basis of the activity.
- The development phase (*aufbauende Phase*) allows linguistic and structural difficulties to be identified and isolated so that they can be addressed specifically. At this point in the process, the foci are the analysis of model texts and the guided reflection on the linguistic and rhetorical elements characteristic of the chosen text type. Students are encouraged to engage with the distinctive features of written German, particularly regarding cohesion, coherence and stylistic appropriateness in relation to the communicative context.
- The structuring and communicative writing phase (*strukturierende Phase und kommunikatives Schreiben*) is the core of text production. In this phase, students write a first draft of the text, putting into practice the knowledge and

strategies acquired in the previous phases. The emphasis is on the internal coherence of the text, clarity of expression and logical organisation of ideas. The teacher acts as a facilitator and accompanies the students in the writing process, providing guidance rather than corrections.

- The revision and improvement phase (*Verbesserungsphase*) allows students to refine their texts in terms of language, style and content. In this phase, students work on varying their language register according to the audience and communicative purpose, adjusting their tone and complying with the formal and textual conventions of the text type. Revision is seen as an opportunity to reflect critically on one's work and to make conscious choices aimed at improving quality.

In sum, the integration of AI tools such as *DeepL Write* – when grounded in a process-oriented pedagogy – opens new opportunities for fostering learner autonomy, refining academic writing, and deepening genre-specific competence in GFL contexts.

#### 4. *Proposed teaching plan*

In accordance with the objectives and teaching methodology that have been delineated above, this section now describes in detail the teaching plan that was subsequently implemented in the pilot studies discussed in the next chapter (section 5). The examples shown here are based on a text taken from the online magazine *Deutsch Perfekt*<sup>5</sup>, as shown also in Figure 2. In terms of level, the text is categorised in the magazine as intermediate (*Mittel*), corresponding to level B of the CEFR. In this specific case, given the presence of numerous technical terms relating to the automotive and transport sectors, the language level can be assessed as B2.

The proposed plan is divided into the four stages mentioned above (section 3) and aims to gradually develop textual and sociolinguistic competence, first in the domain of reception (preparation and development phase) and subsequently in that of production (structural and communicative writing phase with revision and improvement).

In the preparatory phase students are provided with the text and asked to carry out an initial brainstorming, decoding and comprehension activity. This consists of answering a series of questions relating to both internal and external factors of the text (Schmidt 1976, 114), following the text analysis model proposed by Nord (2007, 40). Questions relating to factors external to the text therefore concern the author (*Sender*), the author's intention (*Senderintention*), the recipient (*Adressant*), the channel used (*Kanal*), the place and time when the text was written (*Ort und Zeit*), and the reason for writing it (*Anlass*). Questions relating to factors internal

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<sup>5</sup> The selected text was extracted from *Deutsch Perfekt* online magazine and can be viewed in its entirety via the following link: <https://www.deutsch-perfekt.com/deutsch-lesen/schnell-schneller-deutsche-autobahnen> (last accessed May 2025).

to the text concern the main theme (*Thematik*), the content in all its parts (*Inhalt*), verbal and non-verbal elements (*verbale und nonverbale Elemente*) with particular attention to the vocabulary used and the syntactic form (*Lexik und Syntax*), structure and division of the text (*Aufbau und Textgliederung*) as well as presuppositions (*Präsuppositionen*), i.e. references to information that the reader must know in order to understand the text. This phase is an essential step in the development of foreign language learners' textual and sociolinguistic skills, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the structure and function of texts, fostering the development of critical and practical skills that are indispensable for written production tasks. By enabling students to identify and reproduce diverse text types, adapting tone, register and structure according to the communicative context, this approach contributes to the cultivation of comprehensive literary competence (Schmölzer-Eibinger, Weidacher 2007).

The development phase is dedicated to stylistic comparison. The students are presented with the same text in the four styles available in *DeepL Write*. The primary activity involves the identification of the distinctive characteristics inherent in each style, which are then documented in a table. Several linguistic aspects should be observed, including syntax, vocabulary, sentence length and the use of language for specific purposes (LSP). By means of this comparison, students establish a stylistic inventory to be used as a reference in the subsequent independent production phase. For convenience, some characteristics of the individual styles highlighted in the text under consideration are listed below:

- Simple style (Figure 3): prevalence of the canonical subject-verb order, division of complex sentences into shorter main clauses, lexical simplification (e.g. *Auto* instead of *PKW* to mean car), avoidance of genitive constructions in favour of compounds;

Figure 3 – *Rephrasing of the text in the simple style (with changes highlighted in green)*

The screenshot shows the DeepL Write interface with a German text on the left and its rephrased version on the right. The rephrased text is in a simple style, with changes highlighted in green. The interface includes a language dropdown set to 'German', a swap button, a style dropdown, and a settings menu.

**Original Text (Left):**

Fast allein ist Deutschland aber mit der Möglichkeit, auf Autobahnen so schnell zu fahren, wie man will. In Europa hat nur ein anderer Ort kein Limit: die Isle of Man in der Irischen See. Autobahnen gibt es dort aber keine. Auch insgesamt gibt es nur wenige andere Länder ohne Maximalgeschwindigkeit, sie haben aber schlechte Straßen. Über ein Tempolimit diskutiert man in Deutschland schon ziemlich lang – und meistens emotional. Dabei ist 1953 ein wichtiges Jahr. Damals fand unter Kanzler Konrad Adenauer eine große Deregulierung der Geschwindigkeit statt: Menschen in Pkw und auf Motorrädern durften überall in der Bundesrepublik so schnell fahren, wie sie wollten und konnten. Westdeutschland lebte seinen Mythos der Autobahn. Anders in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: Dort waren 100 Stundenkilometer auf Autobahnen das Maximum, 80 außerhalb von Orten und 50 in Orten.

**Rephrased Text (Right):**

In Deutschland kann man auf Autobahnen so schnell fahren, wie man will. In Europa gibt es nur einen anderen Ort ohne Limit: die Isle of Man in der Irischen See. Es gibt dort aber keine Autobahnen. Es gibt nur wenige andere Länder ohne Maximalgeschwindigkeit, aber die Straßen sind schlecht. In Deutschland diskutiert man schon lange über ein Tempolimit. Meistens sind die Diskussionen emotional. 1953 war ein wichtiges Jahr. Adenauer hat die Regeln zur Geschwindigkeit geändert. In der Bundesrepublik durften Autos und Motorräder überall so schnell fahren, wie sie wollten. Westdeutschland lebte seinen Mythos der Autobahn. In der DDR gab es andere Geschwindigkeitsregeln: 100 km/h auf Autobahnen, 80 km/h außerhalb von Orten und 50 km/h in Orten.

- Business style (Figure 4): dense syntax with longer sentences and very complex compound words (*Geschwindigkeitsbeschränkung* for speed limit) that

tend to be used in place of words of Latin origin (*Tempolimit*, as well as *Höchstgeschwindigkeit* instead of *Maximalgeschwindigkeit*);

Figure 4 – *Rephrasing of the text in the business style (with changes highlighted in green)*

German ▾ ↔ Style ▾ ⋮

Fast allein ist das Land aber mit der Möglichkeit, auf Autobahnen so schnell zu fahren, wie man will. In Europa hat nur ein anderer Ort kein Limit: die Isle of Man in der Irischen See. Autobahnen gibt es dort aber keine. Auch insgesamt gibt es nur wenige andere Länder ohne Maximalgeschwindigkeit, sie haben aber schlechte Straßen. Über ein Tempolimit diskutiert man in Deutschland schon ziemlich lang – und meistens emotional. Dabei ist 1953 ein wichtiges Jahr. Damals fand unter Kanzler Konrad Adenauer eine große Deregulierung der Geschwindigkeit statt: Menschen in Pkw und auf Motorrädern durften überall in der Bundesrepublik so schnell fahren, wie sie wollten und konnten. Westdeutschland lebte seinen Mythos der Autobahn. Anders in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: Dort waren 100 Stundenkilometer auf Autobahnen das Maximum, 80 außerhalb von Orten und 50 in Orten.

880 / 2000 ↶ ↷

↔ Style ▾ ⋮

Allerdings ist das Land fast allein mit der Möglichkeit, auf Autobahnen so schnell zu fahren, wie man möchte. In Europa gibt es nur eine weitere Strecke, die keine Geschwindigkeitsbeschränkung aufweist: die Isle of Man in der Irischen See. Autobahnen sind dort jedoch nicht vorhanden. Nur eine geringe Anzahl anderer Länder verfügt über eine vergleichbare Infrastruktur, die eine Höchstgeschwindigkeit zulässt. Allerdings sind die Straßen in diesen Ländern oft in einem schlechten Zustand. In Deutschland wird bereits seit geraumer Zeit über die Einführung eines Tempolimits diskutiert, wobei die Debatte oft von Emotionen geprägt ist. Im Jahr 1953 wurden wichtige Entscheidungen getroffen, die den Grundstein für die zukünftige Entwicklung legten. Unter Kanzler Konrad Adenauer erfolgte seinerzeit eine umfassende Deregulierung der Geschwindigkeit. In der Bundesrepublik durften Menschen in Pkw und auf Motorrädern überall so schnell fahren, wie sie wollten und konnten. Westdeutschland lebte seinen Mythos der Autobahn. In der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik galten auf Autobahnen 100 Stundenkilometer als Höchstgeschwindigkeit, 80 km/h außerhalb von Orten und 50 km/h in Orten.

880 / 2000 ↶ ↷

- Academic style (Figure 5): use of genitive constructions (*eines Tempolimits*), use of logical connectives (*jedoch*), high-register verbs (*aufweisen*), use of textual signals for discourse structuring and rhetorical strategies (*seit geraumer Zeit* instead of *ziemlich lang*) passive forms and nominalisations (*von Emotionalität geprägt* instead of *emotional*);

Figure 5 – *Rephrasing of the text in the academic style (with changes highlighted in green)*

German ▾ ↔ Style ▾ ⋮

Fast allein ist das Land aber mit der Möglichkeit, auf Autobahnen so schnell zu fahren, wie man will. In Europa hat nur ein anderer Ort kein Limit: die Isle of Man in der Irischen See. Autobahnen gibt es dort aber keine. Auch insgesamt gibt es nur wenige andere Länder ohne Maximalgeschwindigkeit, sie haben aber schlechte Straßen. Über ein Tempolimit diskutiert man in Deutschland schon ziemlich lang – und meistens emotional. Dabei ist 1953 ein wichtiges Jahr. Damals fand unter Kanzler Konrad Adenauer eine große Deregulierung der Geschwindigkeit statt: Menschen in Pkw und auf Motorrädern durften überall in der Bundesrepublik so schnell fahren, wie sie wollten und konnten. Westdeutschland lebte seinen Mythos der Autobahn. Anders in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: Dort waren 100 Stundenkilometer auf Autobahnen das Maximum, 80 außerhalb von Orten und 50 in Orten.

880 / 2000 ↶ ↷

↔ Style ▾ ⋮

Das Land zeichnet sich jedoch durch eine nahezu autonome Handlungsfähigkeit aus, was die Möglichkeit angeht, auf Autobahnen mit beliebiger Geschwindigkeit zu fahren. In Europa existiert lediglich eine weitere Insel, die von dieser Regelung ausgenommen ist: die Isle of Man in der Irischen See. Autobahnen sind dort jedoch nicht vorhanden. Eine vergleichende Analyse zeigt, dass nur eine geringe Anzahl an Ländern über die Implementierung einer Maximalgeschwindigkeit verfügt. Allerdings weisen diese Länder in der Regel suboptimale Straßeninfrastrukturen auf. Es ist von essentieller Bedeutung, dass die folgenden Ausführungen mit der erforderlichen Sorgfalt vorgenommen werden. In Deutschland wird bereits seit geraumer Zeit eine Diskussion über die Einführung eines Tempolimits geführt, die zumeist von Emotionalität geprägt ist. Das Jahr 1953 nimmt in diesem Zusammenhang eine entscheidende Rolle ein. In der Zeit unter Kanzler Konrad Adenauer wurde eine umfassende Deregulierung der Geschwindigkeit durchgeführt. In der Bundesrepublik Deutschland war es für Menschen, die ein Kraftfahrzeug oder ein Motorrad besaßen, erlaubt, mit diesen so schnell zu fahren, wie sie wollten und konnten. Westdeutschland lebte in dieser Zeit seinen Mythos der Autobahn. In der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik galten auf Autobahnen 100 Stundenkilometer als Höchstgeschwindigkeit, 80 Stundenkilometer außerhalb von Orten und 50 Stundenkilometer in Orten.

880 / 2000 ↶ ↷

- Casual style (Figure 6): predominance of forms typical of spoken language, also evident in spelling, such as fusions (*gibt's* instead of *gibt es*) that are closer to colloquial language, a documentary tone with a higher level of informality, lack of full verbalisation with the use of generic support verbs, including auxiliaries, and the use of adverbs or modal particles that reinforce meaning (*da, eher, richtig*).

Figure 6 – *Rephrasing of the text in the casual style (with changes highlighted in green)*

The screenshot shows a web interface for text rephrasing. At the top, it says 'German' with a dropdown arrow, a double-headed arrow icon, and a 'Style' dropdown menu. Below this, there are two columns of text. The left column contains the original German text, and the right column contains the rephrased text. The rephrased text includes several green highlights indicating changes: 'Deutschland ist da fast allein', 'gibt's', 'einen anderen Ort ohne Limit, und das ist', 'Es gibt', 'die Straßen sind aber oftmals eher schlecht', 'wird', 'diskutiert', 'richtig emotional', '1953 war übrigens', 'passierte', 'In der Bundesrepublik durften Menschen', 'In der DDR war es anders: 100 km/h auf Autobahnen, 80 km/h außerhalb von Orten und 50 km/h in Orten waren das Maximum.'

In the structuring and communicative writing phase, students are asked to produce their own texts based on their previous observations and the stylistic inventory they have already developed. The proposed activity is as follows: rewrite the text in each of the four styles that were analysed, paying close attention to the specific stylistic features that emerged (*Überarbeiten Sie den folgenden Text in den vier analysierten Stilen. Achten Sie dabei auf die spezifischen Stilelemente, die in der Tabelle eingetragen wurden*). Teachers can request that learners adapt a short text in the four styles or select one style to develop in a longer and more complex text. This practice fosters the capacity to modulate the linguistic register in accordance with the communicative purpose and the target audience, thereby stimulating a deliberate and strategic approach to written production.

In the revision and improvement phase, critical reflection is introduced with the assistance of AI. The aim of the proposed activity is to facilitate a comparison between one's own text and a version generated by an AI system in the same style through three questions:

1. What are the differences between your text and the one written by AI? (*Was sind die Unterschiede zwischen Ihrem Text und dem der künstlichen Intelligenz?*)
2. Which of the two texts is closer to the chosen style? (*Welcher der beiden Texte entspricht am besten dem gewünschten Stil?*)
3. Which parts of the artificially generated text would you keep in your text? (*Welche Elemente des künstlich erzeugten Textes würden Sie für Ihren eigenen Text beibehalten?*)



Following the comparison stage, students can refine their texts. Reflection on the function and impact of AI thus opens a critical dialogue on the integration of technology into the language learning process.

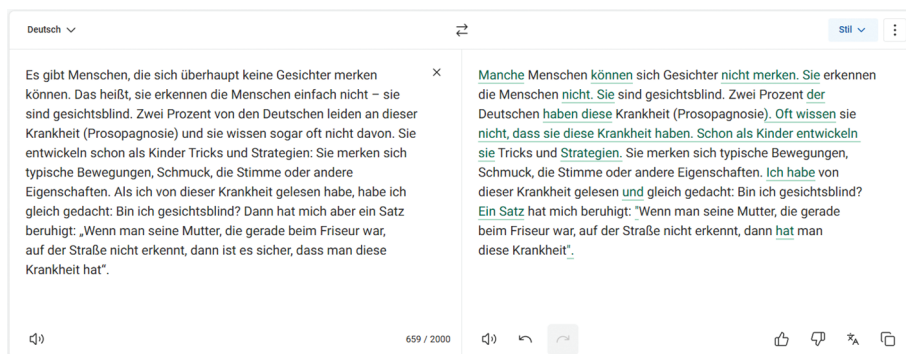
The preliminary results of a pilot study based on the described teaching plan are presented below. The plan has been designed for students of German as a foreign language and focuses on the acquisition of LSP and the recognition of different types of text in order to subsequently produce authentic texts by giving them writing tasks that reflect real communicative situations.

### 5. Pilot study

The pilot study took place within an advanced German language elective course in a master's degree programme at the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the *Università Cattolica* in Milan in November 2024. The target audience was 10 students with an intermediate-to-advanced level of German (at least B1+ of the CEFR). An excerpt from the textbook used for the course, *Panorama B1* (Williams et al. 2017, 14), was used for the pilot study. This excerpt had already been covered in a previous lesson and deals with prosopagnosia (also known as face blindness), a neurological disorder that prevents people from recognising faces, including familiar ones.

The preparatory phase was carried out partly within the textbook using the proposed text comprehension exercises and partly – especially in relation to the target audience and the linguistic factors internal to the text – through targeted questions. Subsequently, in the development phase, the four versions of the text processed by *DeepL Write* (in its free version)<sup>6</sup> in the four different styles were presented (Figures 7-10).

Figure 7 – *Rephrasing of the pilot study text in the simple style*

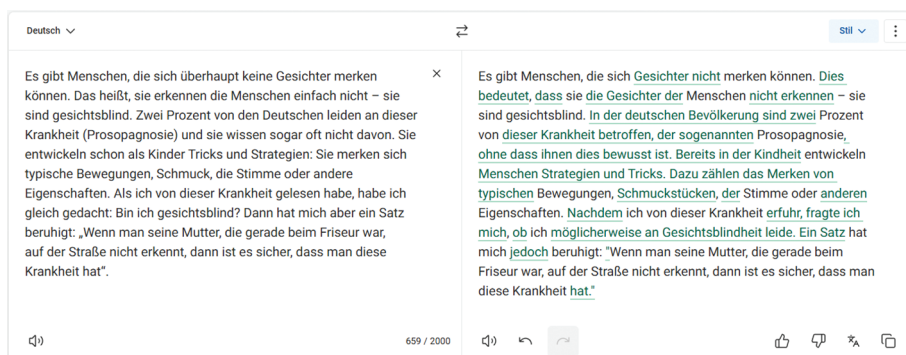


<sup>6</sup> A paid version of the tool is currently available, while during the pilot study it was only possible to use the free beta version released in English and German.



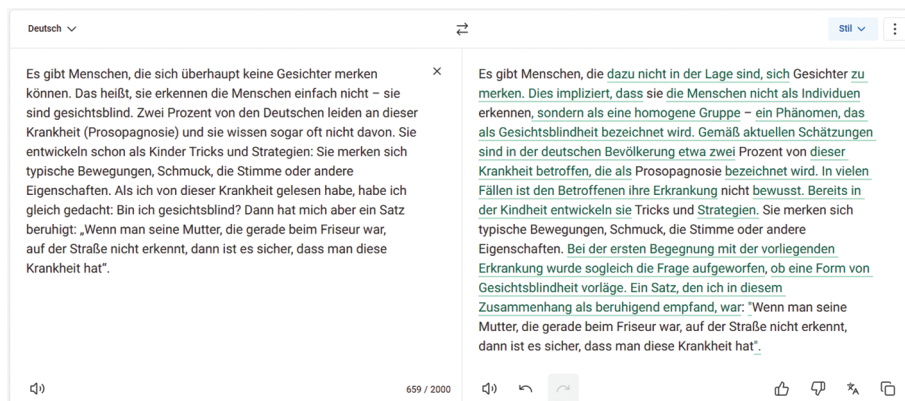
As demonstrated in the initial sentence of Figure 7, the employment of a simple style often results in the manifestation of a paratactic style, characterised by the elimination of subordinate clauses (*die sich überhaupt keine Gesichter merken können*) and the removal of adverbs that serve a reinforcing function in negations (*überhaupt*). A further simplification can be observed in the use of more general verbs such as ‘to have a disease’ (*eine Krankheit haben*) instead of more precise verbal expressions such as ‘to suffer from a disease’ (*an einer Krankheit leiden*). Even the use of pronominal particles that refer to previously mentioned concepts, as in the sentence ‘they don’t even know anything about it’ (*sie wissen sogar nichts davon*), tends to be replaced by simpler constructions, as in the case of the main clause ‘they often don’t know’ (*Oft wissen sie nicht*) followed by the declarative clause ‘that they have this disease’ (*dass sie diese Krankheit haben*).

Figure 8 – *Rephrasing of the pilot study text in the business style*



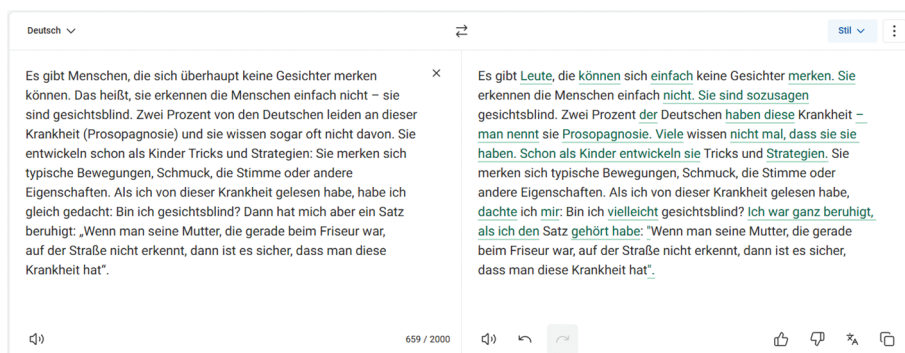
The business style also has fundamental characteristics that are evident in the first sentence, where the subjective expression that reinforces the meaning created by the adverb ‘absolutely’ (*überhaupt*) is eliminated, adopting a more sober, direct and professional language. The use of this style is characterised by the substitution of informal expressions with a more formal register, as evidenced by the transition from *das heißt* (i.e.) to *dies bedeutet* (that means). The requirement for clarity is also reflected in the selection of vocabulary, where more technical terminology is employed. For instance, the sentence ‘two per cent of Germans suffer from this disease’ (*zwei Prozent der Deutschen leiden an dieser Krankheit*), is expressed as ‘two per cent of the German population is affected by this disease’ (*In der deutschen Bevölkerung sind zwei Prozent von dieser Krankheit betroffen*). The greater terminological precision required by business language is also evident in the noticeable increase in text length, a feature also found in the academic style.

Figure 9 – Rephrasing of the pilot study text in the academic style



The academic writing style is evident in several rewordings that make the text more abstract and scientific, introducing concepts such as ‘homogeneous group’ (*homogene Gruppe*), which give the whole text a more academic or technical tone. In this style there is a shift from an active and personal form such as ‘two per cent of Germans suffer from this disease’ (*Zwei Prozent von den Deutschen leiden an dieser Krankheit*) to an impersonal and passive form such as ‘according to current estimates, approximately two per cent of the German population is affected by this disease’ (*Gemäß aktuellen Schätzungen sind in der deutschen Bevölkerung etwa zwei Prozent von dieser Krankheit betroffen*). This highlights objectivity and detachment, characteristics that are peculiar to formal scientific texts. Also evident are the clarification and expansion of information, found in the reformulation of the phrase ‘they are often not even aware of it’ (*sie wissen sogar oft nicht davon*), which becomes ‘in many cases, those affected are unaware of their illness’ (*In vielen Fällen ist den Betroffenen ihre Erkrankung nicht bewusst*). These changes are aimed at increasing clarity and formality. In addition to these features, connectives and related structures have been introduced to improve cohesion, making the text more fluid and articulate by hypotaxis.

Figure 10 – Rephrasing of the pilot study text in the casual style



In contrast to the academic version, the casual style is characterised by parataxis. Lexical and stylistic simplifications are also evident: neutral terms such as *Menschen* (individuals) are replaced by more colloquial words such as *Leute* (people), while the addition of modal particles (a characteristic feature of spoken German) such as 'simply' (*einfach*) helps to make the statement more accessible. In addition, there is frequent use of paraphrasing and informal structures, for example with the insertion of attenuating expressions such as 'that is to say' (*sozusagen*), which give a conversational and less assertive tone. At the textual level, the AI intervention introduces a more explanatory narrative, with the addition of phrases not found in the original, such as 'Many people don't even know they have it' (*Viele wissen nicht mal, dass sie sie haben*), which increase communicative effectiveness for a non-specialist audience. Finally, the introduction of markers of subjective uncertainty, such as 'maybe' (*vielleicht*), and the simplification of subordinate clauses make the entire text more fluid and understandable, especially for readers with intermediate language skills.

The students worked in groups and analysed the texts in order to compile a table summarising the characteristics of each style. In the plenary phase, the tables of the individual groups were discussed and collated into a single table (Table 1), which was then used as a guide in the next phase.

Table 1 – *Characteristics of the text styles in DeepL Write according to the students of the pilot*

	Einfach	Geschäftlich	Akademisch	Locker
<b>Wortschatz</b>	Wiederholungen, einfache Wörter (keine Fachwörter)	mehr Präpositionen, Komposita	fachsprachlich, Komposita	umgangssprachlich
<b>Satzbau</b>	kurze Sätze, wiederholte Strukturen, Parataxe (fast ausschließlich Hauptsätze)	längere Sätze mit Nebensätzen	Nebensätze, Nominalisierung	viele Hauptsätze
<b>Textlänge</b>	kurzer Text	längerer Text	längerer Text	mittellang
<b>Adressaten</b>	breites Publikum	kein spezifisches Publikum	eher in Richtung Fachtext	breites Publikum
<b>Weitere stilistische Merkmale</b>	wenige Daten bzw. Infos, informell	Passiv, Komposita, keine Abkürzungen	Genitiv	diskursiv, einfacher

In the structuring and creative writing phase, the students, still in their respective groups, reworked the text in a single style assigned to them by the teacher and proceeded to restructure the original text according to the stylistic characteristics highlighted in the table. Since there were three groups of students, the styles developed were simple, business and casual. The academic style was not addressed in this pilot study. The text was developed by the groups as follows.

– Simple style:

Viele Menschen können sich keine Gesichter merken. Sie erkennen Menschen nicht. Aber das kann eine Krankheit sein. Sie entwickeln schon als Kinder Tricks

und Strategien. Zum Beispiel sie merken sich typische Bewegungen, Schmuck, die Stimme oder andere Aspekte. Ich habe diese Krankheit entdeckt und habe gedacht: bin ich gesichtsblind? Aber ich weiß, dass wenn man seine Mutter, die gerade beim Friseur war, erkennt, dann ist man nicht krank. (Source: Group 1)

– Business style:

Viele Menschen können sich keine Gesichter merken. Das bedeutet, dass sie Schwierigkeiten haben, andere Menschen zu erkennen, weil sie gesichtsblind sind. Zwei Prozent der Deutschen leiden an dieser Krankheit, die Prosopagnosie heißt, und sie wissen oft nicht davon. Sie entwickeln schon als Kinder Tricks und Strategien: Sie merken sich typische Bewegungen, Schmuck, die Stimme oder andere Eigenschaften. Timo Brunner, der Protagonist des Texts, hatte Zweifel daran, ob er gesichtsblind war, als er von dieser Krankheit las. Die Antwort war einfach: Die eigene Mutter zu erkennen ist ein Zeichen, dass man nicht krank ist. (Source: Group 2)

– Casual style:

Es gibt Leute, die es nicht schaffen, die Gesichter von den anderen Menschen zu erinnern und erkennen. Zwei Prozent von den Deutschen wissen nicht, dass, diese Tendenz eigentlich mit einer Krankheit zu tun hat. Um mit diesem Problem klarzukommen, entwickeln sie von der Kinderzeit verschiedene Strategien und Tricks, wie zum Beispiel Bewegungen, die Stimme und so weiter. Als ich diese Krankheit entdeckt habe, habe ich mich gewundert, ob ich gesichtsblind war. Zum Glück habe mich aber einen Satz beruhigt: “Wenn man seine Mutter, die gerade beim Friseur war, auf der Straße nicht erkennt, dann ist es sicher, dass man diese Krankheit hat“. (Source: Group 3)

In a subsequent lesson, the revision and improvement phase took place. In this phase, the students reflected on the quality and adherence to style of the texts they had produced and then compared them with the versions developed by the AI. They then identified the strengths and weaknesses of their approach to text restructuring and the AI's approach and finally discussed the potential use of *DeepL Write* and which aspects they would implement to improve their writing production skills. These discussions are summarised and reported in the concluding paragraph of this paper.

## 6. Conclusion and discussion

The findings of this study emphasise the opportunities and limitations of integrating AI tools such as *DeepL Write* into the teaching and learning of written production in German as a Foreign Language. While acknowledging the potential of such tools to provide concrete support during the writing process, especially in terms of reworking texts, students also highlighted the need for critical oversight and hu-

man validation, particularly when writing in a foreign language. The students indicated that, during the revision stage, their primary focus was typically on lexical adjustments; however, *DeepL Write* was found to propose more extensive structural rephrasing with greater frequency, which were at times perceived as unnecessarily redundant or excessive. This discrepancy suggests a potential gap between the current revision practices of students and the more extensive textual transformation that AI tools may suggest.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the efficacy of AI-assisted writing is contingent upon students' fundamental competencies in text analysis, a skill that remains indispensable irrespective of technological augmentation. In the context of language learning, the development of written production skills must be undertaken together with written reception skills, as the two influence each other. The ability to write effective texts requires a solid familiarity with textual structures, communicative registers and discursive conventions, which is mainly acquired through the analysis and comprehension of written texts. Therefore, writing practice cannot be separated from careful exposure to and reflection on the textual models that form its foundation. Furthermore, while students recognised the potential of utilising *DeepL Write* for their academic work in their native language, they indicated an ongoing reliance on native speakers or instructors when working in a foreign language to ensure linguistic accuracy and communicative effectiveness. This highlights how machine feedback cannot replace that of human experts, who, in the field of learning, correspond to the figure of the teacher (Tian, Zhou 2020).

Several areas for future research and pedagogical development emerge from the insights gained from this pilot study. Firstly, the empirical scope of the pilot study should be expanded by involving a larger and more diverse sample of GFL learners across different proficiency levels and educational settings. This would provide a more nuanced understanding of how learner variables, such as linguistic background, digital literacy and metacognitive awareness, influence the use and perception of AI-assisted writing tools. Additionally, future studies should incorporate a broader range of text genres and communicative tasks, to assess whether the advantages and disadvantages of AI tools vary by discourse or text type.

Secondly, a comparative analysis of multiple AI-based platforms should be included in order to examine differences in revision suggestions, linguistic quality and pedagogical potential. This would help educators to make more informed decisions about which tools best align with their instructional goals and learners' needs. This is compounded by the fact that many platforms currently in use are available in both free and paid versions (cf. section 2.2). It would therefore be very interesting to observe and analyse whether there is a difference in using one version rather than the other, especially in relation to the possible corrections that can be made, which influence the specific training of the software. A study in mechanical engineering evaluated ChatGPT's ability to solve university exam questions, using the paid (GPT-4) and free (GPT-3) versions as references (Frenkel, Emara 2023). The results showed that the paid version achieved an average answer accuracy of 76%,

compared to 51% for the free version, indicating a significant difference in accuracy between the two versions.

Thirdly, longitudinal studies could investigate the long-term impact of AI-assisted writing on learners' written competence using specific psychological- and neurobiological-based models such as I-PACE (Brand et al. 2016). Such studies should also examine whether sustained exposure to AI-generated suggestions fosters deeper metalinguistic awareness or, conversely, leads to over-reliance on external tools.

Finally, the integration of AI in language education requires the development of teacher training programmes to provide instructors with the skills to critically evaluate and effectively implement these tools. This includes fostering an understanding of AI's limitations and potential biases, as well as its role in promoting or inhibiting learner autonomy. Future pedagogical models should explicitly address how to scaffold students' interactions with AI to support reflective, self-directed learning rather than passive dependence.

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MOIRA DE IACO

## Multimodal Language in the Foreign Language Classroom. A study on the Perception of Gestures by Foreign Language Teachers

### *Abstract*

The main aim of this article is to support the hypothesis that gestures and body movements spontaneously play an essential role in the context of language teaching by analysing data from ongoing empirical research. Gestures are an integral part of the human communication system, as it has been demonstrated in several psycholinguistic studies. It is argued that there is a need to raise awareness of the potential of multimodality among language teachers and students to promote kinaesthetic learning. The theoretical framework of this paper is derived from the theories of embodied cognition in combination with the total physical response approach. Gestures and body movements are fundamental for cognitive and communicative functions such as conceptualisation, thought organisation, language production and comprehension, development and management of emotions and pragmatic aspects. The analysis of data collected as part of a study on the perception of gestures by foreign language teachers, which is presented in this paper, confirms that the use of gestures and body movements by language teachers corresponds to each of the cognitive and communicative functions mentioned above.

### *Keywords*

multimodal language; foreign language teachers' gestures; cognitive functions of gestures; pedagogical functions of gestures; embodied cognition

### *Introduction*

The theoretical framework of the preliminary study on teachers' perception of gestures in the foreign language classroom presented in this contribution, is derived from the theories of embodied cognition in combination with the total physical response approach (Hung, Fang, Chen 2014; Kuo, Fang, and Chen 2014; Macedonia and Knösche 2011). The latter considers the combination of physical and verbal responses with the use of students' body movements to prepare and learn verbal expressions during the language acquisition process. It encourages the physical involvement of the learner (Asher 1969). This approach can be integrated into embodied cognition studies to gain a broader perspective on the cognitive role of the body's influence on the mind in learn-

ing and to include the impact of the teacher's bodily actions on learners during instruction (Paloma, Ascione, Tafuri 2016; Stolz 2021). So, it is possible to claim that language learning can be "the result of our bodily nature shaping our perceptions and actions" by an interaction in group and with the environment, so promoting the application of the method of the cooperative learning in class (see Ferreira 2021).

Starting from this framework the main goals of this paper are:

1. Analysing data from ongoing empirical studies to show the essential role of gestures and body movements in foreign language teaching. In particular, data collected through a study on the perception of gestures by a group of 29 foreign language teachers who in autumn 2024 answered a questionnaire created specifically for this study. These collected data will be analysed and results will be discussed.
2. Providing results to increase the awareness of the potential of multimodality among language teachers and students and to promote the pedagogical benefits of kinaesthetic teaching and learning.

Gestures and body movements are fundamental to cognitive and communicative functions such as conceptualisation, thought organisation (Goldin-Meadow 2023) and memorization of vocabulary (Tellier 2008; García-Gámez, Cervilla, Casado, and Macizo 2021), language production and comprehension (Sweller, Shinooka-Phelana, and Austin 2020), management of emotions and pragmatic aspects (Morgenstern and Goldin-Meadow [Eds.] 2022). The study on the perception of gestures by foreign language teachers presented and discussed in this paper has proven that the use of gestures and body movements by language teachers corresponds to each of the cognitive and communicative functions mentioned above, as this paper aims to show by analysing the preliminary data from the ongoing empirical study.

## *2. The state of the art*

Gestures and body movements spontaneously play an essential role in the context of language learning, since they are an integral part of the human communication system, as it has been demonstrated in several psycholinguistic studies (McNeill 1992, 2005; Krauss 1998; Kendon 2004; Capirci, Contaldo, Caselli, Volterra 2005; Goldin-Meadow 2023). Children begin to communicate with gestures, especially deictic gestures, and they develop the ability to synchronise gestures and words. Gestures are the first means of communication for children and the means for learning language and, more generally, for cognitive development. Through gestures they begin to organise thoughts and intentions, they joint the attention of adults (Tomasello, Carpenter and Liszkowski 2007) and they begin to communicate thoughts and intentions, they produce and understand thoughts and thus prepare for the development of verbal mo-

dality (Iverson and Goldin-Meadow 2005). Further evidence of the key role of gesture in the cognitive development of thinking and shaping communication is provided by blind children who use gestures from birth even though they have never seen anyone sign (Iverson and Goldin-Meadow 1998, 2001). Signers also use gestures, but the latter are usually confused with signs because signs and gestures consist of similar manual and non-manual components<sup>1</sup> (see Cook 2022, 243).

Adults continue to use gestures throughout their lives and across cultures and languages, even after they have mastered one or more verbal languages and completed their cognitive development. As Cook (2022, 248) claims, “in adult speakers, it is clear that movements of the hand and mouth influence one another during communication” and it has been shown that the production of meaningful gestures simultaneously with speech performance reduces the load on speakers’ working memory and thus provides a cognitive benefit. Hand movements without a meaning that is synchronised with speech do not have the same positive effect (see Cook, Friedman, Duggan, Cui and Popescu 2016). Furthermore, it has been proven that gestures are related to the flow of speech. In fact, a restriction of gestures has a negative effect on lexical access and processing by the working memory, e.g. the increasing of fluency disorders (Rauscher, Krauss, and Chen 1996).

Neuroscientists have shown that the same neurones are involved in mouth movements and grasping actions (Rizzolatti, Camarda, Fogassi, Gentilucci, Luppino and Matelli 1988): Mouth and hand are connected through the brain, i.e. they have a neuronal coordination on the basis of which they can jointly shape communication (Iverson and Fagan 2004). Ferreira (2021, 1461) states that “to comprehensively understand how cognitive processes operate, it is necessary to acknowledge the brain as embodied”. This concept is also argued by embodied cognition theories and means that “how humans collect information and assemble the world depends non-trivially on the body, its experiences, and its movements; the only way that the brain talks to the environment is through the body, sensory tissues, and organs”. Human beings think, speak, and learn with the body as well as the mind or even think, speak, and learn through the influence of the body on the mind and the influence of the mind on the body. Body actions and physical experience influence mental processes, and mental processes leave traces in the body. Body and mind interact with each other as two distinct, but not separate, independent systems (Barsalou 1999, 2008; Gibbs 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> Signers are people who use a sign language such as Italian Sign Language. This is one of the various sign languages used around the world and was developed for communication of deaf people and between deaf and hearing people. Each sign of a sign language consists of a combination of phonemes, the so-called formational parameters. There are five of these: Handshape, palm orientation, movement, location, and non-manual signals such as facial expressions and body movements.

### 3. *The Study*

#### 3.1 Methodology

29 foreign language teachers working at schools or universities in Italy took part in the study. They answered a semi-structured questionnaire with a mixture of open and closed questions with multiple choice answers (see the Appendix). The questionnaire refers to their use of gestures in class and their observation of learners' gestures in class. The questionnaire was distributed in October 2024 in a Google form through the Italian Association of Foreign Language Teachers ANILS (Associazione Nazionale Insegnanti Lingue Straniere). The questions were aimed at:

1. Investigating teachers' perceptions of the frequency of their gestures;
2. Investigating teachers' perceptions of the functions of gestures used in foreign language teaching;
3. Observing teachers' perceptions of the impact of their gestures on teaching and learning;
4. Identifying the composition of gestures and body movements used by foreign language teachers in the classroom;
5. Investigating teachers' perceptions of the use of learners' gestures in the classroom.

The data collected are analysed from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The quantitative analysis is carried out by creating charts. The qualitative analysis is done by creating tables according to the aspects to be focussed within the theoretical framework of embodied cognition and total physical response (cf. Macedonia and Knösche 2011; Chen and Fang 2014; Huang, Chao, Fang, and Chen 2013). It promotes a cognitive approach to language teaching that needs to incorporate gestures more and more consciously and develop the use of gestures by language teachers as a professional skill (cf. Stam and Tellier 2022).

#### 3.2 Participants

Among the 29 participants, 27 are Italian native speakers, 1 is a Russian native speaker and 1 is bilingual from childhood (Italian and English). 9 of these teachers work in the first grade of secondary school, 3 work in the second grade of secondary school, 2 work at the university, 1 has experience in all teaching levels. 7 teachers have experience of teaching groups of between 10 and 20 students and 17 teachers work with groups of more than 20 students: all of these teachers work in public schools or universities; 4 teachers work in private schools and teach smaller groups; 1 teacher works with groups with a variable number of students at different educational levels. Most of the teachers learnt the language they teach at university, but six of them also learnt the language they teach in the family environment. 14 teachers who participated in the study teach English: 3 of them also teach Spanish, 1 also teaches German; 3 teach

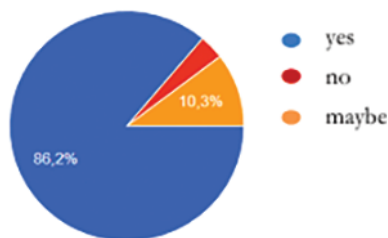


only Spanish; 7 teach Italian as a second language (L2): 2 of them also teach German and 2 also teach Russian; 3 teach only French.

### 3.3 Collected Data

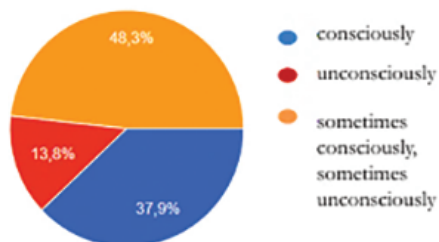
86.2 per cent of the teachers involved in the study stated that they use gestures in the classroom (see Chart 1).

Chart 1 – *Percentage of teachers' use of gestures according to teachers' perceptions*



14 teachers stated that they sometimes use gestures consciously and sometimes unconsciously during their lessons; 11 teachers stated that they only use gestures consciously; 4 teachers stated that they use gestures unconsciously (see Chart 2).

Chart 2 – *Percentage of conscious and unconscious use of gestures by teachers*



Teachers who stated that they always or sometimes consciously use gestures also stated that they use methods such as role play, flipped classroom, cooperative learning, and total physical response.

Teachers indicated that they use gestures in classroom activities such as explaining and illustrating vocabulary, facilitating student responses during interactive and hands-on activities, describing physical and character aspects, illustrating intonation and rhythm to convey the prosody of a language, introducing the activities to be performed, and illustrating cultural and social aspects to make them visible and more immediate for understanding (see Table 1).

Table 1 – *Teaching activities in which teachers use gestures*

<i>Contexts for the use of gestures by teachers</i>
Explanation and illustration of vocabulary
Facilitating students' answers
Description of physical and character aspects
Illustration of intonation and rhythm
Explanation of the activities to be done
Illustration of cultural and social aspects

According to the teachers (see Table 2), the gestures they use in class fulfil functions such as avoiding verbalisation or verbal translation into students' L1, facilitating comprehension, improving memory processing and communication, highlighting topics and the context of communication, involving students in class activities, clarifying content, visualising words, to support teaching and learning more directly, directing teachers' mental activities by organising thinking and lexical access, both of which are fundamental to explanatory work, and also directing students' mental activities by favouring thinking, attention, and memory, promoting the learning of cultural content, highlighting cultural differences in the way of thinking, living and acting.

Table 2 – *Functions of gestures in the foreign language classroom according to teachers' experience*

<i>Functions of teachers' gestures</i>
Avoiding verbalisation and verbal translation in the L1 of students
Facilitating comprehension
Improving memory
Increasing communication
Emphasising topics and contexts
Involving students
Clarifying content
Giving visual support for words
Guiding the mental activities of teachers and students
Favour the learning of culture

The teachers involved in the study were asked to indicate gestures that they frequently use in class. They mentioned different types of gestures for different expressive functions. The examples mentioned by the teachers are collected and summarised in Table 3: The different types of gestures are in the first column and the corresponding expressive functions in the second column.

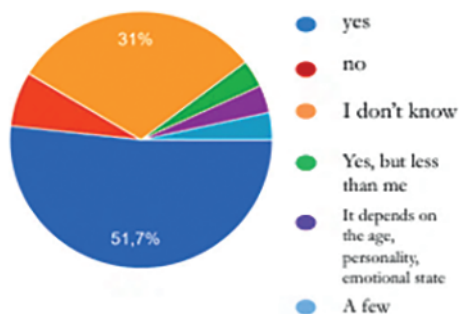
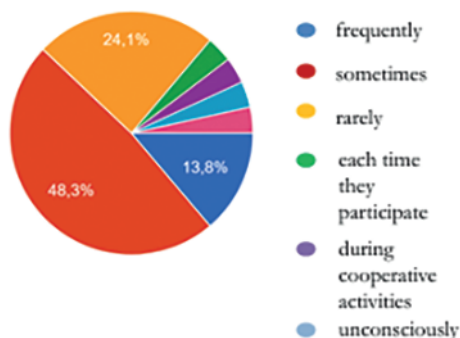
Table 3 – *Types of gestures used by teachers for different expressive functions*

<i>Types of gestures</i>	<i>Expressive functions</i>
Unconscious gestures	To accompany the speech
Facial mimicry	To express feelings and emotions
Action or position gestures	<p>1. To introduce teaching activities (writing, speaking, reading, make silence*, listening**, repeat***, pay attention to the novelty****) *The gesture with folded arms</p> <p>**The hand touches the ear</p> <p>***The index finger in horizontal position rotates on itself forward near the mouth</p> <p>**** The gesture of the bell/the gesture of the light bulb (see figures 1 and 2)</p> <p>2. To mimic verbs such as sleeping, running, etc.</p> <p>3. To mimic jobs</p> <p>4. Movements up or down for explaining prepositions</p> <p>5. To mimic situations</p> <p>6. Movements of the hand at different levels of position to explain the degree of strength of adjectives</p> <p>7. Movement of separation to distinguish concepts</p>
Deictic gestures	<p>1.To show dimensions and collocations</p> <p>2.To indicate the position of the parts of a sentence by pointing to air</p> <p>3.To attract the attention</p> <p>4.To assign word shifts</p> <p>5.To show the past (behind), the present (in front), the future (ahead) for explaining the tenses of verbs</p> <p>6.To indicate and connect elements</p> <p>7.Pointing the head to express thought or imagination</p>

Fig. 1 – *The gesture of the bell*

Fig. 2 – *The gesture of the light bulb*

More than half the majority of teachers stated that students use gestures in class. 31 per cent of teachers indicated that they do not know whether students use gestures in class, probably because they have never paid attention to this aspect (see Chart 3). According to the teachers, gestures are not used as often by the students as by the teachers (see Chart 4).

Chart 3 – *Percentages of use of gestures by learners according to the teachers*Chart 4 – *Percentages of the frequency of gestures' use by students according to the teachers' perception*

The teachers were very uncertain in answering the question about the type of gestures used by the students. Those who responded referred to imitation of the teacher's gestures, facial expressions, iconic gestures to describe physical features, gestures for asking to speak. Most teachers were also undecided when asked about the situ-

ations in which learners use gestures and the functions of students' gestures, again answering "I don't know". The teachers who gave an answer referred to learners' use of gestures in situation such as those characterised by the lack of words in the target language, the necessity to clarify, during the production in the target language and in pair activities. Regarding the functions of students' gestures, teachers responded that students use gestures to replace words, to be clearer and more comprehensible, to compensate for vocabulary limitations in the target language, and to reinforce the learning of a grammatical or lexical structure.

### 3.4 Data analysis

The percentage of teachers who stated that they use gestures in the classroom is high (86,2 %).

It has been established that the sample of teachers who responded to the questionnaire work in different orders and levels of education. However, it is a sample that is not meaningful enough for the different orders and levels to be able to assess differences in the frequency of use of gestures by teachers in relation to the educational level of the students. This aspect should be investigated in studies conducted later with a larger and more diverse sample of teachers of foreign languages at different levels of education.

With one exception, all the teachers involved in the study have Italian as their mother tongue. In fact, only one has Russian as a mother tongue. In order to understand whether the frequency of use of gestures in class by foreign language teachers and their perception of such use can be correlated with the teachers' L1, which, as in the case of this study, is a language with a high frequency of use of gestures, it is necessary to deepen the research with comparative studies involving foreign language teachers with an L1 other than Italian. It would also be interesting to examine in a future study the possible differences in the frequency of use of gestures by teachers in relation to the language taught, checking, for example, the differences related to the distance or proximity between the teacher's mother tongue and the language taught and between the students' mother tongue and the language taught by the teacher.

The participants in the study showed that they correctly recognised the key role that their gestures play in foreign language teaching. Most of them were aware of both the cognitive and the pragmatic-communicative functions of gestures. Nevertheless, the examples they gave are certainly fewer than those actually used in class, just as their perception of the frequency of gestures' use is certainly low, since many gestures fulfil cognitive and pragmatic functions without the teacher being aware of them (cf. Cook 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to conduct more studies based on the integration of natural and experimental approaches, i.e. the integration of observational studies on the spontaneous use of gestures in different contexts of language teaching and learning with experimental studies aimed at demonstrating the specific use of gestures for the achievement of language teaching and learning goals. An extension of these studies could enhance the conscious use of gestures in

foreign language teaching to improve the interaction of bodily actions and mental processing, thus basing learning processes even more strongly on the embodiment of cognition.

The examples of gestures listed in Table 3 are different types of gestures (co-speech gestures, iconic gestures, mimes, metaphoric gestures) that were used as pedagogical gestures that can be categorised into non-intentional and intentional gestures. Gestures that accompany speech without having a lexical meaning and facial expressions that express feelings and emotions are non-intentional gestures. Moreover, these types of gestures are mostly unconscious and have pragmatic functions, such as establishing an emphatic relationship between teacher and students, providing information about the quantitative and qualitative attention that a task requires, involving students in clarifying the content and in changing the goals and cognitive engagement in the different activities. They help to manage students' motivation and emotions. Gestures classified as action or positional gestures, iconic gestures used for representing physical characteristics, and the different types of deictic gestures have a lexical meaning and are more intentional and conscious than the others listed in the table 3. They can be co-speech gesture, but they can be also used before speaking in the target language to prepare the teachers' explanations and the students' comprehension, or after speaking to reinforce the understanding and memorization of the content conveyed by words. Most of them have a metaphorical conceptual basis. The latter refers to embodied experiences or ideas in gestures. Teachers mentioned gestures used to introduce classroom activities and explain content. In class, activities such as writing, speaking or reading are mimed. Then, the commandment of silence can be formulated indirectly: In this context, one teacher mentions the metaphorical use of the gesture of folded arms, representing the teacher's interruption of the lesson, to indirectly ask learners to restore their attention and stop making noise. The gesture of the hand touching the ear invites the students to listen to the lesson. The index finger spinning around itself near the mouth conceptualises the action of repetition in visual space and asks learners to perform this action in the classroom. The bell gesture is a metaphorical gesture used by teachers to draw learners' attention to the task and convey the need to focus attention on the content by simulating the motion of shaking a bell. The light bulb gesture symbolises the emergence of new content that needs to be grasped and understood. Mime is used to represent verbs or vocabulary (e.g. jobs) or grammar content (e.g. prepositions) to be taught. Teachers' gestures also metaphorizes space, as in the cases of the positional gesture for the degree of strength of adjectives and the gesture of separation. The first represents the lexical and grammatical degree of strength of adjectives by iconically tracing in the shared visual space the image of a degree scale on which the content to be learnt is organised. The second establishes a conceptual order by using the visual space to organise the content to be differentiated by the learners. All these gestures and body movements are examples of the embodiment of cognitive actions and experiences, even with objects of the real word, which take on a metaphorical meaning in order to fulfil pedagogical functions.

The deictic gestures listed in Table 3, which were given as examples by the teachers involved in the study, function as pedagogical gestures by fulfilling both the so-called primary and secondary function of pointing (cf. Cooperrider and Mesh 2022). Deictic gestures are used to indicate properties of objects of real words such as dimension and collocation, to attract attention, to assign word shifts by pointing to students and they play the primary functions of pointing by directing the listeners' gaze and conveying information such as collocation and physical features. Deictic gestures such as those used to indicate and connect abstract elements, to refer to the syntactic features by pointing to the parts of a sentence in the air, and the deictic gestures for past, present and future used to metaphorically represent the tenses of verbs in space are deictic gestures that play the secondary functions of gestures. They provide a visually concrete mapping to abstract concepts.

The deliberate use of gestures fits better with the total physical response approach and with interactive and cooperative language teaching methods in which body movements and reading movements play a central role. The teachers involved in the study have shown that they are aware of their use of both unconscious and conscious gestures. Nevertheless, the cognitive and communicative functions of both unconscious and conscious gestures in the context of language teaching need to be investigated in depth through observational studies under more natural conditions, and not only in the laboratory under artificial conditions, as has been investigated in most of the available studies.

The data collected in this study show that teachers do not pay much attention to students' use of gestures. Teachers observe limited use of gestures by students when they do not know or cannot remember vocabulary in the target language. This could mean that teachers do not focus on students' use of gestures during lessons and therefore have not developed awareness of this use.

### 3.5 Discussion

The teachers' description of the functions of gestures shows that gestures make a cognitive contribution to teaching. Teachers are also aware of this contribution as they believe that gestures facilitate understanding, improve memory, support attention and organise a visual representation of thoughts. What they perceive about the cognitive functions of gestures in the classroom is a confirmation of what has been claimed in several psycholinguistic studies (McNeill 1992, 2005; Krauss 1998; Kendon 2004; Capirci, Contaldo, Caselli, Volterra 2005; Goldin-Meadow 2023). According to McNeill's Growth Point Theory (1992), gestures organise thinking in coordination with language in the so-called Growth Point, in that both gestures and language express the acts of thinking: gestures embody the thinking that is verbalised in language. Gestures organise and shape thought in a way that is based on perceptual and motor processes, according to embodied theories (Barsalou 1999, 2008), and in this sense they support cognition in a more direct way.

Studies have investigated the performance of speakers who gesticulate spontaneously during their speech in memory tasks (Wagner, Nusbaum, and Goldin-



Meadow 2004). It was found that these speakers perform better than speakers who do not gesticulate: They benefit from the lightening of cognitive load and the enhancement of cognitive resources using gestures synchronised with words (Goldin-Meadow and Wagner 2005). Cook (2022, 250) notes that “speakers of all ages may be able to reduce their own demand on working memory by gesturing, by indexing referents, by spatializing ideas, and by reactivating relevant information”. Teachers’ perceptions of the functions of gestures, such as facilitating comprehension, improving memory and clarifying content, can be related to the findings of these studies on the benefits of using gestures for input processing by working memory. Gestures provide working memory with a dual visual process that reduces the cognitive load on the cognitive system.

Gestures have been related to the imagistic thinking as well as to visual perceptual and motor aspects (Krauss 1998; Krauss and Hadar 1999; Cienki 2005), embodying motor and visual content, so using the special working memory for optimising the processing by memory (Morsella and Krauss 2004) and helping the long-term achievement and the retrieval of lexical items (see Macedonia and Knösche 2011; Macedonia 2013; Rowe, Silverman and Mullan, 2013; Macedonia and Klimesch 2014). Gestures can also facilitate phonological articulation and prosody performance by shaping intonation patterns in space (falling, rising, etc.) (Esteve-Gibert and Prieto 2013). As shown in the study presented here on teachers’ perceptions of the functions of gestures in the foreign language classroom, it is possible to avoid verbalisation and verbal translation in students’ L1 by encouraging students to find and memorise words in the target language. Gestures provide visual support for word production and comprehension, as the teachers involved in the study emphasised.

The use of gestures in terms of frequency and degree of conventionality is influenced by cultural differences (cf. Kita 2009). Conventional gestures, the so-called symbolic gestures, can be culturally specific and must therefore be taught. Teaching gestures in the foreign language classroom can convey a cultural value that promotes the development of intercultural competence (cf. De Iaco 2020). But the unconscious use of symbolic gestures that take on pedagogical functions can compromise the success of the lesson. Therefore, teachers need to consider these aspects, become aware of the cultural specificity of some gestures and programme which symbolic gestures can also have pedagogical functions that are beneficial for students’ learning, and which symbolic gestures need to be learned and cannot be used for teaching content. In this context, it is necessary to consider the metaphorical gestures with a high degree of conventionality, such as the metaphorical gestures used synchronously with the teaching of verb forms to conceptualise time in space: the past behind the speaker, the present close in front of the speaker and the future in front of the speaker. This conceptualisation of time with the metaphorical spatial collocation of the different tenses is widespread in different cultures, but it is not universal and can lead to misunderstandings in a multilingual and multicultural class. In Aymara culture, for example, the future is conceptualised behind the speakers and

the past in front of them, because we know and we can “see” the past, so it remains in front of our eyes, but we do not know the future, so we cannot “see” it (see Núñez and Sweetser 2006; De Iaco 2022). So if, on the one hand, teachers’ gestures can have a positive cognitive effect on students’ language acquisition and symbolic gestures characterised by a cultural value can be consciously used by teachers to convey the target culture, on the other hand, it must be taken into account that “in some cases, certain gestures can lead to misunderstandings because they are ambiguous, too symbolic or culturally embedded” (Stam and Tellier 2022).

Many other studies (Stam and McCafferty 2008; Swellera, Shinooka-Phelana, and Austin 2020; Stam and Tellier 2022) have shown that foreign language learners use gestures in class and that the gestures they use have relevant cognitive and pragmatic functions. The latter are related to the organisation of thinking, facilitation of speaking, clarification of language, synchronisation and interaction with the teacher and other students, memory processes and adaptation to the environment. In addition, learners’ gestures in the foreign language classroom provide information about their affective and emotional state, their interlingual system and their level of comprehension of the oral or written material taught in class (see Gullberg and McCafferty 2008; Stam 2008; Stam and McCafferty 2008; Stam and Buescher 2018; Mirzaei 2016; Tellier 2014; Stam and Tellier 2022). Therefore, the perception of gestures of foreign language students by the teachers who participated in the study presented here is not realistic because they perceive selectively their use of gestures during teaching, but they do not use to concentrate their attention on the use of gesture by students. It is necessary to conduct a complementary and comparative study of students’ perceptions of the use of gestures in foreign language teaching. In general, it is necessary to extend the study of the use of gestures in foreign language teaching by both teachers and students, to deepen the knowledge of the functions that these gestures fulfil and to propose the acquisition of the pedagogical use of gestures by language teachers in the training programmes dedicated to them. In this context, Stam and Tellier (2022) have proposed, for example, the inclusion in teacher training programmes of workshops and training modules specifically dedicated to the pedagogical use of gestures.

#### *4. Conclusion*

The preliminary study on the perception of gestures by foreign language teachers presented in this paper has substantiated the argument of the key role of multimodal language in foreign language teaching. Indeed, based on the analysis of data collected as part of a study on foreign language teachers’ perception of gestures, it was argued that gestures used by foreign language teachers in the classroom are fundamental to cognitive and communicative functions such as conceptualisation, thought organisation, language production and comprehension, development and management of emotions and pragmatic aspects.

The study showed that a high percentage of the teachers surveyed are aware of the use of gestures in foreign language teaching and that they are aware of the functions of the gestures used in class. However, since most gestures are used spontaneously and unconsciously, it is necessary to link the data collected in this study with further new studies, such as various observational studies in the context of foreign language teaching and learning, in order to better understand the role of gestures, to further deepen the pedagogical power of gestures and to plan training for teachers focussed on developing a conscious awareness of the cognitive and pragmatic functions of gestures used in the classroom.

The types of gestures used by the teachers involved in the study show that the body and mind interact in activities such as teaching by producing gestures as a form of embodied cognition with a pedagogical potential. They confirm that gestures and body movements are fundamental to cognitive and communicative functions such as conceptualisation, thought organisation, language production and comprehension, emotion development and management, and pragmatic aspects. The results of this study show that the gestures and body movements used by teachers in the foreign language classroom fulfil each of the above-mentioned cognitive and communicative functions. They make it possible to promote comprehension, memory and attention, avoid verbalisation and translation into learners' first language, support students' participation in class, convey cultural aspects and manage discomfort and anxiety. This suggests that a more conscious integration of gestures in the classroom can have a positive impact on language learning.

The study shows that the teachers who answered the questionnaire are not aware of the use of gestures by their students. It is likely that integrative and complementary studies focussing on language learners' use of gestures in class will prove that learners' gestures have many cognitive and pragmatic functions, as the studies cited in the previous paragraph have shown. In order to promote the spread of students' strategic use of gestures in class to improve their learning, it is necessary to programmatically educate foreign language teachers about the benefits of observing students' spontaneous use of gestures to obtain information about the tendency of students' learning habits and their emotional state, and to promote students' conscious use of gestures in class towards the achievement of learning goals.

### *Appendix*

The semi-structured questionnaire with a mixture of open and closed questions with multiple-choice answers, which was answered by the foreign language teachers involved in the study:

1. What is your first language (L1)? (closed question with multiple choice answers)
2. If your L1 is not Italian, what is it? (open-ended question)
3. What foreign language do you teach? You may indicate more than one language (open-ended question)

4. How many students do you normally teach in your classes? (closed question with multiple choice answers)
5. At which level of education do you teach? (closed question with multiple choice answers)
6. Where do you learn the language you teach? (closed question with multiple choice answers)
7. What type of teaching method do you use in your lessons? (open-ended question)
8. What type of teaching techniques do you use in your lessons? (open-ended question)
9. Do you use gesture during your teaching? (closed question with multiple choice answers)
10. If yes, do you use gestures unconsciously or consciously? (closed question with multiple choice answers)
11. If yes, in which teaching activities do you use gestures? (open-ended question)
12. In your opinion, what functions do your gestures fulfil? (open-ended question)
13. Can you describe some of the gestures you use in class? (open-ended question)
14. Can you describe gestures that you use in certain situations? (open-ended question)
15. Did you notice the use of gestures by students in class? (closed question with multiple choice answers)
16. If yes, how often? (closed question with multiple choice answers)
17. If yes, what kind of gestures by students you observed? (open-ended question)
18. In which situations do students' gestures in class? (open-ended question)
19. In your opinion, what functions do gestures play? (open-ended question)

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## Certifying a minority language: a first description of the Sardinian case

### *Abstract*

The paper presents the results of the University of Cagliari project aimed at creating the first linguistic certification of the Sardinian language (level C1). The paper describes the theoretical assumptions, work phases, critical issues, and the choices that led to the development of the proposal, as well as the structure of the examination. In the specific case of a non-standardized language with remarkable geographical variation, such as Sardinian, it will be shown how the linguistic certification process also represents a fundamental moment for rethinking and promoting linguistic learning and teacher training.

### *Keywords*

language testing; non-standardized minority languages; Sardinian; language policy.

### *1. Certification and teaching of minority languages*

#### *1.1 General critical issues*

As part of the activities dedicated to the enhancement of Sardinian language, a project for the certification of Sardinian (level C1) has recently been launched, as one of the initiatives envisaged in the agreement signed in 2021 between the University of Cagliari (henceforth UniCa), specifically the Department of Humanities, Languages and Cultural Heritage and the University Language Centre<sup>2</sup>, and the Autonomous Region of Sardinia (RAS). The UniCa-RAS Plan 2021-24 is the op-

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<sup>1</sup> The article is the result of joint work and close collaboration between the authors. Within a common and shared conception and elaboration, however, paragraphs 2.3, 2.3.1, 2.3.2 should be attributed to Giulia I. Grosso; to Antonietta Marra paragraphs 1.1, 2.2, 2.3.3; to Giulia Murgia paragraphs 1.2 and 2.1. Paragraph 3 is to be attributed to the three authors, who thank all the members of the UniCa team who collaborated on the project described here.

<sup>2</sup> See Regional language policy plan (Resolution No. 34/16 of 07.07.2020), and also R.L. No. 22/2018. Among the other activities envisaged by the agreement, we mention here some of them: Sardinian language workshops included in the L10-Literature and LM14-LM15 Classical and Modern Philologies and Literatures degree courses and addressed to the whole University; high-level training path for the teaching of Sardinian, through the activation of a Level II Master's degree.

erational dimension of this agreement and is part of the Regional Language Policy Plan 2020-24 (RAS 2020).

With regard to this certification (henceforth CertSarC1), the UniCa-RAS plan responds to a normative need that arose with the promulgation of the Regional Law (R.L.) 22/2018 (*Discipline of regional language policy*, RAS 2018), which in Article 9 provides for the establishment of a language certification system for the Sardinian language (and for the Catalan of Alghero)<sup>3</sup>. This would be issued by qualified entities and constructed on the basis of the criteria of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages. This C1 certification is required to work in local language offices (Art. 11), and to be allowed to teach the Sardinian language as part of the school curriculum (Art. 20)<sup>4</sup>.

In formulating a proposal that meets the requirements of the R.L. for the Sardinian language, the UniCa working group<sup>5</sup> was not only faced with the difficulties posed in general by the initiation of a certification process, but in addition it was necessary to find solutions to work on minority language varieties. As it is often the case, minority language varieties present a limited degree of elaboration (with the consequent lack of lexical coverage of certain semantic areas, especially for the more formal communicative contexts away from everyday life; Kloss 1952, Marra 2001, Dell'Aquila, Iannàccaro 2004, 92-95) and reduced standardization<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, one of the first issues to be considered in a certification process is undoubtedly the crucial choice of which language to certify. As a matter of fact, we know that even highly standardized languages present determined variation in use, first and foremost because of the geographical factor<sup>7</sup>. For varieties with a low degree of standardization, of course, this problem is far greater, as the main decision of the entire process (that is: which language variety is to be tested and certified) is not facilitated by the frequent scarcity of reference texts such as dictionaries, descriptive and pedagogical grammars, etc. Adding to this central and, clearly, wide-ranging problem, are issues related to the graphic representation of language. They are difficult to untangle both in the presence of diverse writing traditions that have a certain diffusion and recognition, and can even represent identity features (see Dell'Aquila,

<sup>3</sup> Proficiency in Sardinia's other minority varieties – namely Sassarese, Gallurese and Tabarchino – is attested by the relevant RAS department, which appoints an evaluation commission for this purpose.

<sup>4</sup> The situation is different for those who offer extracurricular teaching workshops in the Sardinian language (but also in Catalan Algherese, Sassarese, Gallurese or Tabarchino): for them, a “certification” of adequate competence in oral skills alone is deemed sufficient. So far, RAS (through the relevant department) has established an oral language certification of minority languages and alloglot varieties, called “Nara-mi”.

<sup>5</sup> The group is composed, in addition to the three authors of this paper, of UniCa colleagues Simone Ciccolone, Olga Denti, Luisanna Fodde, Immacolata Pinto, Nicoletta Puddu, Ignazio E. Putzu, Maurizio Viridis, and Sardinian language expert collaborators Antonio Cordella, Giovanna Dessi, Gianfranco Fronteddu, Maria Elena Onano, Carminu Pintore, and Bruna Siriu. We also availed ourselves of the collaboration of the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science.

<sup>6</sup> See, among others, Dell'Aquila, Iannàccaro (2004), Cordin (2011), Dal Negro, Marra (2013), Luise, Vicario (2021), Fiorentini (2022).

<sup>7</sup> Among the various works see at least the volume edited by Cerruti, Crocco, Marzo (2017).

Iannàccaro 2004, 76, about what they call “flag characters”), and in their absence. Last but not least, minority languages often lack reference teaching tools, first and foremost syllabi, which, as we shall see (sec. 2), are essential for the certification process. Textbooks, grammar reference books, dictionaries, and materials for testing and possible assessment of learning are all in short supply (Iannàccaro, Fiorentini 2021, Marra 2021).

The certification process for Sardinian C1, therefore, required discussion and the identification of solutions to these problematic issues, before the group could operationally work on creating the certification tests (sec. 2).

## 1.2 The specificities of the Sardinian case

When discussing what to test in the CertSarC1, the research team took several factors into account regarding the internal linguistic history (such as typological profile, phono-morphological and syntactic pattern, definition of the main geographic dialectal groupings) and the external linguistic history of Sardinian (including writing traditions and communicative usages, planning initiatives and language policy)<sup>8</sup>.

As far as the internal linguistic history is concerned, briefly what can be remembered here is that Sardinian linguistics divides the linguistic domain of the island into two main macro-varieties, traditionally known as *Logudorese*, for the northern variety, and *Campidanese*, for the southern variety (see Fig. 1). These are identified due to the thickening of a substantial number of isoglosses that cut through the centre of Sardinia and divide the island roughly into two halves. When looking at the dialectological picture in more detail, we note, moreover, that the northern half of Sardinia has within it a central-eastern area, which is considered more conservative, taking the name of *Nuorese*, and that in the central area there is a large median area, an amphizona (Virdis 1988, Putzu 2017). With regard to the external linguistic history, and observing the use of the Sardinian language in diachrony, the sedimentation of a cultured writing tradition is recorded dating back to the Middle Ages (Maninchedda 2012, Virdis 2019). Over time, with respect to literary, religious and bureaucratic uses, two sub-standards of reference have formed, a northern one, based on the so-called common or central *Logudorese*, and a southern one, based on the upper-class variety of Cagliari (Virdis 1988, Paulis 2001).

From the aftermath of the Second World War, after extensive debates on language policy and planning issues that also involved civil society, RAS itself was the promoter in 2001 of a first proposal for a standard (*Limba Sarda Unificada* – LSU 2001), which was followed in 2006 by a second proposal (*Limba Sarda Comuna* – LSC 2006), which is currently in use for the needs of the regional government. These proposals were accompanied by heated controversy because they were not considered representative of all varieties, especially the southern ones. For these reasons, alternative proposals to LSC were subsequently elaborated, i.e. the so called *Arrègulas* (Comitau 2009), a pluricentric model, initially developed for the *Campidanese* area, then also extended to the *Logudorese*

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of issues related to the Sardinian language, see Blasco Ferrer, Koch, Marzo (2017).

area (Comitau 2019). The standardization process for the Sardinian language, at present, has not yet been fully completed (Marzo 2017; Mereu 2024)<sup>9</sup>.

Fig. 1. – *Map of Sardinian varieties (Viridis 1988, 905).*



<sup>9</sup> The same R.L. 22/2018 in Article 8 provides for the establishment of a *Consulta de su sardu*, composed of a group of experts called to develop «a proposal for a linguistic standard and orthographic norm» that takes into account «the Campidanese and Logudorese historical and literary macro-varieties, the languages spread in individual local communities, the reference standards adopted by the Region with an experimental character for the written language output of the Regional Administration and the outcomes of its experimentation» (the English translation is ours). This provision, at present, has not yet been implemented.



## 2. *UniCa's response: the structure of CertSarC1*

### 2.1 Guidelines for orthographic conventions in CertSarC1

In initiating the certification process, the UniCa research team took into account the complexity of the geographical framework just described, both in selecting and distributing the input texts used for the construction of the tests and in identifying the criteria for assessing candidates' skills and abilities. We sought to reconcile two needs:

- on the one hand, it was deemed necessary to take a position of protecting and promoting the different Sardinian language varieties;
- on the other hand, we tried to address the need for shared criteria of standardization as well as the expendability of the certification throughout the region.

Therefore, in adherence to these guiding principles, it was decided that all geographical varieties of Sardinian should be included in the examination, with the sole exclusion, for input texts, of written and oral productions that presented excessively characterized linguistic traits from a diatopic point of view. This choice is also linked to the specific C1 level that the UniCa team was asked to test and evaluate: the idea being, in fact, that Sardinian speakers who will be certified as C1 (and therefore can become Sardinian language teachers or operators in language offices, see sec. 1.1) should have plurilingual competences, at least regarding receptive skills; so they should understand also other diatopic varieties than the variety they speak (Council of Europe 2018, 28-30). The certified C1 Sardinian speakers should possess, in short, intercomprehension skills in reading and listening (Bonvino, Garbarino 2022). As we shall see, in the certification, such intercomprehension skills are tested through a balanced distribution of varieties in the structure of the tests (see sec. 2.2).

The choice of graphic norms for the assessment of tests requiring the use of the written form was particularly delicate. It was decided that the main reference models now established in the writing community (*LSC* and *Arrègulas*) would be integrated and that a graphemic repertoire, clarified and extended by the UniCA team, would have been available to the candidates. This approach allowed, for example, candidates to the use of graphemes which were felt as “identity characters” by some speakers (as already mentioned in sec. 1.1). One example is the grapheme <x> which represents the voiced post-alveolar fricative sound [ʒ] used in the southern area writing tradition. In addition, representation was also given to the *LSC*, which was adopted in the test instructions. It was then decided to intervene minimally, where necessary, in the written texts used as input in order to regularize their appearance (elimination of paragodic vowels, regularization of verbal desinences, insertion of graphic accentuation, regularization of punctuation, etc.), while the so-called “author’s” texts, belonging to the literary tradition, were preserved in their original form.

2.2 The distribution of varieties

The structure of the certification was originally conceived by the UniCa team and included in the RAS public notice on the certification of knowledge of historical minority languages spoken in Sardinia. It is aligned with the structure of the recognized certifications of the main European languages and includes five parts: reading comprehension, listening, written production, oral production (monologic and dialogic interaction) and analysis of communication structures. Each section is made up of different sub-tests, as clarified further on (see section 2.3.3).

For the construction of the tests, the first step was to select the written or spoken input texts within a text database preliminarily created, where each text was assigned to the northern or the southern variety group (see sec. 2.3.1). This, however, was not always an easy task, especially for those varieties of the central area (the amphizona, see sec.1.2), which are more difficult to ascribe dialectologically.

Taking this into account, the UniCa team then organized the reception skills tests (reading and listening) and the communication structure analysis test in such a way that all candidates would have the largest number of written and oral texts in the varieties belonging to their linguistic macro-area and a smaller number of texts from the other linguistic macro-area. The texts are distributed as evenly as possible within the “Candidate’s Notebook”<sup>10</sup> (called *cartulàrios*). When registering, the candidates are asked to indicate their chosen variety of Sardinian, marking only, generically, whether they would prefer the *cartulàriu* (centre-) north, which includes a predominant number of texts in the northern and the central-northern varieties, or the *cartulàriu* (centre-)south, with predominance of texts in the southern and the central-southern varieties. *Cartulàrios* are structured as follows (Fig. 2):

Fig. 2 – *Distribution of varieties in candidates’ notebooks*

	<i>Cartulàriu (centre-)north</i>	<i>Cartulàriu (centre-)south</i>
<i>Listening (3 sub-tests)</i>	2 sub-tests in (centre-) northern varieties and 1 sub-test in other variety	2 sub-tests in (centre-) southern varieties and 1 sub-test in other variety
<i>Reading (3 sub-tests)</i>	2 sub-tests in (centre-) northern varieties and 1 sub-test in other variety	2 sub-tests in (centre-) southern varieties and 1 sub-test in other variety
<i>Analysis of communication structures (4 sub-tests)</i>	2 sub-tests in (centre-) northern varieties and 2 sub-tests in other variety	2 sub-tests in (centre-) southern varieties and 2 sub-tests in other variety

<sup>10</sup> “Candidate’s Notebook – *cartulàriu*” refers to the booklet in which the materials needed to take the certification exam are collected. The CertSarC1 is administered on PCs through the use of the Moodle learning platform; therefore, the booklet is presented in a digital version.

Finally, in the written and oral production activities, candidates are given the opportunity to use any preferred variety of Sardinian.

### 2.3 Steps in the construction of CertSarC1

Having addressed the issues described above and made the necessary theoretical and methodological choices, therefore, the process of designing and building CertSarC1 was organized in five stages:

1. text collection and database construction;
2. definition of the *Reference Level Description* and construction of the C1 syllabus<sup>11</sup>;
3. definition of the exam construct;
4. development of the exam: texts selection, item construction, scoring, item pre-testing, test processing);
5. re-entry of the validated items into the database and processing of the final tests.

Concurrently, glottodidactic training of Sardinian language expert collaborators was conducted with specific focus on language testing (especially familiarization with CEFR descriptors), so that they could work as item writers, test administrators and evaluators. Training was conducted by members of the UniCa team who are experts in glottodidactics and by trainers from the Centre for Certification of Italian as a foreign language (CILS) of the University for Foreigners of Siena<sup>12</sup>.

#### 2.3.1 Construction of the text database and criteria for text selection

The first, preliminary phase consisted of creating a database containing texts of various types in the different varieties of Sardinian, since there was no similar tool that could be used for the purpose of constructing CertSarC1. The database, which is being continuously updated, is the reference repository for the selection of the input texts for each test.

Starting from an initial collection of existing material, texts were surveyed, archived and tagged. The texts come from: archives of local and national radio and television broadcasters, e.g., the digital archive available online *Sardegna Digital Library*<sup>13</sup>; websites of local authorities such as municipalities, RAS and other entities; online newspapers, news sites, e.g., Rai Sardegna; Youtube channels, pages of associations, organizations and social networks frequented by communities of

<sup>11</sup> The construction of the C1 syllabus for Sardinian is part of a more general work of the UniCa team, which is developing syllabi for all CEFR levels.

<sup>12</sup> We would like to take this opportunity to thank the CILS centre members for their contribution: Sabrina Machetti and Paola Masillo for their very helpful training activities and stimulating scientific discussions; Anna Bandini and Laura Sprugnoli for their valuable suggestions regarding scoring and statistical item analysis.

We are also very grateful to Nick Saville, who generously shared his expertise on language testing and is a constant reference person in our work on certifying Sardinian language.

<sup>13</sup> <<https://www.sardegnaDIGITALlibrary.it>>.

Sardinian speakers and writers; private and anonymized communications, e.g., e-mail, Whatsapp messages.

Each text entered into the database was annotated indicating its content, macro-variety of belonging, specific geographical area of reference, textual type and genre, usability by level (according to CEFR criteria), medium-related dimensions, functions, and morpho-syntactic, lexical, cultural and sociolinguistic features.

The criteria for the choice of the texts to be included in the certification tests have been typology, informativeness and relevance to the learner, according to the most recent literature (Machetti, Vedovelli 2024), and the main international associations of language testing's guidelines<sup>14</sup>.

### 2.3.2 Defining the profiles of the Reference Level Descriptions (RLDs) for the Sardinian language and the test construct

Contextually, another preliminary operation in the construction of the exam was the definition of the Reference Level Description (RLDs)<sup>15</sup> for Sardinian. As is well known, the CEFR, in fact, is potentially applicable to any language, but the descriptors do not refer to any particular language. It was therefore necessary, for the benefit of teachers, evaluators, syllabus designers and authors of teaching materials, to construct descriptions for the Sardinian language, as has been done for other languages in the past<sup>16</sup>.

The creation of the RLDs for Sardinian, carried out by UniCa team<sup>17</sup>, is an ongoing process and it is based, for the time being, on an intuitive method. It uses the pioneering operation of linking the elements that define the RLDs itself (derived at the moment only from the texts in the database) with the procedures and evaluation criteria of CertSarC1<sup>18</sup>. According to the principles of the manual *Relating Language Examination to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)* (Council of Europe 2009), this procedure involved an analysis of the different texts in the archive in order to

<sup>14</sup> See i.e. the *Manual for language test development and examining* (ALTE 2011) and the *Principles of good practice* (ALTE 2020).

<sup>15</sup> RLDs are “structured inventories of words and “norms” of a language deemed necessary to produce oral and written texts corresponding to the CEFR descriptor scales. For each level, the RLDs provide an inventory of the language forms to be mastered: text types, functions and elements of the grammar of meaning (such as the expression of the concepts of space and quantity), the different forms for the levels of the system, and the cultural and cross-cultural aspects of language learning”.

<sup>16</sup> According to the Council of Europe (<<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/reference-level-descriptions#:~:text=Reference%20levels%20identify%20the%20forms,level%2C%20from%20A1%20to%20C2>>), RLDs creation work has been carried out for only a few languages including: Croatian, Czech, English, French, German, Georgian, Italian, Lithuanian, Portuguese, Spanish, Turkish (still work in progress) and others.

<sup>17</sup> We are very thankful to prof. Jean Claude Beacco (Council of Europe) for accepting to supervise our proposal.

<sup>18</sup> For further details regarding this procedure, see the website *Relating language curricula, tests and examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference* (RELANG): <<https://relang.ecml.at>>.

produce language descriptions that merge in the RLDs and identify characteristics of different genres of text.

In the future, the UniCa team plans to expand the database by collecting additional authentic texts, teaching materials and the productions of the examined candidates. In this way it will be possible to complete the procedure: the intuitive method (based precisely on the work of specialists, native speakers and language experts) and the partially qualitative method already used will be complemented by refining the qualitative method and adopting the quantitative method, e.g. using frequency lists<sup>19</sup>. This will allow the continuous validation of the collected contents of the descriptive categories of the RLDs.

Based on the descriptors of the CEFR and of the Companion Volume, with which the UniCa team has provided familiarization, and on the basis of the creation of the RLDs, the specification phase<sup>20</sup> was then carried out.

In parallel, the syllabi were defined, by consulting pre-existing models for Italian (in particular Benucci 2007, Spinelli, Parizzi 2010, Enti certificatori 2011, among others). In relation to the context in which the CertSarC1 was conceived, as with any other test, prior to developing, implementing and administering the exam, it was first necessary to define the purpose for which the test is constructed: verify the status of the candidates' linguistic-communicative competence with respect to the varieties of the Sardinian language<sup>21</sup>, in the situations and contexts described. Next, criteria and techniques for constructing the test and the sub-tests were selected. The test content was then identified by selecting texts from the database described above (sec. 2.2.1), choosing techniques for testing receptive skills and, finally, deciding on the types of tasks for testing productive skills. At the same time, the evaluation criteria and related scores were defined, as well as the procedure of administering the examination. The process of validation was carried throughout the different steps of test creation, and implementation of the test (ALTE 2011).

### 2.3.3 Test construction and evaluation

As already mentioned in section 2.2, each exam consists of five parts: listening, reading, written production, analysis of communication structures and oral production, modelled on CILS examination. The textual types chosen include those provided by the C1 level within the CEFR.

<sup>19</sup> According to the CEFR-J model for the RLDs, see Tono (2019).

<sup>20</sup> The specification phase is aimed at "increase the awareness of the importance of a good content analysis of examinations; become familiar with and use the CEFR in planning and describing language examinations; describe and analyse in a detailed way the content of an examination or test; provide evidence of the quality of the examination or test; provide evidence of the relation between examinations/tests and the CEFR; provide guidance for item writers; increase the transparency for teachers, testers, examination users and test takers about the content and quality of the examination or test and its relationship to the CEFR", according to the model proposed in Noijons, Bérešová, Breton, Szabó (2011, 36).

<sup>21</sup> In our case, the main, but not exclusive target audiences may be, as mentioned in sec. 1, school teachers and local language operators.

For listening comprehension, there are 3 objective sub-tests (2 multiple-choice tasks and 1 information detection task), constructed using input texts such as reviews, commentaries, descriptions of professional activities, radio interviews and conversations.

For reading comprehension, there are 3 objective sub-tests (1 multiple-choice task, 1 information identification task, 1 text reordering task) with input texts from, for example, books, newspapers, magazines, fiction, catalogues, instructions, public announcements, articles on scientific or literary topics aimed at a wide audience, and interviews.

For the section on communication structure analysis, the 4 objective sub-tests are clozes (testing the use of connectives, vocabulary, verb forms) and sentence transformation. Input texts include, among others, public notices, municipal regulations, literary texts and newspaper articles.

Finally, the production sub-tests, both oral and written, require the candidate to complete authentic tasks in specific contexts. For the written production, two sub-tests are foreseen, a themed task and a structured task; for the oral production, a dialogue with the examiner and a monologue on a given subject are required.

The tests have undergone pre-testing sessions<sup>22</sup>: a qualitative analysis of the results of the pre-test highlighted the need to redistribute the varieties according to the different task types and the need to use audio that, although authentic, had less background noise.

Furthermore, the quantitative analysis of the items indicated criticalities for some of them in relation to facility and discrimination indexes and distractor efficiency. The critical items have been removed and substituted.

So far four certification sessions have been administered: September 2022, September 2023, February and May 2024, with a total of about 400 candidates.

Concerning tests' evaluation, it is a particularly delicate and complex process in the case of a non-standardized language such as Sardinian. Therefore it was necessary to put a process into place that would ensure inter-rater reliability by comparing all the results of the subjective tests by all the evaluators in the case of the first session, and by comparing all the results of the tests by two evaluators from the second session onward. If there was any doubt, the entire committee was involved in checking the assessment.

The evaluation of objective evidence also posed a challenge for the working group because of the will to represent all the local varieties. In the case of the vocabulary tests, for example, geosynonyms were included in the solutions and thus considered eligible. Finally, in written and oral productions, where the candidates were free to use their variety, apart from the commonly adopted evaluation criteria for the assessment, candidates' performances were also evaluated on how consistent their use was with respect to the chosen variety.

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<sup>22</sup> The pre-testing sessions have been administered to a small sample (17 subjects), given the small number of Sardinian speakers available for the session and not interested in achieving the C1 Sardinian certification.



### 3. *Challenges and future prospects*

The creation of this examination has led the team to reflect on the three main testing features, namely validity, reliability, and impact. Concerning the first criterion, validity, the purpose for which the examination was created has allowed the identification of specific contexts of use and functions, and a user profile which currently is partly defined by the R.L. 22/2018. This profile will have to be modified as the certification becomes more widespread, especially for the other proficiency levels. The definition of communicative competence in the Sardinian language (and thus the identification of a language model) has also made the team reflect on the varieties in use. This is a particularly serious topic for a minority language with low standardization such as Sardinian, as internal variation, although being a great asset, is at the same time an enormous challenge in an assessment process.

Regarding reliability, that concerns the empirical aspects of the evaluation process, it is necessary to highlight that the greatest critical issues are related precisely to the lack of a language standard. Our proposal is the construction of flexible assessment instruments, i.e. with reference to the different macro-varieties, different geosynonyms were incorporated in the lexical choices of communication structure analysis tests, both for content and function word.

Finally, regarding the social impact, for Sardinian to have a certification procedure that meets quality criteria for this type of assessment is undoubtedly of great importance in terms of language policy and planning<sup>23</sup> just as it is for other minority languages with long and important experience in language implementation and standardization processes (such as Friulian and Ladino, for example<sup>24</sup>). The certified language, in some way, increases its social value (Bourdieu 1982) and its visibility within the repertoire. It can represent therefore, one of the levers to promote sociolinguistic vitality (UNESCO 2003, Strubell 1999).

The challenge for Sardinian, as well as for other minority languages, is to find a balance between the protection of diversity and variation<sup>25</sup>, and the need to identify linguistic reference models that allow a shared assessment of competences. In this regard, the structure of CertSarC1 may provide an opportunity to investigate the feasibility of a solution to this challenge that seems to us to provide the advantage of a 'unity in diversity', a gradual trend towards the creation of reference models without losing the specificity and richness of Sardinian variation, in a perspective of a factual polynomic choice (Marcellesi 1987).

Moreover, on this point, the results of CertSarC1 may provide information for the debated issue of intercomprehension between language varieties of Sardinian. This is an important topic in Sardinia, where opposing tendencies (on the one hand

<sup>23</sup> On the ethical issues raised by the social impact of language testing, see at least Shohamy (1997, 2017); Mac Namara, Roever (2006), ILTA Guidelines (ILTA 2000), ALTE (2020), Barni (2023).

<sup>24</sup> Cordin (2011), Luise, Vicario (2021), Fusco (2022).

<sup>25</sup> Diversity and variation are key elements for the individual and social identity recognition of that language, which is fundamental for its preservation, use and intergenerational transmission. See at least Dorian (1981), Edwards (2010, 2012), Fishman (1989), Schalley, Eisenchlas (2020).

pan-Sardinian standardization and on the other its outright rejection) too often arise on a purely ideological level.

In terms of individual impact, the CertSarC1 can certainly be called a high-stake test, that is, a test that has «a strong impact on the life and future of candidates»<sup>26</sup> (Machetti and Vedovelli 2024, 106), since according to the R.L. already mentioned, it constitutes a gateway to the professions of local language operators and Sardinian language teachers in schools, and can be mandatory for local public tenders and competitions. This is why it is strongly marked by principles of both individual (for all the subjects involved), and social responsibility. One of these is surely the contribution to the “normalization” of the use of the Sardinian language by expanding the domains and contexts of use.

Finally, the certification tool and related processes represent a great opportunity for language research, teaching and training. As well known and proven, working on language assessment means developing reference tools that compel metalinguistic reflection and linguistic formalization. The materials collected for test preparation and candidates’ oral and written productions can be also a valuable resource for corpus planning (Callies, Götz 2015). This database of texts, in fact, can highlight forms that are widespread and accepted by competent speakers, but which are not yet included in grammatical and lexical descriptions, and which can also become the subject for further research, even for varieties of Sardinian that have not yet, or only partially, been documented and studied.

In terms of (positive) washback effect, it is easy to understand what the impact of this resource can represent for teaching purposes: from the continuous refinement of the definition of the RLDs for the Sardinian language and of the process of alignment to CEFR, to the construction of reference texts (descriptive and pedagogical grammars) and teaching tools.

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<sup>26</sup> The translation is ours.

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IRENE MICALI

## Teaching Minority Languages to Educate Linguistic and Cultural Diversity. A *language Awareness* Perspective

### *Abstract*

This paper examines the teaching of minority languages in Italy from the perspective of Language Awareness. It provides an overview of the current school models used in different regions - including integral bilingualism in Valle d'Aosta, parity approaches in Ladin education in Bolzano, and implementations under Law 482/1999 - highlighting both the resources available and the challenges faced in the minority language education landscape. Drawing on a wide range of literature, the study identifies critical issues such as the lack of a language standard, the scarcity of methodologically sound teaching materials, and inadequacies in teacher training programs. In response, the paper argues for the integration of Language Awareness into teacher professional development as a tool with a dual purpose: to enhance both communicative and linguistic competence and to promote a deeper understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity.

### *Keywords*

Language teaching, Language education, Minority languages, Language awareness.

### *1. Minority Languages: Resources and Challenges*

In Italy the linguistic diversity is the result of historical and sociolinguistic dynamics that have shaped language use across the national territory. The Italian linguistic space is characterized as a rich plurilingualism, comprising the national language, regional dialects, and both officially recognized and non-recognized minority languages (De Mauro 2006). The study of minority languages (Toso 2008, Fiorentini 2022) is characterized by significant terminological complexity, with multiple definitions and overlapping concepts contributing to an intricate research landscape (Fusco 2006). As noted by Toso (2008), the very definition of a minority language remains problematic, as it is influenced by legal, historical, and sociolinguistic factors rather than purely linguistic criteria. In scholarly discourse, the concept of a linguistic minority has traditionally been associated with national identity and state boundaries (Fishman 1991). However, the growing recognition of linguistic diversity has raised the imperative to focus on the valorization and preservation of minority languages through language policy and planning actions (Dell'Aquila, Iannaccaro 2004).



Although Law 482/1999 has filled the normative gap of Article 6 of the Constitution by protecting minority languages, it has shown limitations and problems from the outset (Savoia 2001), configuring itself as a list of twelve languages<sup>1</sup> (Toso 2008) that includes only two regional languages - Friulian and Sardinian - and excludes languages based on the territorial criteria, such as *Romanes*.

Dealing with language education issues related to minority languages can be complex (Micali 2023). No doubt teaching minority languages can contribute to strengthening multilingualism and enriching learners' linguistic heritage from an intercultural perspective. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that a multitude of challenges, to varying extents, are often encountered by minority languages within the Italian school context (Luise, Vicario 2021). These challenges encompass issues such as language-culture teaching, inadequate teaching materials, and insufficient teacher training (Iannaccaro 2010, Iannaccaro, Fiorentini 2021). Despite some similarities, the teaching of minority languages (LM) differs in terms of theory and methodology from the teaching of mother tongue (L1) and foreign language (L2). Additionally, the lack of consistent school models in the language education literature (Santipolo 2022, Luise 2023) limits the development of concrete and effective educational linguistic and language policy actions.

The present contribution seeks to elucidate the teaching of minority languages by presenting the current school models utilized within the Italian context (see paragraph 2), and discussing the main challenges encountered by teachers, which necessitate a deep reevaluation of their competencies and training (see paragraph 3). In light of these considerations, it is recommended that the professional development of minority language teachers include the integration of "Language Awareness" as a methodological and didactic instrument. This approach is designed to achieve two primary objectives: first, to cultivate communicative and linguistic competencies, and second, to promote an understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity (see paragraph 4).

## 2. School Models in Italian Context

Following the main European Recommendation<sup>2</sup> and the provisions of Law 482/1999, the teaching of minority languages must be included in the school curriculum, and the autonomy of the educational proposal may allow for consideration of the linguistic and sociolinguistic specificity of each community. The current "school models" are quite diverse among themselves (Piergigli 2021), just as

<sup>1</sup> The languages protected by the law are Albanian, Catalan, German, Greek, Slovenian, Croatian, French, Franco-Provençal, Friulian, Ladino, Occitan, and Sardinian <[www.miuir.gov.it/lingue-di-minoranza-in-italia](http://www.miuir.gov.it/lingue-di-minoranza-in-italia)> (last accessed December 17, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages* <[https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605\(02\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(02))> (last accessed December 17, 2024).

the conditions for implementing national laws and local provisions vary greatly in reality.

Regulations on linguistic minorities are exclusively governed by Law 482 in regions with ordinary statutes. In contrast, regions with special statutes provide greater opportunities for teaching additional languages beyond Italian, due to specific regulations (Iannaccaro 2010).

In Valle d'Aosta, for example, a model of integral bilingualism is adopted. This reflects the condition of *mono-community bilingualism* (Berruto 1995) and provides for the vehicular use of both French and Italian. An equal number of hours are devoted to the teaching of both languages.

In the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, the Ladin school also relies on a parity model that ensures the adoption of Ladin as a curricular subject and vehicular language, particularly in the early years of schooling. Italian and German are introduced later on an equal basis. In Alto Adige and Venezia Giulia, on the other hand, the existence of *bicommunal bilingualism* (Dal Negro, Iannaccaro 2003) corresponds to linguistic separatism: it is possible to attend school in Italian or in German or in Slovenian but it remains compulsory to be taught in Italian or the other co-official language<sup>3</sup>.

In other minority communities throughout Italy, which are characterized by *dialectal*, *diglossic*, or *dilalic* linguistic repertoires (Iannaccaro, Dell'Acquila 2011), school teaching follows the rules established by Law 482/1999. According to this law, the minority language can be used alongside the standard language in kindergarten and can be taught as both a curricular subject and a vehicle language in primary and secondary schools, based on parental request.

One of the most important issues in teaching minority languages is distinguishing between vehicular and formal teaching. This involves deciding whether to focus on *teaching the* minority language (formal) or *teaching in* the minority language (vehicular). As early as 2006, the European Commission proposed adopting the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology for using regional or minority languages as vehicular language (Eurydice 2006). An example of good practice is the pilot study carried out by D'Angelo (2023), which utilized innovative digital resources to teach Cimbrian, a minority language spoken in the province of Trento. The study employed an approach to *Intercomprehension* between related languages (English and German) and CLIL methodology. Obviously, to apply such a method, which involves teaching curricular subjects through the vehicular use of language, the minority language must have an appropriate status and linguistic tools, such as the use of a standard, norm and specialized language, which are not always easy to identify.

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<sup>3</sup> In Trentino Alto Adige, Slovenian is not a co-official language, unlike German. However, the special statute of the Friuli Venezia Giulia region "supports measures for education in the Slovenian mother tongue and provides grants to state and parochial schools with Slovenian language instruction" (Piergigli 2021, 16).

It is easy to imagine that while the lack of a language standard, and thus the possibility of configuring as vehicular languages, may not affect national languages such as French, Slovenian or German<sup>4</sup>, its application will be more difficult for those linguistic communities (such as Franco-Provençal and Occitan)<sup>5</sup> that are configured as true enclaves, characterized by a strong territorial and linguistic detachment from the “mother country,” found in the absence of a *Dachsprache* both inside and outside national borders (Kloss 1978).

A further critical issue is the fact that minority languages primarily have an oral tradition and lack writing standards. Therefore, introducing teaching during curricular hours, (whether optional or compulsory), could have repercussions on the prestige of the language. It may deprive the language “of its characteristic as an *in-group* code of students, in opposition to teachers and the institution”, making it “unwelcome, imposed, or avoided.” (Iannaccaro, Fiorentini 2021, 49).

The quality of minority language teaching then depends on the availability of appropriate and methodologically sound teaching materials. Even in communities with more virtuous school models, there are grammars and dictionaries, but often no manuals in the minority languages<sup>6</sup>. The use of translations, photocopies, and worksheets provided by teachers is common. However, studying and learning a language using unstructured materials may once again harm its prestige.

### 3. *Skills and Training of Teachers*

Despite educational programs related to minority languages, introduced by Law 482/1999 and in line with the main European recommendations, teaching proposals vary and often lack continuity (Micali 2023) due to well-known problems: (i) the absence of a language standard (Dal Negro, Guerini, Iannaccaro 2015); (ii) the language-culture teaching; (iii) the lack of teaching training (Bier 2021) and the production of valid and codified teaching materials (Iannaccaro 2010, Iannaccaro, Fiorentini 2021).

<sup>4</sup> For Luserna Cimbrian, for example, “the choice has been made to draw on standard German as the *Dachsprache* for the formation of neologisms, which conditions, for example, the rendering in Cimbrian of institutional documents, as well as literary works, and also language education materials that have already been developed or are being developed” (D’Angelo 2023, 79).

<sup>5</sup> In situations like this, there is a risk of encountering “passive” vehicular use, where teachers use the minority code but learners respond exclusively in the standard language.

<sup>6</sup> The following is an exception: *Il libri di Maman*, a playful-didactic volume for elementary school used to support Friulian language lessons (Bier 2021, 85); *O libre meu, manuale didattico per l’insegnamento della lingua occitana di Guardia Piemontese, in Calabria* (Micali 2022). Additionally, valuable training materials have been produced for teaching Ladino in the province of Trento by OLFED (Ofize Ladin Formazion e Ennescida Didatica) and for teaching Ladino in the province of Bolzano (Iannaccaro, Fiorentini 2021).

Within minority contexts, the adoption of a language standard and the acceptance of the norm<sup>7</sup> depend on the recognition of teachers' competence and the quality of educational programs. As Marra (2021, 214) argues, "[...] teachers of a minority language require both disciplinary and methodological preparation, in addition, of course, to adequate competence in the code that is the object and possibly the instrument of instruction." Additionally to the competence in the minority language, quality training must include knowledge of the culture and tradition of the minority linguistic community. However, in the interpretation of the language-culture pair, it is common that teaching practices are geared more toward the recovery and transmission of culture rather than actual language teaching. Instead, except for national languages, such as French and Slovenian, or languages with a wide territorial distribution and a strong sense of cohesion, such as Albanian in Calabria and Ladino in Trentino, it is generally the cultural dimension that prevails in most minority communities present in Italy (Rivoira 2018). Teaching culture emphasizes the essentiality of language as a factor of identity; it represents the recovery of ancient historical memory and traditions. But if this approach can be found in elementary school that is still strongly tied to the family, in secondary school this approach encounters obstacles related to the communicative needs of young speakers. They require the use of new stimuli and modern tools (Videsott, Fiorentini 2020). Furthermore, the complex dynamics of *in-group* and *out-group* identification typical of adolescents, who tend to conform and isolate diversity, need to be managed. The culture teaching should be better integrated in language teaching as well as respond to the pupils' present communicative needs.

A good model for multilingual and intercultural education that aims to enhance a minority language must also presuppose the teacher's ability "[...] to question how it is possible to 'make languages 'dialogue' in educational activities, just as they 'dialogue' internally with the bilingual person." (Daloiso 2022, 145). This competence comes first and foremost through the choice and use of teaching materials, which, as we have seen, is one of the most obvious critical issues in minority language teaching, but also and above all through the ability to integrate the minority language into a broader framework of promoting and developing multilingualism (Luise 2023, 141).

The delineation of the profile required for minority language teachers constitutes a pivotal step in teacher training, as it is imperative to ensure the quality of teaching and the certification of their competencies. Regarding this last aspect, we can also observe that the profound differences among the various minority communities in the country correspond to a considerable discrepancy among the existing proposals and projects for the selection, training and language certification of teachers. It is noteworthy that South Tyrol, Trentino, and Valle d'Aosta have

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<sup>7</sup> Providing a written form for languages that originate from an oral tradition should not be viewed as learning grammar, but rather as a tool for preserving and passing down the unique characteristics of one's language and enabling its use beyond the academic setting, such as in digital contexts (Quochi, Russo, Soria, 2017).

been identified as virtuous models in the field of minority language education. In contrast, the regional contexts of Calabria, Apulia, Sicily, Piedmont, and Veneto demonstrate shortcomings in this regard (Luise, Vicario 2021). There is also no lack of “intermediate” virtuous models, such as those related to the Friulian language, which, through a strong synergy between the Società Filologica Friulana, the Ca’ Foscari University, and the ARLeF (Agenzia Regionale della Lingua Friulana), offers free CLIL training and methodology courses, recognized and accredited by the Regional School Office for Friuli Venezia Giulia, valid for the registration on the regional list of Friulian language teachers (ARLeF, 2019). Similarly, for the Sardinian language, the FILS (Formazione Insegnanti Lingua Sarda) project was implemented between 2011 and 2013 by the University of Cagliari, which included *limba sarda comuna* in its training offer (RAS, 2014).

At this point, the main critical issues affecting the teaching of minority languages in the Italian school context become clear. Equally clear, however, is the need to combine a *top-down* model with a *bottom-up* approach, where the quality of minority language teaching is closely linked to the recognition of teachers’ skills, also from a regulatory point of view.

#### 4. Building Language Awareness: A Resource for Teaching Minority Languages

Teacher education programs have long relied on a consistent number of reflections, recommendations, and pedagogical solutions. Starting from the need to take, as we have seen, into account the specificities and the sociolinguistic contexts in which the different minority languages are embedded, it is necessary to succeed in designing pedagogical and didactic paths through methodologies and approaches that aim, on the one hand, to develop the linguistic-communicative skills of the learners and, on the other hand, to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity. Considering the latter, it seems appropriate to refer to positions that argue for the importance of promoting in language education what James and Garret (1992, 8-12) define as Language Awareness<sup>8</sup> (LA), refers to an individual’s conscious sensitivity to the nature of language and its role in human communication. This concept is not meant to replace language learning but rather to complement it. The benefits of LA extend across multiple domains, including emotional engagement, social interactions, power dynamics, cognitive development, and language performance.

As Balboni’s work indicates (1999, 20-21), the 1980s saw the emergence of the *Language Awareness* movement in Britain and the *Éveil aux langues*<sup>9</sup> initiative

<sup>8</sup> The *Association for Language Awareness* defines it: “as explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use”. *Language Awareness* (published by Routledge), the official journal of the *Association for Language Awareness*, has an updated bibliography <[www.languageawareness.org](http://www.languageawareness.org)> (last accessed December 20, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> In the *Cadre de Référence pour les Approches Plurielles* or CARAP (Candelier et al. 2012), *Language Awareness*, also known as *Éveil aux langues*, is the approach most oriented toward raising awareness of

in France. Both of these movements advocated for explicit linguistic awareness in education. In Italy, the equivalent term, *Consapevolezza Linguistica*, was adopted, emphasising the need to counterbalance the intuitive teaching methods of the communicative approach. It is important to note that Italy had already established the concept of language reflection in the 1970s, highlighting the role of linguistics and communicative awareness in cognitive development and autonomous learning (De Mauro 2018, GISCEL 1975).

Similar to the multilingual language education experiments conducted in the Italian school context (Andorno, Sordella 2017, 2018), educational activities in the LA perspective on minority languages, in addition to improving learners' language skills, may be able to foster the development of positive representations and attitudes, not only towards languages and their diversity but also to the speakers of these languages and their culture (and in this it is possible to find a point of contact with practices related to the *Intercultural Approach*). LA-oriented approaches aim to stimulate metalinguistic reflection by comparing multiple languages. "Reflecting on language means gaining awareness of the way it is language being used" (Andorno, Sordella 2017, 174). This tool is valuable for teachers as it facilitates the systematic design of teaching modalities with the dual aim of increasing awareness of individual multilingualism and promoting an understanding of the plurality of languages and cultures.

Observing languages and recognizing their diversity can stimulate learners' curiosity about the similarities and differences between different language systems. This can increase their awareness of linguistic phenomena and help them develop metalinguistic and metacognitive skills that are useful for learning. If a language is subject to linguistic reflection within the school context, it can positively impact its prestige, supporting the need to intervene in the perception and representation of minority languages and cultures.

At this point, it is evident that educational systems have the responsibility to implement language policy and language planning actions by adopting teaching practices and strategies that aim to revalue minority languages and reconstruct their *status* from an identity approach.

According to this perspective, *Language Awareness*, in its broadest sense, aligns with the concept of *identity* and is closely linked to it. The language education interventions on Sardinian, Friulian, and Ladino demonstrate the construction of identity and linguistic fidelity. This is essential for protecting languages in minority contexts.

The European Recommendations and Resolutions suggest that member states should "Apply comprehensive approaches to improve teaching and learning of languages at national, regional, local or school level"<sup>10</sup>, supporting the development

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linguistic and cultural diversity.

<sup>10</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605\(02\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(02)) (last accessed December 17, 2024).



of language policies that promote *Language Awareness* as an effective resource for multilingual learning and a tool for enhancing linguistic diversity. LA-related activities become, in this sense, a cross-curricular dimension of the school curriculum, an integral part of disciplinary teaching, not just language teaching (Santipolo 2018).

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MARIA VITTORIA LO PRESTI

## Promuovere l'autonomia nell'apprendimento delle lingue in contesto accademico: le strategie per lo sviluppo delle abilità di produzione e interazione orale

### *Abstract*

In the context of higher education, characterized by internationalization and students' mobility, the promotion of plurilingualism and language learner autonomy represent a strategic priority. This paper presents a project, carried out at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, aimed at fostering the development of language learning autonomy through the implementation of effective language learning strategies and teachers training in a university context. The study, based on a questionnaire administered to students enrolled in language courses offered by the Servizio Linguistico d'Ateneo (university language service), identified the strategies most commonly employed to enhance oral production, interaction skills, and phonological competence. The findings underscore the importance of supporting learner autonomy through personalized and reflective practices, advocating for targeted and coherent didactic interventions aligned with students' needs, with the ultimate goal of strengthening their *agency*.

### *Keywords*

Autonomy in language learning; Strategic competence; Oral production and interaction.

### *1. Introduzione*

Nel contesto dell'istruzione superiore, caratterizzato da dinamiche di internazionalizzazione e mobilità studentesca crescenti, l'obiettivo della promozione del plurilinguismo acquisisce una rilevanza sempre più centrale. Le università, frequentate da studenti provenienti da contesti linguistici e culturali differenti, sono chiamate a favorire lo sviluppo di repertori plurilingui, intesi come strumenti essenziali per consentire agli apprendenti di agire efficacemente in più lingue e varietà linguistiche (Consiglio d'Europa 2002). In tale prospettiva, l'approccio orientato all'azione, proposto dal Quadro Comune Europeo di Riferimento per le lingue (QCER), si configura come un approccio didattico innovativo, pensato per un parlante capace di sfruttare le sue risorse linguistiche per realizzare compiti autentici e fondato sulla valorizzazione della cosiddetta "agency", ossia la capacità di agire autonomamente, assumendosi la responsabilità del proprio percorso formativo e ponendo una parti-

colare enfasi sull'interazione dinamica e complessa tra gli elementi sociali e individuali dell'apprendimento (North 2023, 8).

L'adozione di un approccio orientato all'azione implica un cambiamento di paradigma nella concezione dell'insegnamento-apprendimento delle lingue, con un'enfasi sulla costruzione di competenze non solo linguistiche, ma anche strategiche, finalizzate a rendere l'apprendente capace di imparare a gestire autonomamente il proprio processo acquisizionale (Canale, Swain 1980): il corretto uso di strategie efficaci permette, infatti, un apprendimento linguistico duraturo e permanente (Oxford 1990).

Alla luce di tale quadro teorico di riferimento, intendiamo presentare un progetto sperimentale, svolto nell'ambito del Servizio Linguistico di Ateneo (SeLdA) dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore e realizzato a partire dai bisogni linguistico-comunicativi degli apprendenti universitari. Una particolare rilevanza è stata attribuita alla riflessione sullo sviluppo delle abilità orali, in quanto esse rappresentano sia una competenza essenziale per le future esigenze professionali degli studenti universitari sia una criticità nel percorso di studio delle lingue. A tal fine, si sono volute analizzare le pratiche autonome già messe in atto dagli apprendenti, con l'obiettivo di individuare strategie di apprendimento efficaci e proporre interventi mirati per lo sviluppo di un repertorio plurilingue.

Il contributo si propone, in primo luogo, di delineare i concetti di autonomia nell'apprendimento linguistico e di competenza strategica, per poi illustrare brevemente i principali studi che hanno contribuito a definire le strategie di apprendimento, dando rilievo alle strategie per lo sviluppo dell'oralità. Successivamente, sono presentati i risultati di una ricerca basata su una raccolta di dati, condotta attraverso la somministrazione di un questionario a un campione di studenti universitari di corsi di lingua, organizzati dall'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. I dati raccolti sono analizzati per identificare le strategie per lo sviluppo delle abilità di produzione e interazione orale e della competenza fonologica più ricorrenti tra le risposte degli studenti; sulla base di tali evidenze, vengono infine avanzate proposte operative finalizzate a rafforzare l'efficacia dell'apprendimento linguistico nel contesto considerato.

## 2. *L'autonomia nell'apprendimento delle lingue e lo sviluppo della competenza strategica*

I primi contributi scientifici sullo sviluppo dell'autonomia nell'apprendimento delle lingue si collocano alla fine degli anni Sessanta del secolo scorso, in un contesto caratterizzato da una crescente attenzione ai bisogni linguistico-comunicativi dell'apprendente. In tale circostanza, termini come *apprentissage autodirigé* e *apprendre à apprendre* vengono introdotti ufficialmente nel dibattito accademico da Holec, che, nel suo noto *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, definisce l'autonomia come "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (1981, 3), ossia la capacità di farsi carico del proprio apprendimento. Per Holec l'autonomia non è un

tratto innato nel discente ma, al contrario, è una competenza che può essere acquisita e incrementata nel tempo, attraverso pratiche di apprendimento formale.

Lo studente autonomo è responsabile e consapevole del proprio percorso educativo ed è capace di gestire i contenuti del proprio processo di apprendimento, definendo i propri obiettivi linguistici e scegliendo le strategie più adatte al proprio stile di apprendimento. Tale processo si configura a seguito di una riflessione sulle proprie necessità e sulla base della selezione di attività didattiche adeguate, facendo ricorso a persone, risorse e strumenti in funzione dei propri bisogni linguistico-comunicativi. La riflessione continua su di sé, sulla lingua e sul processo di apprendimento implica la capacità di prendere decisioni in modo consapevole e di saper modificare, se necessario, le strategie di apprendimento adottate, mantenendo il controllo sul proprio percorso. Questa visione influenza profondamente la didattica delle lingue e propone un modello di insegnamento che incoraggi gli studenti a diventare partecipanti attivi nel proprio processo di sviluppo della competenza linguistico-comunicativa (Little 1991).

Più recentemente, l'autonomia è stata interpretata come una dinamica di apprendimento in cui l'individuo è chiamato a pianificare, attuare, controllare e valutare il proprio percorso di acquisizione nella L2, in funzione della propria *agency*, sia a livello individuale sia collaborativo (Little 2022). Esercitando la *agency* nell'acquisizione linguistica, gli apprendenti sviluppano gradualmente una competenza riflessiva e linguistico-comunicativa, rendendo la L2 una parte pienamente integrata del proprio repertorio plurilingue e della propria identità. Partendo da questa visione, l'autonomia può essere promossa in classe o fuori dalla classe di lingua, attraverso il dialogo pedagogico e la collaborazione tra docente e studente (Mozzon-McPherson, Tassinari 2020).

Apprendere in autonomia non significa dunque apprendere da soli, ma all'interno di un ambiente relazionale, come un gruppo classe o una comunità di pratiche (*community of practice*), in cui è possibile discutere la propria percezione dell'autonomia, condividere e confrontare le proprie esperienze e mettere in evidenza il valore della collaborazione tra pari e con i docenti nello studio delle lingue (Tassinari 2017). Emerge evidentemente la dimensione sociale dell'autonomia, intesa come un percorso di crescita che si evolve attraverso l'interazione tra le capacità individuali e il contesto sociale e la riflessione sulle esperienze condivise.

A tale proposito, Macaro (2008) ricorda l'importanza della riflessione sulla conoscenza delle strategie di apprendimento da adottare nei diversi contesti educativi: solo riflettendo l'apprendente può valutare l'efficacia delle singole strategie da adottare, l'adeguatezza di specifici insiemi di strategie rispetto a un compito linguistico particolare e l'interpretazione delle proprie scelte strategiche all'interno di un quadro più ampio e dinamico. Questo quadro riguarda l'intero percorso di apprendimento linguistico, che si sviluppa nel tempo e che richiede una visione globale, riflessiva e adattiva del proprio modo di apprendere. Essere autonomi significa dunque non solo essere consapevoli di come si apprende, ma anche comprendere quando e in che modo adoperare una determinata strategia, in funzione degli obiet-



tivi a lungo termine e dell'esperienza linguistica personale: i discenti che adottano strategie efficaci, infatti, ottengono i risultati migliori (Oxford 1990).

La letteratura scientifica dimostra che la riflessione sull'uso delle strategie di apprendimento adottate incide positivamente sull'efficacia del processo di apprendimento e, pertanto, lo sviluppo di una competenza strategica è divenuto centrale nella riflessione teorica sulla linguistica applicata (Mariani 1994; Degache 2000; Dauglas 2007). Tale centralità ha contribuito a ridefinire l'apprendimento di una seconda lingua non come un processo lineare e convenzionale, bensì come un'attività che comporta difficoltà intrinseche e che richiede all'apprendente di attivarsi per affrontare e risolvere sfide linguistiche (Grenfell, Macaro 2007).

Per formare apprendenti consapevoli, è fondamentale che il docente conosca le strategie di apprendimento più efficaci nei diversi contesti educativi e sia in grado di guidare gli studenti nel loro utilizzo, al fine di sviluppare le singole abilità linguistico-comunicative. Una didattica delle lingue incentrata sulla consapevolezza e sull'autonomia dell'apprendente risulta strettamente legata alla visione di apprendimento permanente proposta dal QCER: per il Consiglio d'Europa è essenziale sviluppare la competenza dell'imparare a imparare una lingua, ossia conoscere le strategie metacognitive, le strategie di apprendimento linguistico e gli stili cognitivi, al fine di massimizzare le opportunità di apprendimento e sviluppare la piena consapevolezza delle proprie risorse e strategie (Consiglio d'Europa 2002).

### 3. *Le strategie di apprendimento linguistico*

Numerosi contributi hanno esaminato in modo approfondito il tema delle strategie di apprendimento in ambito glottodidattico, evidenziandone il ruolo di rilievo nei processi di acquisizione e di produzione linguistica (Oxford 1990; O'Malley e Chamot 1990). Le strategie di apprendimento comprendono una varietà di azioni volte ad apprendere, memorizzare e produrre efficacemente contenuti linguistici; tuttavia, nella pratica didattica, il significato attribuito a tale termine può variare considerevolmente, includendo tecniche, espedienti, tattiche, atteggiamenti, esercizi e attività didattiche (Grenfell e Macaro 2007).

Una delle definizioni citate con più frequenza in letteratura è di Oxford (1990, 8), che definisce le strategie come "specific actions performed by the learner to make language acquisition easier, faster, more pleasurable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable".

Secondo Kappler Mikk *et al.* (2019) le strategie di apprendimento comprendono i pensieri e i comportamenti, consci e semi-consci, adottati dagli studenti per migliorare, da un lato, la propria conoscenza e uso della lingua target e, dall'altro, la comprensione e l'uso funzionale di tutto ciò che riguarda la cultura, mettendo così in evidenza come le strategie non si limitino all'acquisizione linguistica, ma comprendano anche la dimensione culturale, considerata fondamentale per un uso autentico e funzionale della lingua in un contesto pluriculturale.

Le strategie aprono la strada a una maggiore competenza, allo sviluppo dell'autonomia e all'autoregolazione dell'apprendente e il loro utilizzo corretto incide profondamente sulla capacità di diventare apprendenti linguistici competenti (Oxford 1990; Hsiao, Oxford 2002); possono essere insegnate e rese esplicite durante la lezione di lingua, attraverso “compiti con una forte componente strategica che potrebbero ottimizzare e velocizzare lo sviluppo della competenza proprio per le prestazioni che gli apprendenti sarebbero indotti a fornire” (Mariani 2011, 278). Si ritiene, dunque, necessario per i docenti avere un quadro delle principali strategie di apprendimento per poterle trasmettere agli studenti (Kappler Mikk *et al.* 2019).

La ricerca sulle strategie di apprendimento ha origine negli anni Settanta quando viene delineato da Stern il profilo del cosiddetto “good language learner (GGL)” (1975, 31), ossia colui che è in grado di gestire attivamente le proprie modalità di apprendimento. Lo studioso elabora un elenco delle dieci principali strategie per un apprendimento efficace, includendo le seguenti:

- l'uso di uno stile personale di apprendimento e di strategie efficaci;
- un approccio attivo al compito;
- un atteggiamento aperto verso la lingua target;
- una forte empatia nei confronti dei parlanti;
- la competenza metodologica;
- l'uso di strategie di pianificazione finalizzate a organizzare la lingua target in un sistema ordinato e la capacità di rivedere progressivamente tale sistema;
- una ricerca continua del significato;
- la disponibilità alla pratica e all'uso della lingua in contesti comunicativi reali;
- l'auto-monitoraggio e la sensibilità critica sull'uso della lingua;
- lo sviluppo progressivo della lingua target come sistema di riferimento autonomo.

Sebbene l'elenco proposto da Stern tenga conto solo della sua esperienza personale come insegnante, unito a una rassegna della letteratura pertinente, costituisce un primo tentativo di sistematizzazione delle strategie, cui seguiranno numerosi altri contributi (Grenfell e Macaro 2007). Tra i principali studi svolti tra gli anni Settanta e Ottanta, vale la pena citare le ricerche di Rubin (1975), Naiman *et al.* (1978) e Stevick (1989), le quali dimostrano che i GLLs tendono a utilizzare determinate strategie per l'apprendimento delle lingue e concordano sul fatto che la ricerca sulle strategie potrebbe facilitare la comprensione del processo di acquisizione di una lingua. Nello stesso periodo, Tarone (1981) distingue strategie di apprendimento, strategie comunicative e strategie produttive, utilizzate per la realizzazione di compiti interattivi. La vasta varietà di fattori e di classificazioni legati alle strategie è stata indagata in particolare da O'Malley e Chamot (1990) e Oxford (1990).

I primi applicano la teoria di Anderson (1985), relativa alla psicologia cognitiva e alla processazione dell'informazione, alla ricerca teorica e applicata sulle strategie e distinguono le strategie in tre tipologie: cognitive, relative all'effettiva elaborazio-

ne del linguaggio nella mente; metacognitive, riferite alla pianificazione, al monitoraggio e alla valutazione dei processi cognitivi; sociali, riguardanti gli aspetti sociali e affettivi nelle situazioni di apprendimento linguistico.

Oxford (1990) propone un modello di riferimento per classificare e comprendere le strategie, distinguendo le strategie dirette e indirette. Le prime implicano la manipolazione diretta dell'uso della lingua target e comprendono strategie cognitive, mnemoniche e compensative. Queste strategie includono processi mentali come l'organizzazione delle informazioni e la creazione di collegamenti per sviluppare le abilità di comprensione e di produzione.

Le strategie indirette, invece, supportano e gestiscono il processo di apprendimento senza coinvolgere l'uso della lingua, e includono strategie metacognitive, affettive e sociali. Le strategie metacognitive riguardano la consapevolezza e l'autoregolazione del proprio processo di apprendimento, la definizione dei propri obiettivi, il monitoraggio dei progressi e l'autovalutazione. Le strategie sociali e affettive riguardano l'interazione e gli aspetti emotivi dell'apprendimento linguistico, come ad esempio la riduzione e il controllo sull'ansia e la ricerca di un feedback.

Per Oxford le strategie sono identificabili e quantificabili; per tale ragione, il modello da lei proposto è stato adottato come base teorica per l'elaborazione di un questionario, noto come "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning" (SILL), finalizzato a rilevare la frequenza con cui gli studenti ricorrono alle diverse strategie. Il SILL ebbe un impatto enorme e in pochi anni si stima che venne utilizzato per valutare l'uso delle strategie di oltre 10.000 discenti in tutto il mondo (Grenell, Macaro 2007).

A partire dalla metà degli anni Novanta, l'attenzione della comunità scientifica si è orientata verso l'individuazione di modalità volte a favorire lo sviluppo di strategie efficaci. Si è giunti così alla consapevolezza che non esistono strategie universalmente valide, poiché la loro efficacia risulta condizionata da una pluralità di fattori contestuali, individuali e situazionali. Si assiste così a un cambiamento di prospettiva: dall'attenzione rivolta al profilo globale dell'apprendente e alla valutazione quantitativa delle strategie impiegate, a un'evoluzione verso lo studio sulla qualità delle scelte strategiche operate dal singolo apprendente e analizzate nel contesto in cui si manifestano.

Ricerche approfondite evidenziano come l'adozione e l'efficacia di specifiche strategie siano condizionate da numerose variabili, quali lo stile cognitivo (Reiss 1981); i tratti della personalità e stili di apprendimento (Oxford, Cohen 1992); le caratteristiche socio-culturali dell'ambiente di apprendimento (Crookes *et al.* 1994); la memoria di lavoro, la motivazione e il livello di competenza linguistico-comunicativa (Macaro 2001); gli obiettivi glottodidattici, la conoscenza dei propri stili di apprendimento, l'attitudine allo studio, l'età, l'esposizione alla lingua (Grenfell, Macaro 2007).

### 3.1 Strategie per lo sviluppo delle abilità orali

Le abilità di produzione e interazione orale e la competenza fonologica sono altamente complesse da sviluppare, in quanto il processo cognitivo messo in atto nell'esecuzione di tali abilità e competenze linguistiche coinvolge la comprensione, il recupero, l'elaborazione e la produzione delle forme, dei suoni e delle strutture linguistiche, oltre che il mantenimento della correttezza e della fluenza durante la comunicazione (Douglas Brown 2007; May Melendez *et al.* 2014).

Per Anderson (1985) tale processo può essere articolato in tre fasi distinte, delineate come segue:

- la costruzione, durante la quale il parlante seleziona gli obiettivi e pianifica la realizzazione del messaggio;
- la trasformazione, in cui le regole della lingua e dei suoni della lingua sono utilizzate per dare forma al significato del messaggio;
- l'esecuzione, che corrisponde al momento in cui il messaggio è espresso.

Considerata la natura articolata e ampia dell'argomento, numerosi studi hanno approfondito i processi cognitivi e comunicativi implicati nella produzione e nell'interazione in L2, con attenzione alle strategie impiegate per lo sviluppo delle abilità orali. In riferimento a tali strategie, la ricerca dimostra che è possibile sviluppare le abilità di interazione e produzione orale e la competenza fonologica nella classe di lingua, facendo ricorso ad attività didattiche mirate e a strumenti per stimolare la riflessione sulle strategie adoperate (Mariani 1994; 2011; Nigra 2014; Retaro 2023).

Krings (2016) approfondisce le principali strategie per lo sviluppo delle abilità orali per tutti i livelli di competenza linguistico-comunicativa, per i diversi profili di apprendenti e per l'apprendimento in classe o autonomo, in gruppo o tra pari. Analizzando i fattori che possono rendere particolarmente complessa la produzione in una lingua straniera, l'autore delinea strategie concrete per sviluppare le abilità di produzione e interazione orale e la competenza fonologica in L2. Sono quindi fornite alcune indicazioni pratiche per gli apprendenti di lingua, a partire dalla necessità di definire obiettivi chiari e concreti. Tra le indicazioni, Krings suggerisce di familiarizzare con l'uso di dizionari monolingui e bilingui al fine di individuare, in caso di dubbi legati al lessico, gli equivalenti linguistici più adeguati. Lo studioso invita altresì gli apprendenti, una volta identificate le eventuali lacune, a verificare la propria capacità di interagire oralmente e a cercare il feedback dell'insegnante o di un partner, nel caso dell'apprendimento in tandem. Risulta importante, inoltre, adoperare un repertorio di frasi di routine, lavorare su modelli di conversazione e sviluppare strategie per affrontare eventuali problemi di comprensione dei testi orali. Tra le attività consigliate rientrano lo studio e la costruzione del discorso a partire da testi autentici, il parlare con sé stessi in L2 e l'utilizzo quotidiano della lingua anche in ambito domestico. Infine, pianificare un soggiorno all'estero con cura può offrire occasioni preziose per mettere in pratica le proprie competenze e massimizzare i benefici dell'apprendimento linguistico.

Per Krings, il controllo della pronuncia è un aspetto centrale nello sviluppo della competenza fonologica. Nell'interazione e nella produzione orale è utile comprendere l'importanza della pronuncia e della composizione dei suoni delle parole: prendere coscienza dell'inventario fonetico della lingua di studio e confrontarlo con quello della propria lingua madre permette, ad esempio, di riconoscere differenze fonologiche significative (come i fonemi con funzione distintiva nella L1 o nella L2) e di lavorare su di esse. È importante, inoltre, prestare attenzione all'accento corretto (tanto lessicale come sintattico), allenare l'articolazione dei suoni sia in modo isolato sia nella pronuncia delle parole e utilizzare tecniche pratiche come battere il ritmo per fissare l'accento di parole complesse. In questo ambito, Krings consiglia la partecipazione a gruppi teatrali in lingua e la preparazione di monologhi da registrare e, successivamente, analizzare. Queste attività consentono un lavoro sistematico sulla pronuncia e sull'espressività, favorendo un apprendimento dei suoni della lingua consapevole e progressivo.

Risulta evidente che i docenti di lingua possono adoperare numerose tecniche didattiche per stimolare gli apprendenti nell'uso di specifiche strategie. Tra esse, ad esempio, Douglas Brown segnala le cosiddette "questioning strategies" (2007, 169), domande strategiche per permettere agli apprendenti di interagire con il docente o tra pari, o le attività di sensibilizzazione all'uso delle strategie produttive, utili per aiutare gli studenti a riconoscere, comprendere e adoperare consapevolmente le strategie comunicative dentro o al di fuori della classe.

Alcune strategie, come ripetere ad alta voce dopo l'insegnante, sono comuni e probabilmente familiari agli studenti, mentre altre, come la registrazione dei propri monologhi, risultano meno conosciute. Tuttavia, indipendentemente dalla loro diffusione, le strategie rivestono un ruolo fondamentale nello sviluppo delle abilità orali: ad esempio, le strategie mirate a rafforzare il proprio messaggio, come porre domande in modi diversi, o a gestire eventuali interruzioni nella comunicazione, come la riformulazione per chiarire il significato di un termine, sono state identificate, classificate e, in molti casi, integrate nei programmi di diversi manuali di lingua (Nunan 2015).

Risulta, infine, interessante ai fini del presente studio il lavoro di Yoong e Hashim (2023), i quali hanno analizzato articoli scientifici, sul tema dell'apprendimento delle lingue, pubblicati tra il 2019 e il 2023, al fine di identificare le strategie più diffuse tra gli studenti che desiderano apprendere una lingua e di supportare gli educatori linguistici nella scelta di approcci, metodologie e tecniche didattiche efficaci per potenziare le abilità orali. I risultati emersi da questa revisione hanno indicato che, facendo riferimento al modello di Oxford (1990) le strategie metacognitive e cognitive si distinguono come le scelte predominanti; seguono le strategie di compensazione e sociali, che si affermano come valide alternative. Al contrario, le strategie mnemoniche e affettive risultano essere poco adottate dagli apprendenti nel loro intento di migliorare le abilità di produzione e interazione orale.

#### 4. *Contesto e metodologia di indagine*

Con l'obiettivo di approfondire l'impatto che può avere il corretto utilizzo di strategie per lo sviluppo delle abilità di produzione e interazione orale e la competenza fonologica, è stata avviata un'indagine di tipo quantitativo e qualitativo nel contesto dei corsi di lingua organizzati dal Servizio Linguistico d'Ateneo dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. La raccolta dati, avvenuta tramite Google Moduli tra i mesi di gennaio e febbraio 2025, fa parte di un più ampio progetto di ricerca sullo sviluppo dell'autonomia nell'apprendimento linguistico negli studenti universitari: i dati raccolti tramite il questionario hanno permesso di effettuare una prima ricognizione sul tema delle strategie di apprendimento e sono stati condivisi con gli studenti durante un seminario divulgativo e di formazione<sup>1</sup>.

Il questionario è stato elaborato in linea con le indicazioni metodologiche e le strategie proposte da Krings (2016); è stato poi adattato al contesto specifico della ricerca e suddiviso due parti: nella prima sono stati raccolti dati di contesto e nella seconda sono state indagate le strategie di apprendimento utilizzate dagli studenti per sviluppare in autonomia le abilità di produzione e di interazione orale e la competenza fonologica.

Riguardo ai dati di contesto, è stato chiesto agli studenti di indicare la propria lingua materna e le lingue di studio. Sono state indagate le motivazioni principali legate allo studio delle lingue attraverso una domanda chiusa in cui è stata data la possibilità di selezionare tre risposte tra alcune affermazioni proposte ("superare un esame di certificazione"; "fare un soggiorno Erasmus all'estero"; "usare la lingua nel mio lavoro in futuro"; "viaggiare nei paesi in cui si parla la lingua") o di aggiungere un'ulteriore risposta.

Le domande successive sono state suddivise in quattro sezioni, ciascuna dedicata a un diverso ambito:

- a) "esercitarsi nel parlato",
- b) "interagire con altri",
- c) "familiarizzare con i suoni della lingua",
- d) "altre strategie adoperate".

Per ogni sezione sono state presentate strategie e tecniche didattiche, rispetto alle quali gli studenti hanno potuto indicare un livello personale di corrispondenza, scegliendo tra quattro opzioni: "uso questa strategia e mi piace"; "ho già provato questa strategia e vorrei usarla di nuovo"; "non ho mai usato questa strategia, ma vorrei usarla in futuro"; "questa strategia non mi si addice".

Nell'ultima domanda del questionario è stato chiesto agli studenti di indicare ulteriori strategie utilizzate per migliorare le abilità orali.

<sup>1</sup> Seminario di Maria Giovanna Tassinari (Freie Universität Berlin) *Imparare le lingue in autonomia: tecniche e strategie*, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano, 28 febbraio 2025.



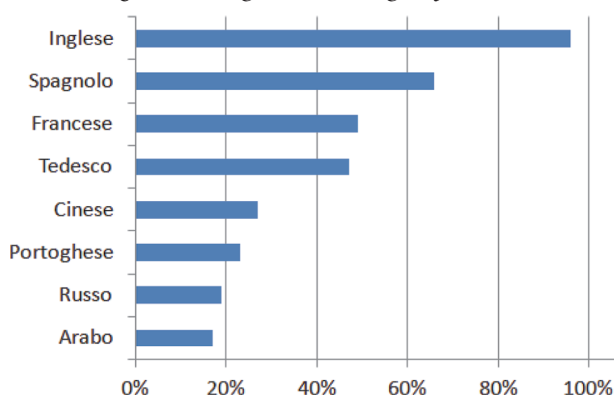
### 5. *Analisi dei dati raccolti*

Sono stati raccolti 51 questionari compilati da studenti iscritti a corsi di lingua delle diverse Facoltà dell'Ateneo<sup>2</sup>.

La quasi totalità degli informanti (92%) dichiara di essere madrelingua italiana; mentre i restanti (rispettivamente il 3%) indicano come lingua madre lo spagnolo o l'ucraino.

Come mostra la figura 1, dalle risposte analizzate emerge che la lingua più studiata dal campione degli informanti è l'inglese (96% degli studenti), seguito dallo spagnolo (66%), dal francese (49%) e dal tedesco (47%). Sono presenti nel campione, seppur in misura minore, studenti che dichiarano di studiare il cinese (27%), il portoghese (23%), il russo (19%) e l'arabo (17%)<sup>3</sup>.

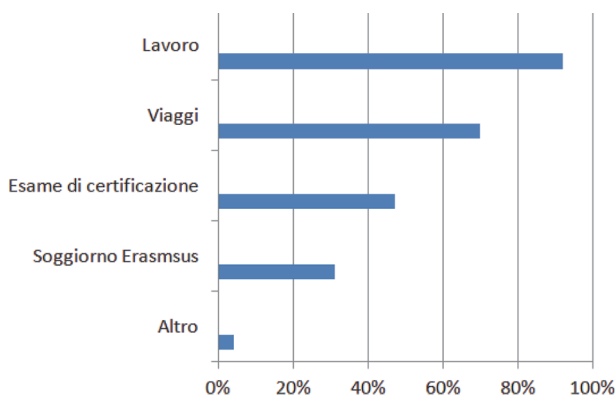
Figura 1 – *Lingue studiate dagli informanti*



In riferimento alle motivazioni che portano gli studenti allo studio delle lingue, come riporta la figura 2, dalle risposte analizzate si evince che i motivi principali sono legati al mondo del lavoro (92% degli studenti) e alla possibilità di viaggiare nei Paesi in cui si parlano le lingue apprese (70%). Secondo quanto dichiarato da circa la metà degli informanti (47%), anche il superamento di un esame di certificazione rientra tra le motivazioni che portano allo studio di una lingua straniera; per il 31% degli apprendenti la motivazione è legata, invece, alla possibilità di un soggiorno Erasmus. Inoltre, solo due studenti hanno indicato tra le altre motivazioni “poter interagire con i madrelingua” e “per passione e per poter leggere pubblicazioni in altre lingue”.

<sup>2</sup> I corsi di lingua coinvolti sono relativi alle Facoltà seguenti: Economia; Giurisprudenza; Lettere e filosofia; Psicologia; Scienze bancarie, finanziarie e assicurative; Scienze della formazione; Scienze linguistiche e letterature straniere; Scienze politiche e sociali.

<sup>3</sup> Per questa domanda e per la successiva era possibile indicare più di una risposta.

Figura 2 – *Motivazioni allo studio delle lingue*

Di seguito è riportata l'analisi delle risposte degli studenti sulle preferenze d'uso delle strategie e delle tecniche proposte per sviluppare autonomamente le abilità di produzione e di interazione orale e la competenza fonologica. Infine, sono illustrate le altre strategie utilizzate dagli studenti del campione considerato.

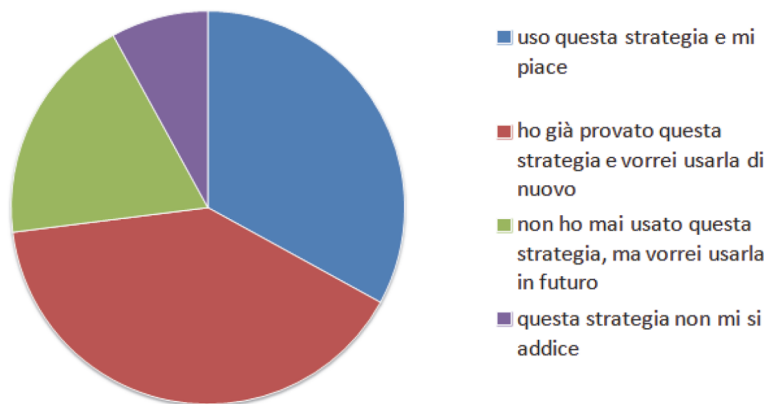
Le risposte alle domande chiuse sono riportate in dati percentuali; le risposte alla domanda aperta sono state esaminate e, dopo aver individuato le categorie di concetti descritti dagli studenti, sono state classificate in valori percentuali.

### 5.1 Le strategie per lo sviluppo dell'abilità di produzione orale

In riferimento all'utilizzo di strategie e tecniche per lo sviluppo dell'abilità di produzione orale, è stato chiesto agli informanti di selezionare un'opzione relativa alla propria esperienza con riferimento alle diverse strategie suggerite. Le strategie e le azioni proposte erano le seguenti:

- “mi esercito provando da solo/a nuove espressioni”;
- “provo nuove strutture grammaticali in diverse situazioni per acquisire maggior confidenza / sicurezza”;
- “se voglio dire qualcosa, penso a come lo direbbe un madrelingua e provo a formularlo allo stesso modo”;
- “con l'aiuto del dizionario o di traduttori scrivo quello che vorrei dire e poi mi esercito ripetendolo”;
- “provo brevi monologhi, mi registro e mi riascolto”.

Riguardo alla prima strategia proposta, esercitarsi da soli provando nuove espressioni, come è possibile osservare dalla figura 3, una parte consistente degli informanti coinvolti nell'indagine (40%) afferma di averla già sperimentata e di volerla riutilizzare, mentre una percentuale inferiore (33%) dichiara di farne uso abitualmente. Alcuni studenti (19%) non l'hanno ancora messa in pratica, ma sembrano interessati; solo pochi (8%) non la ritengono compatibile con il proprio stile di apprendimento.

Figura 3 – *Esercitarsi provando nuove espressioni*

La seconda proposta, impiegare nuove strutture grammaticali in situazioni diverse per acquisire maggiore sicurezza, suscita curiosità in alcuni studenti (33%) che, pur non avendola mai adottata, intendono provarla in futuro. Il 29% l'ha già testata e desidera approfondirne l'utilizzo, mentre il 23% la integra stabilmente nel proprio percorso formativo. Solo una piccola parte (15%) non vi si riconosce.

Per quanto riguarda la terza strategia legata alla riflessione sull'uso autentico della lingua e al tentativo di formulare discorsi imitando i madrelingua, la risposta è positiva: il 38% degli studenti universitari l'ha già applicata e intende ripeterla, il 31% la utilizza con regolarità e soddisfazione, mentre il 19% la considera un'opzione interessante da esplorare in futuro. Solo il 12% degli studenti non la trova adatta alle proprie modalità di apprendimento.

La quarta strategia proposta, scrivere ciò che si desidera dire con l'aiuto del dizionario o di traduttori e poi esercitarsi nella ripetizione, appare particolarmente apprezzata: il 33% degli studenti riferisce di utilizzarla con regolarità e di trovarla efficace; un ulteriore 25% l'ha già sperimentata e manifesta l'intenzione di continuare a servirsene; il 23% non l'ha mai adottata, ma si mostra curioso di provarla; una parte più contenuta del campione (19%) non la considera adatta al proprio approccio allo studio.

La figura 4 riporta i dati riferiti all'ultima strategia per lo sviluppo dell'abilità di produzione orale, provare brevi monologhi, registrarsi e riascoltarsi: dal grafico risulta evidente che questa strategia non è ancora stata messa in pratica dalla quasi metà degli informanti (46%), che dichiara però di volerla sperimentare. Alcuni studenti (29%) non la ritengono adatta alle proprie preferenze di apprendimento, mentre altri (21%) l'hanno già utilizzata e intendono riproporla in futuro. Solo una piccola percentuale di apprendenti (4%) afferma di adottarla abitualmente con soddisfazione.

Figura 4 – *Provare brevi monologhi, registrarsi e riascoltarsi*

Le strategie e le tecniche per lo sviluppo dell'abilità di produzione orale proposte nel questionario risultano adoperate dalla maggioranza del campione di apprendenti, con una chiara preferenza per le strategie che permettono la riflessione sull'uso della lingua, come esercitarsi da soli con nuove espressioni, utilizzare il dizionario per preparare testi da ripetere e riflettere su come si esprimerebbe un madrelingua. Al contrario, alcune strategie che implicano l'assunzione di un ruolo maggiormente attivo nel proprio processo di apprendimento, come ad esempio la registrazione di monologhi, risultano ancora poco diffuse, sebbene emerga un interesse da parte degli studenti a sperimentarle in futuro.

## 5.2 Le strategie per lo sviluppo dell'abilità di interazione orale

Le strategie per lo sviluppo dell'abilità di interazione orale proposte agli studenti sono state le seguenti:

- “cerco regolarmente occasioni per parlare con un madrelingua”;
- “cerco di dirigere la conversazione su temi che voglio esercitare o migliorare”;
- “in una conversazione, ripeto o uso espressioni che usa il mio interlocutore”;
- “chiedo al mio interlocutore di correggere i miei errori”;
- “dopo una conversazione, mi annoto alcune espressioni e strutture da imparare”.

Dall'analisi dei dati raccolti, la prima strategia relativa alla ricerca di opportunità per parlare con persone madrelingua risulta essere interessante per il 35% degli informanti, sebbene non venga adottata dagli stessi. Il 33% degli studenti dichiara invece di utilizzare questa strategia e la ritiene utile. Altri apprendenti (28%) riportano di interagire abitualmente con madrelingua e di provare soddisfazione; solo una minoranza (4%) la considera poco adatta al proprio stile di apprendimento.

Una tendenza simile si osserva nella volontà da parte degli studenti di dirigere la conversazione su temi che vorrebbero esercitare o migliorare, per la quale quasi la metà del campione (49%) ha espresso interesse ad adottare questa strategia in futu-

ro, pur non avendola ancora sperimentata. Il 28% la utilizza regolarmente, mentre il 18% l'ha provata e vorrebbe ripeterne l'uso. Solo il 5% non la ritiene efficace.

Nel caso della proposta "in una conversazione, ripeto o uso espressioni che usa il mio interlocutore", il 33% degli informanti riferisce di aver già sperimentato questa tecnica con l'intenzione di continuare ad applicarla, mentre il 29% afferma di farne uso frequente. Alcuni studenti (24%) mostrano interesse verso questa strategia, pur non avendola mai impiegata, e il 14% del campione la esclude dal proprio metodo di apprendimento.

Molto più consolidato appare l'impiego della strategia "chiedo al mio interlocutore di correggere i miei errori", adottata regolarmente dal 44% degli informanti e provata da un ulteriore 23% che intende riutilizzarla. Un altro 23% è curioso di sperimentarla, mentre solo alcuni rispondenti (10%) la percepiscono come poco utile.

Infine, rispetto alla possibilità di annotare alcune espressioni e strutture da imparare dopo una conversazione, come rappresentato dalla figura 5, un numero consistente di studenti (41%), pur non avendola mai provata, considera questa strategia interessante e desidera introdurla nel proprio repertorio; il 31% degli apprendenti ne fa uso abituale, mentre il 20% l'ha già sperimentata con intenzione di ripeterla. Una parte residuale del campione di studenti (8%) non la ritiene adatta al proprio stile.

Figura 5 – *Annotare espressioni e strutture dopo una conversazione*



Gli studenti mostrano un atteggiamento complessivamente positivo e una forte disponibilità a interagire attivamente con parlanti nativi e con i pari, con l'obiettivo di potenziare le proprie competenze nell'interazione orale. In particolare, strategie quali la richiesta di correzione degli errori e la ripetizione delle espressioni dell'interlocutore risultano ampiamente apprezzate, in quanto forniscono un feedback immediato e promuovono un apprendimento contestualizzato e significativo.

### 5.3 Le strategie per lo sviluppo della competenza fonologica

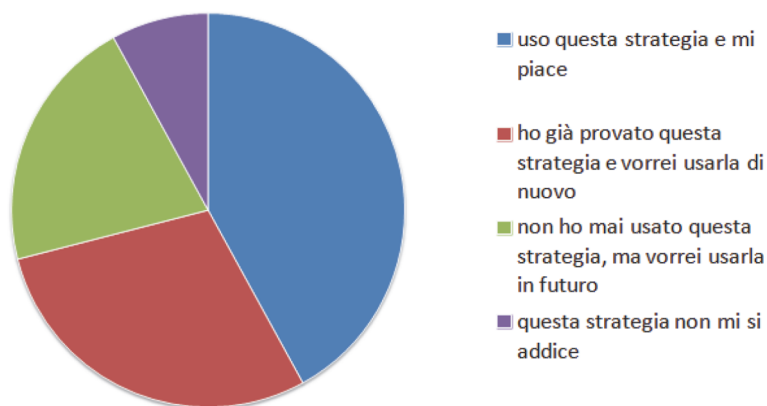
Per quanto riguarda le strategie finalizzate al miglioramento della competenza fonologica, le tre proposte hanno riguardato le seguenti strategie:

- “esercito i suoni della lingua per familiarizzare con la pronuncia”;
- “esercito la pronuncia di singole parole, ascoltandone una registrazione e ripetendole”;
- “esercito la pronuncia e l’intonazione di frasi, ascoltandone una registrazione e ripetendole”.

La prima strategia risulta la più consolidata: oltre la metà degli studenti (55%) dichiara di utilizzarla regolarmente con soddisfazione, mentre un ulteriore 21% riferisce di averla già messa in pratica e di volerla impiegare nuovamente. Il 20% degli apprendenti non ha ancora sperimentato questa strategia, ma manifesta interesse a farlo, e solo una piccola percentuale (4%) non la considera adatta alle proprie esigenze formative.

Risultati simili si osservano nella figura 6, che rappresenta la strategia “esercito la pronuncia di singole parole, ascoltandone una registrazione e ripetendole”: questa strategia è adottata con continuità dal 42% degli studenti e provata da un ulteriore 29%, intenzionato a riutilizzarla. Il 21% degli informanti esprime curiosità verso questa pratica didattica, pur non avendola ancora sperimentata, mentre l’8% non la ritiene in linea con il proprio stile di apprendimento.

Figura 6 – *Esercitare la pronuncia ascoltando le parole e ripetendole*



Infine, il 36% degli studenti dichiara di ascoltare e di ripetere intere frasi abitualmente. Alcuni (29%) affermano di aver già provato e apprezzato questa strategia e altri (29%) si mostrano propensi ad adottarla in futuro. Solo il 6% non mostra interesse nei confronti di tale proposta.

Le strategie per lo sviluppo della competenza fonologica appaiono tra le più utilizzate. L’ascolto e la ripetizione, sia di suoni singoli sia di frasi complete, sono pratiche ben integrate nei percorsi di apprendimento autonomo degli studenti e sono percepite come efficaci. Ciò dimostra una crescente consapevolezza dell’importanza dell’input uditivo nella costruzione di una pronuncia accurata e naturale.



#### 5.4 Altre strategie

Nell'ultima domanda del questionario è stato chiesto agli studenti di illustrare altre strategie utilizzate per migliorare le abilità di produzione e interazione orale e la competenza fonologica nelle lingue di studio.

I dati emersi dalle risposte degli studenti sono stati raggruppati in alcune categorie così individuate: l'ascolto e la visione di contenuti in L2; la ricerca di occasioni di interazione; l'esercitazione in autonomia; la lettura; le risorse digitali.

Quasi la metà degli informanti (45%) dichiara di ascoltare musica e podcast o di guardare film, video e serie tv in lingua straniera. Tra essi il 40% non si limita all'ascolto, ma ripete i suoni, le espressioni e le frasi, come si legge dai seguenti commenti "vedo interviste di madrelingue e cerco di ripetere il discorso" e "ascolto film in lingua originale e provo a ripetere qualche parola". Un informante segnala, inoltre, l'abitudine di "annotare espressioni che userebbe un madrelingua per cercare di riutilizzarle" mentre guarda film in lingua originale.

Il 17% degli apprendenti cerca l'interazione con i madrelingua o con i propri pari, come ad esempio scrivono due studenti: "sono in frequente contatto con persone madrelingua così che possa diventare un'abitudine parlare in lingua straniera" e "chiamo o videochiamo amiche straniere o le ospito a casa mia per un periodo di tempo".

Alcuni studenti (15%) si esercitano a casa provando, ad esempio, a parlare "ad alta voce e davanti a uno specchio" e a "inscenare la presentazione di un tema come potrebbe fare una studentessa davanti alla classe" o, in un altro caso, ad "argomentare la propria opinione rispetto a elementi di un discorso che si ascolta, magari come alcuni podcast". Un informante commenta scrivendo: "quando sono da sola, organizzo ciò che devo fare nella mia giornata e cerco di pensare (anche ad alta voce) in altre lingue".

La lettura per lo sviluppo dell'abilità di produzione orale è una pratica didattica utilizzata dal 10% del campione di studenti e, tra essi, due informanti leggono ad alta voce, in particolare "parole sconosciute o poco usate".

Un altro 10% degli studenti coinvolti nell'indagine segnala l'utilizzo di applicazioni quali "Duolingo o altre app per imparare a parlare le lingue" e strumenti digitali come, ad esempio, traduttori e social network.

Infine, uno studente descrive l'utilizzo di altre strategie, come si legge dal seguente commento: "memorizzo la pronuncia di singoli vocaboli associando il suono a un'immagine".

Le strategie riportate rivelano un approccio diversificato all'apprendimento: l'uso di media autentici (musica, film, podcast), la lettura ad alta voce e l'interazione con i madrelingua o con i pari rappresentano strumenti efficaci che dimostrano una buona dose di autonomia da parte degli studenti. L'integrazione di strumenti digitali e applicazioni conferma, inoltre, l'importanza crescente delle tecnologie nell'apprendimento linguistico.

## 6. *Riflessioni conclusive*

Nelle istituzioni universitarie, inserite sempre più nell'internazionalizzazione e nelle esigenze di mobilità studentesca, promuovere il plurilinguismo e lo sviluppo dell'autonomia nell'apprendimento delle lingue rappresenta una sfida educativa centrale e un obiettivo strategico: l'indagine condotta sul campione di studenti scelto ha permesso di ottenere un quadro relativo alle strategie principalmente adottate nello specifico contesto di apprendimento considerato.

La varietà delle lingue studiate, le motivazioni dichiarate e le strategie di apprendimento messe in atto autonomamente dagli studenti delineano un profilo di apprendente consapevole delle proprie esigenze formative e interessato a sviluppare competenze linguistico-comunicative attraverso strategie personalizzate. Dall'analisi dei dati raccolti emerge, infatti, una forte motivazione strumentale allo studio delle lingue, prevalentemente legata a esigenze professionali e di mobilità internazionale.

I risultati del questionario rivelano l'interesse degli apprendenti nei confronti di numerose strategie e si osserva una disponibilità diffusa alla sperimentazione e al miglioramento.

Si evidenzia il bisogno di un'azione formativa da parte degli insegnanti di lingua in contesto accademico che miri non solo all'insegnamento delle lingue ma anche a favorire lo sviluppo di una competenza strategica. A tal fine, si rendono necessari interventi glottodidattici mirati, che favoriscano l'uso consapevole delle strategie di apprendimento adeguate, la sperimentazione di pratiche didattiche autonome e la costruzione di un dialogo educativo orientato alla valorizzazione della *agency* degli studenti.

Poiché ogni studente possiede e adopera un repertorio strategico unico, risultano essenziali due considerazioni: da un lato, è necessario che i docenti adattino le proprie pratiche didattiche alle specifiche preferenze e modalità di apprendimento individuali degli studenti; dall'altro, è auspicabile che gli studenti mantengano un atteggiamento aperto e ricettivo nei confronti dell'acquisizione di nuove strategie di apprendimento. Saper adottare un insieme diversificato di strategie e saperle adattare alle proprie peculiarità permette di ottenere risultati più soddisfacenti.

In tale prospettiva, i risultati analizzati possono offrire spunti per una più ampia riflessione sulla formazione dei docenti di lingue e sulla progettazione di percorsi formativi che accompagnino gli studenti verso una sempre maggiore autonomia, in linea con i principi del QCER e con le attuali esigenze del contesto accademico internazionale. In particolare, è opportuno ricordare che nel Volume Complementare del QCER (Consiglio d'Europa 2020) si è progressivamente superata l'idea di un approccio modellato sul raggiungimento di una competenza linguistica pari a quella di un madrelingua, promuovendo invece l'obiettivo dell'intercomprensione e dell'efficacia comunicativa. Questo cambiamento di prospettiva riguarda in modo particolare la padronanza fonologica e dovrebbe, pertanto, essere noto anche ai discenti autonomi, affinché possano orientare le proprie strategie di apprendimento secondo obiettivi realistici e funzionali alla comunicazione.

Si rivela, infine, necessario proseguire la ricerca sulle strategie negli specifici contesti di apprendimento, in quanto essa offre indicazioni utili sia agli insegnanti sia agli studenti, favorisce una comprensione più approfondita dei processi di apprendimento linguistico e consente di organizzare e sistematizzare tali conoscenze, al fine di realizzare pratiche didattiche funzionali per la specifica tipologia di apprendente.

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BORBALA SAMU, ZACHARY NOWAK

## L2 textbook design for intercultural learning in semester study abroad

### *Abstract*

Research in the field of language learning in study abroad contexts has demonstrated that international experience alone is often not enough for students to reach higher levels of L2 proficiency and intercultural sensitivity. To optimize the potential of study abroad it is essential to provide specific curriculum, methodology and language teaching materials that allow both foreign language acquisition and personal development. In this article we describe our recent experience of creating tailor made teaching materials for beginners—while attempting to reconcile the Italian *sillabo* and the American *syllabus*, or rather the European and North American approaches to creating a linguistic program—including activities that empower students to immerse themselves in the host community, to learn how to do things with language in a way appropriate for the given social situation, to increase their intercultural competence through critical reflections about the encounter with the foreign language and the new culture.

### *Keywords*

Study abroad; L2 Italian; Intercultural Communicative Competence; curriculum design; language teaching materials

### *1. Second language study abroad programming*

American university students taking courses at educational institutions in countries other than the United States are heir to both the occasional studies that English Grand Tourists undertook starting in the sixteenth century, as well as a nineteenth-century American tradition of finishing one's studies in Europe.<sup>1</sup> From an expensive undertaking limited to the wealthiest in the nineteenth-century U.S., study abroad in the last four decades has expanded to include a far larger number of American undergraduates. Roughly one in twenty U.S. undergraduates spend at least a month abroad for study purposes.<sup>2</sup> On the values of study abroad, see Mollica (2015) and Dolci (2015) in an important issue on the subject in *Insegno*. This num-

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<sup>1</sup> The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design BS; §1-2 ZN, §§3-5 BS. Translation of Figures ZN. The authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

ber, while seemingly small, is notable given the absence of a coherent system or state subsidies, such as the Erasmus program in Europe (DePaul and Hoffa 2010, 2).

While Americans may study abroad, it is not a given that they will have had class instruction in the language of the host country, nor even that they will necessarily even take a class to learn that language while there. In an important 2003 article, Engle and Engle proposed a classification system of study abroad programs (primarily those serving American students) in which they first distinguished between “culture-based” and “knowledge-transfer” programs. The latter offer instruction in the language of the students, rather than that of the host country; the goal is providing content *in* the host country, instead of content *about* the host country, and language instruction is rarely part of the curriculum. This is especially true of summer or other short-term study abroad experiences. The other category — “culture-based programs” — includes a variety of sub-categories. Some are merely conduits for students to enroll directly in the universities of the host country; instruction is entirely in that country’s language, and students are surrounded by other students from that country. Other programs require a course in the language of the host country but the other content-classes, while perhaps focusing on the host country, are taught in English. Finally, some programs (which Engle and Engle somewhat dismissively define as “service providers of scenery”) do not require language instruction but do offer at least some courses about the host country. Engle and Engle’s seven-variable classification takes into account, for example, types of student housing and the length of the student’s sojourn, language is clearly a key criterion for their classification system: “target-language competence” and “language used in coursework” are two of the seven variables (Engle and Engle 2003). Confidence in foreign language skills is a key issue in intercultural development, since it correlates with more willingness to initiate conversations with local people and with the feeling of self-efficacy in a multicultural environment (Jackson 2015, 87).

The Umbra Institute is an American study abroad program located in Perugia, Italy, a university city with 165,000 residents and almost 30,000 Italian and international students at its two universities. While the American students who spend three and a half months studying at The Umbra Institute are not primarily Italian majors, all students enroll knowing that an Italian language and culture class is required despite the fact that the other content courses are in English. In Fall 2021, the academic administration program undertook an assessment project to evaluate the effects of students’ time at The Umbra Institute. One part of the assessment was aimed at evaluating the utility of the mandatory Italian class; specifically, The Umbra Institute’s administration was considering changing Italian language instruction from mandatory to optional, given that only a tiny percentage (normally 1-2%) of the students each semester are Italian majors, and most students have never studied Italian before (consistently more than 80%). The data were both a survey asking the students to rate the importance they assigned to learning Italian that semester (on a scale of 1 to 6), as well as several open-ended questions, and (later in the semester) a focus group with a representative sample of students.



The results were surprising: despite the fact that a tiny percentage of the students were Italian majors, and that few (in the focus group) reported that they intended to study Italian when they returned to their home institution, the students in Fall 2021 ranked learning Italian as a 5.25 out of 6, or a “very high priority” (the three subsequent semesters have all been around this 5.25 number). Both in the anonymous responses to the open-ended survey questions and in the subsequent focus group, many students expressed a desire to get to know Italians and to immerse themselves in the local community—many implied or said explicitly that they saw the language as a vehicle to that desired cultural integration. In fact, one of the main reasons why students look to study abroad is the belief that an experience abroad would be a transformative learning experience that would positively impact their lives, a belief that has been found in other studies of education abroad (Plews and Misfeld 2018, 166). One problem, though, that focus group participants identified was that the Italian language textbook used; the students considered it inadequate for the type of immersion they desired.

The existing Italian language textbooks published commercially have a series of characteristics that make them less-than-ideal for our students’ cultural goals. In order to appeal to a broad market, these textbooks are written for students studying Italian anywhere: Chicago, Osaka, or Cape Town. This means that the textbooks, when they present cultural notes<sup>2</sup>, tend to frame those in the national context, or (when they present regional idiosyncrasies) only mention a particular region or city once. These textbooks do not, then, present the opportunity for students to get to know the city they are studying in, because they are written for both L2 and FL contexts. It follows that none of this kind of textbook has any sort of tie-in with community-engaged learning: the desire (for authors and publishers) for a textbook that could be used anywhere means the absence of any sort of local connection. Even if some of these textbooks were likely written in Perugia (where there are several publishers of Italian textbooks), they were not explicitly connected the city: dialogues took place in cities all across Italy and the cultural notes referred to festivals across the country’s regions. The thematic units that overlay the progression of communicative language competences in these books do not follow, in any meaningful way, the chronology of a student studying in Perugia. For example, the students begin to travel on the weekends immediately, but most textbooks have the thematic unit about travel paired with the grammatical concept of the past tense (e.g. “Dove sei stato questo fine settimana?” “Sono andato a Venezia.” ‘Where did you go this weekend?’ ‘I went to Venice’), which is not introduced immediately but rather only after a significant number of lessons.

As if these inadequacies were not enough, most of the textbooks we reviewed for use with our students also lacked the presentation of pragmatic aspects of the language use

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<sup>2</sup> Peripheral presentation of culture does characterize textbooks of other languages as well, as evidenced by Eddy: “Textbooks tend to deliberately instruct and explain culture, while teachers often present it as facts. These snippets are relegated to the ‘little blue box’ located literally and figuratively on the margin of the curriculum” (2022, 44).



such as, for example, formulating requests adequately in emails according to the role and social status of addressee or react in an appropriate manner to an invitation. Most had some sort of cultural notes, but they offered – similarly to traditional textbooks for other languages – “an inaccurate and decontextualized presentation of the different pragmatic aspects examined, as well as a lack of natural conversational models representing the real use of language” (Martínez-Flor 2007, 246). The importance that students assigned to learning Italian (as a vehicle of cultural immersion), The Umbra Institute’s existing commitment to community-engaged learning, and the inadequacies we found with the existing textbooks made us decide to write our own textbook (ultimately named *Allora!*). The first step, however, in that process was establishing the course design for the elementary language programs and for the textbook students would use in those courses.

## 2. Curriculum development and textbook design: American vs Italian-based approaches

Curriculum development is an essential activity in language teaching. It focuses on determining what knowledge, skills, and values learners should acquire, what experiences should be provided to bring about intended learning outcomes, and how teaching and learning can be planned, measured, and evaluated. Curriculum development is a more comprehensive process than syllabus design, since it describes the broadest contexts in which planning for language instruction takes place (Dubin and Olshtain 1986). It includes the processes that are used to determine learners’ needs, to develop aims or objectives, to create an appropriate syllabus, to establish course structure, to choose teaching methods and materials, and to carry out an evaluation of the language program (Nation and Macalister 2010). Thus, it is important to highlight the fact that curriculum development is not merely deciding what to teach, but also how to do that and with which objectives.

A syllabus is a more circumscribed document, usually prepared for a particular group of learners. There are several different ways in which a syllabus can be defined; here we consider both the organizational syllabus (referred to the language course) and the materials syllabus (structure and contents of the textbook). For what regards the organizational syllabus, there are different terms to define the educational paths proper to the U.S. tradition and those belonging to Italian teaching of foreign languages. Given that, it is imperative to resolve the tension between the American syllabus<sup>3</sup> and the Italian *sillabo*, in order to ensure compatibility of credits. The syllabus in contemporary language courses offered in the United States is considered a sort of a contract between the teacher and the learners, an official document to be followed verbatim. The American syllabus is not only

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<sup>3</sup> The word *syllabus* in English and its seeming linguistic cousin in Italian, *sillabo*, have multiple definitions. The word syllabus was first used in English in 1656 to refer to a table of contents of a document, whereas the meaning of a document outlining the content of a course first appeared in 1889. Parkes and Harris point out that “the ambiguity about the meaning of the term does not seem to have dissipated in the subsequent centuries,” as the word “syllabus” is used in some fields to mean “a course of study” rather than a document (2002, 55).

a description of the course, but indicates student learning outcomes, course logistics, classroom climate, course description, assignments/exams, grading and course policy, teaching methods and materials, and course calendar. The term *sillabo* in Italian, on the other hand, is a list of course content and abilities that a student is required to demonstrate for each level of linguistic competence (Soffiantini 2013). Ciliberti notes that an American syllabus corresponds better with what in Italy would be called a *curricolo*, comprehensive of the high-level objectives of a course paired with a detailed description of how those objectives will be attained (Ciliberti 2012). That said, for all of its detail about policies, assignments, and grammatical-cultural topics, American syllabi for modern foreign languages largely leave out communicative functions from their description of weekly instruction<sup>4</sup>.

The Umbra Institute's updated elementary Italian language course's syllabus and the textbook *Allora* were a response to the following question: "How can one design a didactic structure that functions as a bridge between two glottodidactic traditions and that meets the needs of American students who are spending their study abroad in Perugia?" (Grandicelli 2022). The crucial first step was a curriculum development process at the macro level, prior to descending into the particulars of learning objectives and assessments. The point of departure was the analysis of the background and needs of the students, while not ignoring variables such as institutional goals (in this case, intercultural communicative competence), the total time students will have in the classroom, the (cultural/geographical) context, available resources, etc. Then and only then could work begin on the specification and sequencing of the content (Diadori, Palermo and Troncarelli 2009, 180).

As far as the context is concerned, The Umbra Institute organizes Italian language and culture classes for various types of learners, including elementary-level students, called ITAL 101: Living Perugia - Elementary Language, Culture, and Reflection. This is a course of a total of 60 hours, spread over 13 weeks (the period of the U.S. students' stay in Perugia). The second step in designing a response to the question above was the needs analysis. In order to understand learners' needs, we administered a questionnaire with the aim to ascertain what were the major factors in the attractiveness of Italian and Italy to a U.S. learner. The questionnaire was submitted in English and consisted of three main parts: the openness to diversity, the Italian program and the expectations. Students were asked to specify with a score from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) their degree of agreement or disagreement on certain issues. Apart from the high score assigned to the importance of learning Italian (see §1) students expressed a general agreement regarding the item "I am interested in learning about the many cultures that have existed in the world", with a score of 5.42. This says a lot about the profile of the U.S. learner in the study abroad context (or at least the population that chooses to study in Perugia): openness to learning about different cultures prevails and could be seen as a driver for learning a language and culture different from the L1. The responses to "I would like to join an organization that emphasizes getting to know people from different cultures,"

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<sup>4</sup> Consider, for example, the syllabi of PennState University <<https://sip.la.psu.edu/undergraduate/italian/courses/syllabi/>> last access 11/08/2023.

with a score of 5.17, support our thesis: learners who choose to stay a semester abroad are more open to discovering new cultures. In fact, the item “The real value of a college education lies in being introduced to different values” also received wide approval (5.04). So, in conclusion, it can be asserted that one of the greatest motivating factors for the study experience in Perugia is openness to new cultures. Finally, regarding students’ expectations about their time in Perugia, 33.8% placed personal growth first, 26.9% of students identified immersion in Italian culture as their primary goal, and 20% considered language a very important goal to achieve during their stay. The discovery of diversity, the chance to grow as individuals, the immersion in Italian culture, the opportunity to have an authentic experience, and the learning of a new language are all factors that certainly help enrich American students’ stay in Italy. Regarding the city, half of the informants designated “Live an authentic experience” as their primary purpose; or, as one student wrote, “A more down to earth learning of Italian culture that is not as chaotic and touristy as other major Italian cities”.

As the next step in our design process, learning objectives were defined based on the needs students identified in the questionnaire. The main objectives are related to linguistic-communicative competence and intercultural competence. This purpose is also suggested by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), which includes intercultural competence among the core elements that a member of a multicultural society should have (Spinelli 2006). Intercultural competence may help people open to diversity, but it is also useful to avoid culture shock. The approach of the syllabus is communicative: communicative functions are placed, in fact, in the first column of the course calendar and in the textbook syllabus (see Fig. 1 below, that reproduces, in English, the indications given for Week 4), to emphasize their prominent role within the teaching action. Through such functions, the student is able to accomplish the communicative tasks that characterize each week.

Figure 1 - *Example from the textbook’s syllabus (translated from Calicchio et al. 2022, 9)*

	<i>Communicative Function</i>	<i>Structure</i>	<i>Lexicon</i>
<b>WEEK 4</b>	Ask someone to recount something, recount events in the past Recount a trip or a past vacation	Some irregular past participles ( <i>aprire - aperto, bere - bevuto, fare - fatto...</i> ) Other irregular past participles ( <i>rimanere - rimasto, dire - detto, leggere-letto...</i> ) Expressions associated with the past ( <i>yesterday, the day before yesterday, last ..., ... ago this morning</i> ) Adverbs related to time ( <i>before, then, after</i> ) Preposition <i>in</i> with means of transportation	Review of the lexicon for travel, means of transportation, places of departure and arrival Pronunciation and spelling: intonations of questions “Where were you on vacation?”

In defining learning objectives, intercultural competence was an important goal to be achieved for U.S. students at The Umbra Institute. One of the primary purposes of the school's Italian course is immersion in the L2, alive and present outside the classroom, promoting learning that takes advantage of the "linguistic life" outside the classroom. For these reasons, cultural, and pragmatic aspects have a large space in the program and in the textbook. For example, learners are instructed about discussion topics to choose while interacting with Italian people (Fig. 2), and they are stimulated to compare taboos in the two cultures.

Figure 2 – *Discussion topics and taboos (translated from Calicchio et al. 2022, 200)*

#### A BIT OF ETIQUETTE

What should you do when Italian friends invite you to dinner? In Italy, when you go to dinner at someone's house, it's a customary to bring something to eat or drink: if you bring a good bottle of wine or a good dessert, you can't go wrong! And if the food isn't very good? Unfortunately, Italians are a bit touchy in the kitchen: it's better not to criticize too much; indeed, compliments are always much appreciated!

#### CULTURE: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

Getting to know new cultures can be very difficult: the customs, the traditions, and even the acceptable topics of discussion can be very different! Imagine you're having dinner with new friends. Would you ask them these questions?

1. How much did you pay for your new car?
2. How much do you make a month?
3. How old are you?
4. Go to the gym? Have you lost weight?
5. Are you married? Are you with somebody right now?
6. Do you want to have children?
7. What do your parents do for work?
8. Who did you vote for?
9. What do you want to do after college?

Unlike the United States, where people talk about money and salaries more freely, in Italy money is usually a sensitive subject: people avoid it because showing they are rich or, conversely, that they don't have a lot of money, often causes shame. Even asking explicit questions about politics can cause slight embarrassment. The acceptability of certain topics also varies according to generations: for example, people 40-50 years of age make observations on others' weight more readily than younger generations. Conversely, a younger person might ask questions about age or partners much more often than an older person.

**A curiosity:** In Italy, unlike in the United States, questions about your religious beliefs or your zodiac sign are not considered strange.

Ultimately the macro-level curriculum design we undertook consisted in reviewing the time students would be in the course and harmonizing the course calendar and the textbook's syllabus. As Fig. 3 shows, the 12 weeks of the course are preceded by

four days of full immersion, a distinctive feature of the language courses offered by The Umbra Institute.

Figure 3 – *The course calendar and the textbook's syllabus (translated from Calicchio et al. 2022, 8)*

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	Communicative Functions	Structure	Lexicon
<b>Immersion Day 1</b>	Introducing oneself, greeting someone, "survival" questions Asking the meaning of a word, " <i>Come si dice in italiano...?</i> ", ask who someone is	Alphabet, numbers, to have/to be, subject pronouns and interrogative pronouns	Afternoon: lexicon for the café (Italian <i>bar</i> ) and <i>vorrei</i>
<b>Immersion Day 2</b>	<i>How much does it cost?</i> , making requests at the supermarket (review of <i>vorrei</i> ), asking the price, knowing objects	Singular/plural, nouns, indefinite articles, to have/to be, I like...	Afternoon: lexicon for food/shopping/weights and measures, review of <i>vorrei</i> , review of numbers
<b>Immersion Day 3</b>	Names of shops, asking for objects. Description of apartments (to use there is/are)	Agreement of adjectives and nouns, definite articles, there is/are, verbs ending in <i>-are</i> and the irregular verb <i>fare</i>	Afternoon: lexicon for and information about the mall, "Where is/are...?", "Do you have...?"
<b>Immersion Day 4</b>	Going to the train station, describing the station, asking for tickets at the counter	<i>-are</i> , <i>-ere</i> , and <i>-ire</i> : three conjugations, review of numbers for the time, the 24-hour clock	Afternoon: lexicon for travel (tickets, roundtrip journeys)
<b>Week 1</b>	Describing a typical day Asking and telling time Asking and giving information about time Asking and responding to questions about everyday life Talking about one's habits	The present indicative of verbs ending in <i>-are</i> , <i>-ere</i> , and <i>-ire</i> ( <i>-isc</i> ) The present indicative (1 <sup>st</sup> person singular) of the verbs <i>fare</i> , <i>andare</i> , <i>uscire</i> , and several reflexive verbs (to wake up, to take a shower, to fall asleep...) Some simple prepositions: <i>in</i> , <i>a</i> , <i>al</i> , <i>alla</i> , <i>alle</i> , <i>all'</i> <i>Da...a</i> / <i>dalle...alle</i> (Playing with locations) <i>Amare</i> +the infinitive, modal verbs Months and seasons	<b>Lexical structure</b> Moments of the day Days of the week Actions that repeat in daily life <b>Reflection</b> Some collocations with the verb <i>fare</i>

Once we had a syllabus that corresponded to all these variables and included communicative functions, pragmatic, and sociocultural aspects we intended to teach each week, we could proceed to the design of the corresponding textbook. As we underwent this backwards design process (Fink 2013), we understood—as Balboni highlights in his work—how important it is to connect the different roles teachers can assume, that is of instructor, facilitator, and designer of the educational process, as well as of the curriculum and author of teaching materials (Balboni 2012, 51).

### 3. *From students' needs analysis to intercultural education*

While creating course contents, as a baseline, we first considered Lo Duca's Italian L2 Syllabus (Lo Duca 2006). This syllabus is based on the CEFR, and it is designed for Erasmus students, which represent a group similar to the American study abroad students in various respects. According to the CEFR, the primary goal of language teaching is the development of linguistic-communicative competence, which is divided into pragmatic competence (the ability to act effectively in different contexts), sociolinguistic competence (the ability to master the different social conditions of language use), and linguistic competence (the ability to select the most appropriate linguistic elements to realize different communicative intentions) (Council of Europe 2001).

From the other side, we also considered the U.S. standards. The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* emphasize that interaction between language and culture in teaching should be accomplished through the development of the five learning objectives: Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, Communities. The first goal to be achieved is communicative competence (Communication). The second goal is Culture, that is, in our case, knowledge and understanding of the Italian culture through readings, listening, or consultation of materials that help the U.S. learner understand the Italian worldview and values. Regarding Connections, the main purpose is to be able to connect the Italian language with other disciplines. Reaching the fourth goal (Comparison), the learner will be able to compare the new language to the L1 and to critically analyze linguistic structures and cultural content conveyed by the language. Finally, the fifth objective leads learners to participate in Italian Communities (at home and around the World).

Both documents consider culture as an essential part of teaching a foreign language. However, as we mentioned in §1, very often teaching culture is limited to knowledge-transfer, that is giving information about the target country, both in textbooks and in teaching practice. If our aim is to give students the possibility to understand, to 'live into' and value other cultures' social life, their way of living and thinking, then we should develop students' competence in culture, instead of simply increase their knowledge about culture; in other words, we should develop their intercultural competence. This assumption is shared by the *National Standards in Foreign Language Education* (1996), as well as by the CEFR and a new volume of descriptors including those for 'pluricultural competence' (Byram and Wagner 2018). The aim, according to these reference works,



is not to educate perfectly bicultural learners (as if one were two native speakers in one person), but learners being able to act as mediators (for themselves and for others) in different cultural and linguistic contexts, using their intercultural skills and attitudes. “It entails the crucial skills required for students to decenter from their taken-for-granted and unquestioned world perspectives in order to see how others see the world and «how others see us»” (Byram and Wagner 2018, 6).

In this framework intercultural competence could be defined as a combination of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that allows to understand and respect people with a different cultural background; to interact with them appropriately, effectively, and respectfully; to establish positive and constructive relationships with them; and finally, to better understand one’s own cultural affiliations (Huber and Reynolds 2014, 16-17). From a methodological point of view, it is important to stress that intercultural competence is not an automatic by-product of language teaching (see especially Engelking 2018). Rather, it is necessary to plan teaching to help students acquire and use linguistic and intercultural competence. A suitable methodological approach to reach this aim, in our view, should be connected to the concept of experiential learning and to the involvement of learners in social interactions with their immediate community.

Since we want to train our learners to use Italian effectively while interacting with the local community, we need to teach them how to use pragmatic aspects of the language, for example how to express appropriately speech acts such as greeting, apologizing, inviting, requesting, offering and proposing, accepting or declining offers (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4 – *How to express, accept or decline an offer (translated from Calicchio et al. 2022, 133)*

**INFOBOX: SOME USEFUL PHRASES**

In the previous chapters we have already seen some useful expressions for ordering and making requests, and for accepting or declining an invitation or a proposal. Let’s look at some other important phrases!

**OFFERING AND PROPOSING**

Do you want a coffee?  
Would you like a coffee?  
Wanna get a coffee?  
Should we get a coffee?  
Can I offer you a coffee?  
Can I get you a coffee?

Do you want something (to eat/drink)?  
Want something (to eat/drink)? I’m buying!

**ACCEPTING**

Yes, thanks (a lot, a million)!  
That’d be great!  
Gladly!  
It’d be a pleasure!

**DECLINING**

No, but thanks anyway.  
I don’t want one right now, thanks.  
I’m not hungry, but thanks.  
No, I’m fine, thanks.  
Maybe another time!

To communicate speech acts in L2, learners have to acquire linguistic expressions (for example, to decline an offer in Italian it is necessary to know expressions like *No, grazie* ‘no, thanks’ or *Forse un’altra volta* ‘Maybe another time’), but they also need to have some knowledge about the rules of proper social behavior, about social

perception and values attributed to certain expressions (for example, if there are any social situations, such as an invitation for dinner, where declining an offer might be considered rude if expressed in a direct way). As Kasper and Rose (2001, 2) note, “Speech communities differ in their assessment of speakers’ and hearers’ social distance and social power, their rights and obligations, and the degree of imposition involved in particular communicative acts”. So, learners of a foreign language must not only know the appropriate linguistic forms to achieve their goals using the language, but they must be aware of the sociocultural norms to speak and to behave “properly” in different communicative situations.

Pragmatic competence is, in fact, one of the core constructs of intercultural competence. Adult learners have a considerable amount of L2 pragmatic knowledge: current theory and research suggest a number of universal features in discourse and pragmatics and other aspects may be successfully transferred from the learners’ L1. Basic orientation to communicative action, such as politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) might be shared throughout communities, even though what counts as polite and how the principles of politeness are implemented in context varies across cultures. Similarly, specific communicative acts, such as greetings, requests, offers, invitations, refusal, and apologies are available in any community, however their realization varies across cultures. Research shows that speech acts can manifest differently across languages and cultures. For example, if we compare Italian, American and Australian English apology strategies (Lipson 1994, Walker 2017) we see that Italians are more sensitive to differences of status, authority, and social roles of participants, while American and Australian English egalitarian culture is reflected in avoiding displays of power through language. Thereby, in these cultures direct and generic expression of apologies is the preferred strategy independently from the social distance between interlocutors. As various studies demonstrate “many aspects of L2 pragmatics are not acquired without the benefit of instruction, or they are learned more slowly. There is thus a strong indication that instructional intervention may be facilitative to, or even necessary for, the acquisition of L2 pragmatic ability” (Kasper and Rose 2001, 8). The teaching of pragmatics requires specific methodological attention, the question of “rules” in pragmatics being rather complex (Samu 2023). Learners should be provided appropriate input, and awareness-raising and noticing activities should supplement the introduction of pragmatically relevant input in instructed L2 learning. Fig. 5a and 5b show a series of activities concerning compliments, starting with relevant examples in the target language, then stimulating intercultural reflection and concluding with practice.

Figure 5a – *Learning how to give and receive compliments*  
(translated from Calicchio et al. 2022, 177)

#### **CULTURE: WORDS TO BE NICE**

In Italy compliments are very important: they create a friendly atmosphere and they are very frequent in conversations. Italians love to compliment appearances and particular talents: for example, they make many compliments on clothing and cooking skills. Here are some expressions you can use to be kind in Italian.

- Your dress is beautiful! Where did you get it?
- Your shirt is great!
- I like your shoes!
- This dish is delicious, you're really good at cooking!
- You're a fantastic cook, ma'am!

In Italy, unlike the United States, however, people do not *accept* compliments as easily: they prefer to be modest. To compliments like the ones above you could hear responses like:

- You think so? I got it on sale!
- I think it's a bit tight, but thanks!
- I've had them for years, they're old now!
- It's my mom's recipe!
- Thank you, you're too kind!

You decide how to respond! You can thank the person and freely accept the compliment or show yourself to be more modest.

Figure 5b – *Learning how to give and receive compliments*  
(translated from Calicchio et al. 2022, 177-178)

21. What are the most common ways of playing a compliment in the USA? And how to respond to them? Do you give a lot of compliments or not? Do you accept them or do you try to appear humble?<sup>5</sup>

22. Now it's your turn! In pairs, try to put together these short dialogues: "give a compliment and respond."

- A) This dress fits you very well!  
B) Do you think so? says? In my opinion it's too baggy.

- A) Ohh, your dog is really cute!!  
B) Thank you so much, she's only five months old!

1. At the park: a girl compliments a boy on his cute dog.
2. At the gym: the coach compliments the athlete on her performance.
3. At the mall: the saleswoman compliments the customer on choosing a dress.
4. At home: the father compliments his son on his promotion at work.
5. At work: a woman compliments her colleague on the presentation she just gave.
6. At school: a girl compliments her best friend on her new boyfriend, who is cute and smart.
7. At an art exhibition: a visitor compliments the artist on her work.

<sup>5</sup> Activity 21 (Fig. 5b) is proposed in English in the textbook since a fruitful cross-cultural comparison and discussion between learners would require a language competence higher than elementary level.

#### *4. Engagement and reflection during the semester abroad*

Participation in community activities and the relationships established between experts and trainees, i.e., legitimized peripheral learners, to use the term introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991), produces a much more effective learning than the mere transmission of abstract and decontextualized knowledge. According to the theory developed by Lave and Wenger, learning is a process strongly characterized by the social relationship between the learner and the surrounding world; it is a social process in which knowledge is co-constructed in a specific social and physical context. Situated activity allows learners to be involved in sociocultural practices, to interact and identify with members of the local community. Interaction is a key concept in the definition of the community of practice, and it is interaction and cooperation among members that make such a context suitable for generating learning.

One possible way of realizing social learning is through Community Based Learning (CBL) or Service Learning<sup>6</sup>. This approach has been growing in popularity since the 1990s and throughout the United States many third level institutions have adopted this form as a central element of their curriculum. CBL involves students partaking in activities in their communities which meet identified needs of local groups as part of their credit-bearing university courses. Language learning initially lagged behind other subjects in developing CBL courses, and it is still an innovative approach under development (Rauschert and Byram 2018), even if in the United States there is now a widespread use, particularly in Spanish language tuition (O'Connor 2012). Examples of these courses include students serving as conversation partners, volunteering as interpreters at local hospitals, schools, or social service agencies; tutoring or mentoring Spanish-speaking children and adolescents and organizing after-school programs. Students prepare for the CBL placements in class, take part in activities in the community and reflect on the experience and how it might have enhanced their language, cultural and social skills. These experiences can all contribute to significant learning outcomes as long as they include critical reflection, an essential component of CBL (Clifford and Reisinger 2018, 62ff.).

Studying abroad provides an area rich with possibilities for interaction with and learning from the community. Even if this pedagogical approach can be logistically more time-consuming than a simple 'chalk and talk' class, CBL in a foreign-language curriculum has enormous benefits, as well as some risks to be

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In accordance with Eddy (2022, 47), we believe that cultural comparisons, explanations, and reflections should not be postponed until learners can express them properly using the target language. They can be implicitly learned as a result of tasks designed to observe or experience language and culture or, in some cases, they can be explicitly faced using the L1.

<sup>6</sup> Apart from Community Based Learning (CBL), other terms like Service Learning, Education-Based Community Service, Community Based Service, Community Service Learning are also used with the first being widely diffused, especially in the literature.

faced by educators<sup>7</sup>. There is much evidence of how the approach improves not just students' language skills, but also their cultural acquisition (Hellebrandt, Arries and Varona 2003). Thanks to the practical experience, students can learn how to act efficiently in real life contexts, and they can identify their own linguistic and intercultural potentials and limits.

The aim of the textbook *Allora* is to immerse students not only in the study of the Italian language but also in the new host city and its culture. Several activities create spaces for intercultural learning not only through traditional classroom activities, but also in off-campus sites through tasks that engage students in a process of cultural exploration and self-reflection. As Byram states (2021, 109-110), some attitudes can only develop in fieldwork or independent learning locations and some skills depend on the opportunity for real-time interaction with native speakers. In the textbook the full immersion week is characterized by the alternation of in class and out-of-class activities. The activities of the immersion week (see Fig. 3) directly involve students, who receive (in addition to the first useful linguistic tools) practical information about the city, grocery stores, shops, leisure activities, and the public transportation system. After the morning and early afternoon lessons the students, accompanied by their teachers, gain direct experience of what was previously studied in class. Therefore, they are able, from the very first days, to place orders at the bar, to shop at the grocery stores, and to buy a ticket at the train station. To further bring students closer to the city, the dialogues in the book, the mock shopping lists, and exercises involving maps and directions (to give just a few examples) all are set in Perugia. The photographs used in the textbook are overwhelmingly drawn from the city and cultural references (e.g., to the gastronomic tradition) are linked to the municipality and the surrounding region. So, students feel more at ease outside the classroom finding daily references of their study abroad experience in the book.

CBL approach includes several kinds of activities, going from simple out-of-class activities to volunteer work. Apart from the full immersion week, the Italian language program of The Umbra Institute offers various co-curricular activities within the course syllabus, for example language tandem meet-ups with local students or "ViviPerugia activities", which are weekly assignments that encourage students to explore the city using Italian. These assignments are complementary to the book and nudge students to continue to discover the city and to practice the language. These activities aim at grounding the textbook in the local territory and encouraging students to interact with the physical spaces of the city as well as with its inhabitants. Throughout the years several socially engaging initiatives have been tested, such as collaboration in a community garden managed by The Umbra Institute, with an introductory Italian class focusing on special vocabulary preparing students to interact with local people.

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<sup>7</sup> Students who participate in CBL abroad often wrestle with culture shock, reverse culture shock, and identity construction.

Working in the community garden together with local native speakers is a good example of what Lave and Wenger (1991) call 'situated learning', applicable also to the acquisition of the L2 used to interact. Other similar projects could be realized in connection with the topics of the weekly program to ensure hands-on education in which learners take part in activities targeted toward community needs while using Italian language.

### *5. Evaluating the coursebook and the study abroad experience*

One of the main strengths of The Umbra Institute is the possibility the study Italian language and culture during the period of study abroad according to the principles of community engagement. The Institute's goal is to offer American students not only an academic experience, but also an immersive stay in the reality and community that hosts them. If language educators collaborate to develop their students' skills and attitudes—the 'knowing how' or 'can do' approach—related to intercultural competence, rather than promoting 'knowledge about' the Italian culture, they facilitate their students' development of skills which are relevant to every aspect of their lives.

The final step of curriculum design is the evaluation process to determine whether instruction achieves the desired learning outcomes. The American syllabus is usually characterized by a rigid and schematic presentation of the evaluation criteria, learning outcomes and grading policy. The textbook *Allora* fulfills the requirements of the American institutions as far as summative assessments are concerned. For example, comprehensive reviews before midterm and final exams are included in the coursebook's syllabus. However, as suggested in the CEFR, language programs should empower learners to take charge of their own learning and self-evaluation might be a key issue in this process. Self-evaluation grids are an effective way to help learners to recognize some aspects of their learning process, to engage in reflective practice and, at the same time, they give useful information about the effectiveness of the instruction. Furthermore, they may enhance awareness about learning outcomes and gaps to be filled in. As a possible improvement of the textbook, self-evaluation questionnaires could be added at the end of each week, listing relevant learning objectives and other educational goals established by the Institution. Questions could be proposed directly in English to allow full comprehension for elementary level learners. Table 1 shows an example of self-evaluation grid for Week 2 with 'leisure' as its central topic.



Table 1 – Self-evaluation grid for Week 2 (based on Grandicelli 2022, 94-95)

<p><i>What did I improve in my Italian this week?</i></p> <p>Think about what you studied this week during the Italian classes (what you can do with Italian, topics covered, new words learned, grammar...) and reflect on your improvements and topics you still need to work on.</p> <p>Specify your level of agreement about these few sentences: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Disagree a little bit; (4) Agree a little bit; (5) Agree; (6) Strongly agree.</p>						
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I am able to talk about my interests in my free time.						
2. I can correctly use the verb <i>sapere</i> 'to know' to explain what I can do and what I can't do.						
3. I can correctly use the verb <i>volere</i> 'to want' to express what I want and what I don't want.						
4. I am able to order something at the bar in Italian.						
5. I am able to ask for the bill in Italian.						
6. I know the names of the months and seasons in Italian.						
7. I know the names of leisure activities in Italian.						
8. I am able to talk about sports in Italian.						
9. I know music genres and musical instruments in Italian.						
10. I know the most common leisure places in Italian.						
11. I am able to pronounce, spell and write these kinds of words: <i>cappuccino, caffè, prosciutto, sciare, cornetto</i> .						
12. I am able to recognize and reproduce the intonation of a request in Italian.						
13. I am able to recognize and reproduce the intonation of a question in Italian.						
14. During this week, I felt more curious about discovering Italian culture.						
15. During this week, I felt more involved in sharing my culture with the Italian one.						
16. During this week, I felt more involved in the city life.						

The first 13 questions are concerned with general communicative competence, including pragmatic (Q1, 4-5), grammatical (Q2-3), lexical (Q6-10), and phonological (Q11-13) competences. Questions reflect the main approach of the textbook emphasizing the importance of communicative functions over formal aspects of language (for ex. "I can correctly use the verb *sapere* to explain what I can do and what I can't do"). Question 15 ("During this week, I felt more involved in sharing

my culture with the Italian one”) is referred to learners’ intercultural competence, while the last question (“During this week, I felt more involved in the city life”) reflects the aim of making learners live an immersive experience in the local community of Perugia. Learning Italian is a means to discover the city’s traditions and culture and CBL activities are planned to facilitate this process. Integrating the evaluation process with this kind of reflection could emphasize the Institution’s engagement to answer learners’ needs issued from the analysis described above (§2): learning Italian language and using it to discover a new culture and a new system of values, to live an authentic experience, becoming culturally more open and growing as an individual. Thanks to self-reflection students may become more aware about the “transformative” effect of their study abroad experience (Davidson et al. 2021) and realize fully the aims of the course they attend, named, not accidentally, “Living Perugia – Elementary Language, Culture, and Reflection”.

Summing up, the elementary Italian language program and the correspondent textbook *Allora* attempt to bridge two language teaching traditions, offering a course calendar similar to a classic U.S. syllabus but at the same time responding to the language educational goals appropriate to the European tradition. Learning objectives are based on the needs and interests of U.S. learners in Perugia: to immerse themselves as much as possible in the local context and community, to better understand local culture and worldview while learning Italian language. As noted by Abbott and Lear, CSL in second-language programs challenges students to improve language skills and, at the same time, increase their cultural competence (2009, 322). To reach this goal, the classroom becomes less the principal location of learning and more an auxiliary location to prepare learners to real-life experiences. Such experiences should consistently be accompanied by structured reflective activities, for example through the use of self-assessment grids, as previously illustrated. Through reflection students can interpret their lived experiences and make a deeper sense of them. Students then come to value language education as education for developing their identities rather than as the learning of a code which can only be used in some restricted environments.

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ANNALISA ZANOLA

## Oral Proficiency in *English for Scientific and Professional Purposes* (ESPP): new paradigms in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to Italian Professionals

### *Abstract*

The teaching and learning of oral English to adults who require excellent fluency for professional or study purposes deserve special, ever-increasing attention in consideration of the use of this language on a global scale within the domains of work and research, as well as in everyday practice.

The contribution endeavours to provide a concise yet sufficiently comprehensive and exhaustive synopsis of some of the most scientifically established theories and practices on the subject of teaching oral English to non-native adults. The study of the segmental and suprasegmental features of the language, presented in an English-Italian contrastive perspective, as well as the practice of public speaking, aims to outline the distinctive characteristics of a “grammar of oral” that is founded on an in-depth analysis of the soundscape of the language investigated.

### *Keywords*

ESPP, Oral English, English Phonetics, English Pronunciation, English Prosody, Public Speaking

### *1. Introducing ESPP*

Acronyms such as EAP (English for Academic Purposes), EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes), ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes), ESP (English for Special Purposes), and ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) are widely recognized within the field of applied linguistics, particularly among scholars engaged in the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign languages. However, there are more and more compelling arguments for the introduction of a new framework: ESPP (English for Scientific and Professional Purposes), advocating a full integration both of pedagogical practices and a significant area of academic inquiry (Zanola 2023).

The conceptualization of ESPP arises from the need to enhance adult learners' proficiency in English, not only in terms of linguistic competence but also pragmatic functionality. This is particularly critical in the context of today's increasingly globalized, multilingual, and multicultural professional environments (Lockwood



2019). Unlike younger learners, adult professionals – whether in the theoretical, or natural or social sciences or the humanities – are often required to engage in high-level discussions, present complex arguments, and share their expertise with colleagues, clients, or specialized audiences. Consequently, the primary challenges for these learners lie in ensuring the quality of their communication, understanding the communicative context, and selecting the appropriate register. Furthermore, when making decisions regarding lexico-grammatical choices, they must account for factors such as communicative intent, audience, and the specific context of their interactions. It is common for learners to be acutely aware that their linguistic abilities can have direct implications for their professional performance and, by extension, their career trajectories.

Based on the above, ESPP is posited as an emerging field within English language and linguistics, with a focus on the effectiveness and efficiency with which both native and non-native speakers use English in professional settings. In the following paragraphs, the development of this research area is advocated, both within academic circles and beyond, with particular attention to an audience of Italian adult learners, focused on their future professional achievements.

It is suggested that this development could serve as a corrective to the long-standing widespread tradition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The necessity for updating and strengthening the ESP tradition is twofold: firstly, to facilitate learners' linguistic development, and secondly, to facilitate their personal and professional growth. Despite the considerable demand for English proficiency across a variety of professional domains, and the existence of a substantial body of academic literature on the subject, there remains a distinct lack of comprehensive answers to the specific communicative needs – both written and oral – that arise in professional contexts where English functions as a second or foreign language. In the following pages, the oral skills required for ESPP will be described, beginning with the foundational concepts of phonetics and phonology. The complexities involved in teaching and learning pronunciation and prosody will be also explored. The contribution will conclude by providing an analysis of public speaking within both academic and professional settings, emphasizing the intercultural, personal, and contextual elements that can impact the effectiveness – or lack thereof – of presenting in English, extensively drawn on deep expertise and practical experience in the areas of oral communication and public speaking in professional environments.

## *2. Oral proficiency in ESPP*

It is an established fact that oral communication has become a significant aspect of scientific and professional activities, both in person (e.g. conferences, debates, meetings) and remotely, thanks to the numerous tools available to the public in today's digital age. It is a less commonly acknowledged fact, even among language teachers, that oral proficiency displays distinctive characteristics that distinctly differentiate it from written text proficiency. In numerous instances, the 'grammar of

oral English' has been contrasted with the 'grammar of written English' (Balboni 1998; Freddi 1994).

The distinguishing features of this phenomenon are evident in two key aspects: firstly, in the more evident facets of orality, such as the pronunciation of phonemes and prosody (rhythm, accent, intonation); and secondly, in the domain of textuality. Oral professional communication in English is widespread throughout the international community and characterised by a significant variety in users and speakers. In the future, it seems that both native and non-native English speakers will pursue clear, comprehensible and effective communication in the scientific field of their studies and research. Such occasions will address just as many native and non-native English speakers who will be strongly motivated to receive and assimilate clear, comprehensible and effective content. After all, nowadays it would be anachronistic for a professional using English to wonder whether the British or American English pronunciation would be relevant for their performance (Jenkins 2003, 125).

In other words, the matter of the effectiveness of oral communication requires a preliminary assessment of what could be considered 'clear, comprehensible and effective' for a generally international audience. Such an audience also extends to the public of recipients of much of the current international scientific and/or professional communication in English.

## 2.1 Listening and speaking in ESPP

Oral communication in English within international professional contexts lends itself to many theoretical and applicative considerations in the intersecting area between research in and teaching both specialised languages and applied phonetics and phonology.

Decades have passed since the journal *System* forcefully sustained how important pronunciation should be in language training in general. In particular, Taylor (1991, 425), in his contribution to a special issue dedicated to this topic, asked important questions on the purpose of teaching the pronunciation of English as a means of global communication. The implicit presupposition of teaching has always been that learners should be 'intelligible'. Nevertheless, Taylor was the first to ask to whom they should be intelligible and if that means that there are criteria of universal intelligibility. Most of the work that has been carried out to date in foreign and/or second language teaching assumed that such intelligibility was in reference to a native speaker. However, if English no longer belongs to native speakers, and if the latter are no longer involved in many transactions in English, perhaps such an assumption is no longer valid. In a similar context, it could be useful to teach native speakers how to understand non-native speakers.

The paradox outlined by Taylor revealed to be true in certain cases. Indeed, understanding non-native speakers seems to be problematic even for native speakers, as testified by Lindsey's work (2019), which is dedicated to the most recent trends in terms of *received pronunciation*. Nevertheless, one must not forget that the aim of teaching and learning how to speak well is not just that of merely to make it easier

for a future communicator to be understood. Therefore, non-native speakers must continue to understand native speakers. An important step in this direction consists in ‘tuning into’ the sounds and rhythms of a language that has been so hastily exploited, used and abused whereas it should be listened to, loved and treated with patience, concentration and true awareness of its surprising internationality.

For a long time, the literature on EFL has repeatedly insisted on carefully planned oral training. Textbooks have dedicated increasingly rich and varied sections to enhancing oral comprehension and productions skills. In the late 1990’s, Italian textbooks attempted to give form to *oral grammar* (revised in the 2000s in Huart 2010), as opposed to written grammar (Balboni 1998; Freddi 1994). Despite this enforcement of oral skills in English language courses, the practice and study of pronunciation remain marginal, as if they were an afterthought of language training that were limited to drills, minimal pairs and repetition exercises. It also seems that, in honing one’s learning of oral language, the phonetic and phonological elements of a foreign language do not require the same slow and laboured acquisition process that is involved in mastering morphology, syntax, vocabulary, language functions and communicative acts. In contrast, linguists have been underlining for a long time that oral skills must be the priority in planning the annual teaching programme, for ‘it is fundamental to start from speaking. It is necessary to teach proper pronunciation – in particular, the student must be accustomed to recognising and reproducing intonation and rhythm’ (translated from Gobber 2011, 63).

Teaching and learning pronunciation present their own peculiar difficulties. As opposed to syntactic structures, which may be reordered and taught/learned in progression ranging from simple to complex, and vocabulary, which may be categorised based on thematic areas, frequency lists, and areas of interest, the phonetic and phonological aspects of a language cannot be grouped according to any of the above criteria. All such criteria could potentially be present starting from the first lesson without any of them having any priority over the others. It is the responsibility of the instructor to systematically address phonetic reflections (at the segmental and suprasegmental levels) in relation to linguistic considerations throughout the standard training curriculum. The acquisition of pronunciation must invariably be pursued at two distinct levels:

1. at a segmental level, by practicing vowels, diphthongs, triphthongs and consonants, while paying special attention to oppositions that are significant in English but probably absent in the foreign language;
2. at a suprasegmental level, by noting: *a*) the typical phenomena of *continuous speech* in English (assimilations, deletions, weakening, etc.). They often interfere with the sound chain according to codified rules and ‘coordinate’ single phonemes during the creation of the soundscape of this language<sup>1</sup>; *b*)

<sup>1</sup> We hereby translate the expression ‘soundscape’ from the French *paysage sonore* to refer to the mental representation that each person has of a language. The expression was imported by Lhote (1995, 21) from *The New Soundscape* by the Canadian Schafer who, in a publication dated 1979, presented a reflection on the role assumed by people within the sound environment that surrounds them.

the specific role of intonation in oral production in English; *c*) the peculiarity of stress rhythms of English compared to other languages.

It is therefore urgent to take stock of the main difficulties that a non-native speaker or listener will encounter in areas connected to international oral communication (lessons, conferences, debates, dialogues and meetings in academic or professional contexts). The persistent weaknesses in the apparatus of oral English training in multiple international professional areas have often been highlighted by those who, even after years of continuous language studies, complain of failures in their performance.

## 2.2 The success factors of a performance

There are numerous factors that contribute to the success of a performance in oral English. Among the best known, at least six may be indicated (German 2017; Grice *et al.* 2019; Osborn and Osborn 2006; Osborn *et al.* 2007):

1. The ability to use a direct style with the interlocutor;
2. The speaker's adjustment to the audience's behavioural and socio-cultural habits;
3. The degree of effectiveness of the start of an oral communicative act (be it a trivial conversation or a presentation in public), or the positive impact of the speaker on the listener;
4. The strong contents and excellent quality of the performance;
5. The gestural element;
6. The perfect balance between *verbal delivery* and *verbal style*, or in other words the harmony between a correct and cohesive performance and a clear and effective expository style.

Our considerations will start from this last factor and will focus on a non-native speaker's conditions when they will have to use English in front of an international audience. Indeed, for a non-native speaker, four elements are pivotal in determining a successful performance:

- a) *a high degree of motivation*. A speaker's strong motivation to fully understand and make a native English interlocutor completely understand their communicative intentions and thoughts could lead the speaker to gradually and naturally assimilate the native's model.
- b) *experience in using the non-native language for professional communication*. A consistent number of stimuli, contexts and diverse communicative situations in a speaker's professional environment enhances their familiarity with a language whose sounds are unfamiliar.
- c) *the subject's strong natural disposition*. Regardless of the speaker's communicative experience, age and level of schooling and/or education, there are ways and times for personal reactions to the assimilation of new notions and adaption to the new sounds and melodies of spoken language.

- d) *the subject's 'selective' exposure to the target language*. In addition to motivation and experience, the quality of communicative experiences in extra-professional contexts may also reveal itself as a conditioning element in the search of a satisfactory pronunciation model. Those who have personally experienced the failure of a communicative interaction due to 'bad pronunciation' or lack of reception of unfamiliar sounds and intonations are now compelled to gain awareness of the importance and urgency of approaching a suitable model.

In conclusion, while a non-native English speaker can successfully communicate by maintaining the sound habits of their language, their communicative intentions will be frustrated if their speech is interrupted by another speaker with a different linguistic background who uses the English sound system. In most cases, the non-native speaker's lack of knowledge of English sounds will result in the exchange's success only if the context helps the interlocutors.

### 2.3 The failure factors of a performance

In international professional contexts, the non-native speaker sometimes complains of a performance's failure due to difficulties in understanding the interlocutor. Suffice it to think, of the awkwardness that occurs during a conference when the question of a native speaker in the audience is not fully understood by the non-native presenter. Such inconveniences in listening comprehension may be determined by an unfamiliar linguistic variant, the speed of the speech, or lack of familiarity with the accentual, rather than a syllabic, rhythm that characterises the English language. When reflecting on these factors, it is important to remember that there are always:

- a) phonemes that are present in one language and absent in another;
- b) phonetic oppositions that are phonologically/functionally relevant in one language and redundant (phonologically/functionally not relevant) in another.

As a result, a non-native speaker using the English language will use phonemes that are unfamiliar because they are rare or totally absent in their native language. Therefore, even a non-native English speaker with a high level of proficiency in the language may still encounter difficulties when it comes to the sounds of English for at least three reasons. Firstly, the communicative effectiveness of the speakers has never been compromised despite errors in pronunciation. Consequently, the speakers' interest in or willingness to include unfamiliar English sounds and rhythms into their speech has never been triggered. Secondly, due to the extensive experience in written English and the ability to visualise certain words, as opposed to hearing or uttering them, the speaker tends to read and pronounce the word in accordance with the automatisms in oral production that are characteristic of their native language. Thirdly, despite the acquisition of phonetic theory, the speaker may experi-

ence a sense of foolishness or a lack of spontaneity if they were to genuinely implement the model of the native speaker.

None of these reasons are so serious as to constitute a true obstacle in optimising a spoken communicative exchange in English. Once again, the combination of theory and practice is the best solution. The mere imitation of any model is not a guarantee of lasting results. The phonemes and intonation units that are typically considered to be the most challenging are often less frequently encountered in both use and perception. Indeed, a sound that is perceived as anomalous or unusual may be consciously refused or misinterpreted to a lesser or greater extent. The training of 'sound imagery' (Lhote 1995, 33; Zanolà 1999, 18) to new phonemes and phonological oppositions necessitates a considerable investment of time and remains a gradual and delicate process.

#### 2.4 The limit of acceptability

Regarding oral production, there are limits to the extent to which the performance in English of a non-native speaker may be considered more or less acceptable. In accordance with the parameters outlined by Gimson (1978, elaborated by Cruttenden 1994), the minimum degree of acceptability at which a non-native speaker is able to comprehend a given text is as follows:

- a) understand a native speaker in any authentic communicative context;
- b) communicate with a native speaker in a manner that is both appropriate and accurate.

For this to occur, it is necessary for the non-native speaker to dispose of:

1. the twenty vocoids (twelve monophthongs and eight diphthongs) present in standard English;
2. clarity regarding the distinction between minimal oppositions that are significant in the English language (primarily the long-short vowel opposition).
3. twenty-four contoids, some of which may be acoustically similar, but not identical, to their non-native counterparts (for example, /p/, /t/, /k/ sounds that are aspirated in accented syllables; /t/, /d/ as alveolar rather than dental sounds; post-alveolar /r/);
4. familiarity with common phenomena of elision and assimilation;
5. familiarity with the accents, pauses and intonation of spontaneous spoken language.

#### 2.5 Model and models of pronunciation

Non-native speakers of English are aware that their pronunciation tends to imitate an established model. In the context of international communication, such a model should be as 'careful and colloquial' (as phrased in Cruttenden 1994, 271) as possible. Non-native speakers are advised to aspire to precise and comprehensive oral production, with a focus on the full range of possible variants, particularly those that are characteristic of everyday conversation.



The existence of a universally applicable English language that encompasses the numerous variants spoken around the world is both unrealistic and unfeasible. After all, it is highly improbable that any English speaker would acknowledge a variant that only partially recalls their own (Crystal 1997; McArthur 1998). For many years, the teaching of oral English has been anchored to one of the many extant models that most closely represented the British or American pronunciation. In principle, such a model was required to:

- a) achieve maximum geographical and social spread;
- b) be readily and comprehensively intelligible to all individuals;
- c) serve as the most accessible point of reference for any student in all textbooks;
- d) be reproduced and achieved in the majority of texts intended for listening, or for the process of reproduction.

For years, the undisputed ideal candidate for this sort of model has been the British *Received Pronunciation* (RP), followed by *BBC English* and *General English* (Zanola 2000, 5). However, it seems that these models are no longer valid, as English is no longer a foreign language (FL) but rather a common Second Language (L2), especially for professional and academic purposes (Vinogradova and Shin 2021). This is particularly true for RP considering that the native speakers of such a variation make up for less than 3% of the British population (Trudgill 2001).

In view of the increasing spread of global and international English (Zanola 2012), the RP variant seems to be one of the most complicated for native speakers for various reasons (Jenkins 2003, 125): the significant number of diphthongs, the non-rhotic 'r', the complex rules on accent, the extensive use of weak forms. Further factors on an international level include the widespread of American models of pronunciation and many speakers' attachment to the accent of their native language precisely to distinguish themselves from native speakers.

## 2.6 A proposal for an EIL pronunciation

Three alternatives to the combination of *Received Pronunciation* and *General American* have been devised, in the following order: the approach of phonetician Gimson; the system developed by pronunciation expert Jenner; and the method devised by linguist Jenkins.

1. *Gimson's proposal*: An article dated 1978, *Towards an international pronunciation of English*, theorised an artificial phonological model capable of reducing the number of phonemes of the English language from 44 to 29. A *Rudimentary International Pronunciation (RIP)* was conceived for the category of *English as an International Language* (EIL) speakers of the time who needed to speak English in relatively predictable and circumscribed professional situations.
2. *Jenner's proposal*: The hypothesis presented by Jenner in the 1997 article *International English: an alternative view* was the only alternative to Gibson's



twenty years later. Jenner's hypothesis was based on the idea that there is one shared phonological system among all the speakers of English in the world. International English is therefore simply the common ground of the phonological elements found in all variants of pronunciation. Such an approach has the advantage of representing almost all variants without identifying its origin but it also presents significant disadvantages, first and foremost that of needing an imposing corpus of data and the enormous difficulty of identifying suitable criteria for analysing this corpus.

3. *Jenkins' proposal* (2002; 2003): In her *Lingua Franca Core (LFC)* model, the Londoner scholar considered the possible combination of an artificial approach like Gibson's and an empirical approach like Jenner's. It therefore represented a taxonomy of fundamental or, vice versa, accessory elements, to ensure the mutual comprehension of two speakers of international English. Whilst the study is undoubtedly interesting and useful, the inclusion of data such as rhythm, accents and weak forms among the non-core features is not considered to be a viable proposition. Indeed, research has demonstrated that while such prosodic elements may be considered secondary in ensuring the effectiveness of oral production, they are often essential for oral comprehension.

Despite the partial validity of each of the three models, knowledge of the segmental and suprasegmental elements of the English language is the *conditio sine qua non* of a conscious development of oral comprehension skills. The following paragraphs will thus centre on the fundamental components of theoretical and applied phonetics of the English language, as perceived from the contrastive perspective of a non-native English speaker, specifically Italian.

### 2.6.1 Segmental features

Regardless of the approach that is adopted for the study and practice of pronunciation, it is essential to be aware of the sound system that characterises it. Every language is made up of a limited number of phonemes that native speakers are able to identify with ease upon hearing and reproduce with minimal difficulty. However, different languages are distinguished by the number and nature of single phonemes. Consequently, the following possibilities may emerge:

- a) phonemes are present in one language but absent in another;
- b) phonetic oppositions that hold significance in one language are not significant in another.

The training and practice of oral English must include considerations about phonetics in relation to both aspects starting from the first lessons. A non-native speaker who seeks to learn English must be aware that there are 'new' phonemes that have never been used in the sound system of their native language. Therefore, they must be highlighted with care from the very beginning and practiced until they become familiar.

Today it seems there are no longer any 'absolute' or 'real beginners' of English because anyone can claim to have even a minimum knowledge of English. After all, many anglicisms have entered other languages and the teaching of English has spread enormously. Moreover, in teaching practice even an 'advanced student of English' (where 'advanced' refers to a student who is well versed in morphology, syntax and vocabulary) may be considered a beginner in a course in English phonetics. As previously mentioned, there are several underlying causes of this phenomenon. The following are some of the main reasons, which will now be outlined in more detail:

- a) the communication of a learner in this situation has never been compromised up until now despite their errors in pronunciation; as a result, the interest in or desire to insert unfamiliar English sounds into their repertoire has never been triggered;
- b) in the study curriculum of an English learner, writing has had a prominent role. It has been demonstrated that most errors in pronunciation occur after the learner has seen the word in writing (Al-Nabhani and Ranjbaran Madiseh 2025). That leads them to read, and therefore to pronounce the word in accordance with the automatisms of their oral production;
- c) although the learner has a passive knowledge of English phonemes, they refuse to apply such knowledge because they believe it would be unnatural or ridiculous;
- d) there are physiological-articulatory problems that impede the learner from pronouncing certain sounds (this rarely occurs and has usually already been reported in their native language).

### 2.6.2 'New' phonemes

There are numerous sources that provide definitions on the segmental features of the English language and range from handbooks on general phonetics (Canepari 1979; Malmberg 1974), to those on English phonetics (Gagliardi 1991; Porcelli and Hotimsky 2001), to dictionaries of applied linguistics (Bright 1992; Crystal 2010). For learners, the following elements are of particular importance:

- a) Descriptions;
- b) Initiating the learning process with their current level of proficiency, with a focus on the specific phonemes of the English language that are not yet familiar and therefore appear novel.

Good performance cannot be achieved through imitation alone. It must accompany the descriptive phase, as one supports the other. Mere imitation cannot ensure lasting results because the learner must understand *how* the production of a new sound occurs; realise that the apparent novelty of the sound is due to the fact that their phonatory apparatus has had to reproduce other sounds but not that one; become aware of the mobility of their apparatus and its extraor-

dinary ability to adapt to all phonemes like a musical instrument that adapts to any note.

Each time, it will be the trainer's task to point out to the non-native speakers which English phonemes they may not be familiar with. This must be accompanied with examples of common monosyllabic vowels, such as:

- a) *cat* /kæt/ often incorrectly reduced to the /ɛ/ of *bène*;
- b) *big* /bɪg/, which tends to be pronounced with the /i/ of *vino*;
- c) *pub* /pʌb/, commonly pronounced with the /a/ of *casa*;
- d) *look* /lʊk/, conveyed with the /u/ of *uva*,

or in the case of common diphthongs like:

- a) the diphthong /əʊ/ of *no*, *don't*, *won't*, too often assimilated with the open phoneme /o/ of *porta* or the diphthong /ou/;
- b) the diphthong /eə/ of *chair*, reduced to the single phoneme /ɛ/ of the Italian *bène*,

or, finally, with consonant sounds that are frequent in English but not in Italian like those which correspond to the underlined graphemes of *think*, *that*, *road*, *hotel*.

It is also necessary to underline that the sounds that are supposedly 'difficult' for an Italian/non-native speaker include not only those that are completely 'new', but also those that are perceived as closer to familiar sounds. The most obvious example is that of the diphthong /əʊ/: Italian speakers often struggle to realise that the grapheme <o> of words like *so*, *home*, *go*, *don't* or even simple the exclamation *oh!* is related to a diphthong.

### 2.6.3 Relevant oppositions

From the very beginning, English teaching must dedicate time to identifying phonological oppositions that are in the target language but absent in the learner's native language. A Japanese learner, as opposed to an Italian learner for instance, does not distinguish the lateral /l/ from the vibrating /r/, nor do they recognise the voiceless consonants /p/ of the voiced plosive /b/. This is so problematic for them that the well-known and almost globally used *I love you* could be pronounced as *I rub you*.

The English language presents significant oppositions that an Italian/non-native speaker cannot decode as such. However, if the learner is not aware of the opposition that distinguishes the lexemes *law* and *low*, or *meal* and *mill*, or even *marry* and *merry*, it will be difficult for them to perform such sounds correctly. Practising phonetic oppositions is important, and trainers can easily encourage them in learners by starting with oral drills and then moving on to transitioning from oral to written production. Italian learners often struggle to distinguish the following oppositions when completing dictation or listening comprehension exercises (adapted from O'Connor and Fletcher, 1989):

- a) /æ/ ~ /e/ opposition

*You have been using my pan/pen, haven't you?*

*He lost his bat/bet.*

*We heard the cattle/kettle from a long way away.*

## b) /i:/ ~ /ɪ/ opposition

*The peach/pitch was bad.*

*The children were badly beaten/bitten.*

*Did you feel/fill it?*

## c) /ʊ/ ~ /ɔ:/ opposition

*They couldn't find the fox/forks.*

*The cod/cord isn't very good. The pot/port was very old.*

## d) /ɔ:/ ~ /əʊ/ opposition

*The hole/hall is enormous.*

*I think your bowl/ball is in the kitchen.*

*We're going to the show/shore next week.*

## e) /s/ ~ /z/ opposition

*The price/prize was wonderful.*

*Be careful, don't sip/zip too fast.*

*He only has a few pence/pens left.*

## f) /n/ ~ /ŋ/ opposition

*She's a terrible sinner/singer.*

*He ran/rang home.*

*I think they will ban/bang it.*

Listening skills are the fundamental means of honing the learner's sensitivity to such oppositions. Through careful listening, learners can:

- a) hear the differences between individual phonemes first, and then those between English and Italian phonemes;
- b) recall sounds of the English language that have been heard but not yet assimilated;
- c) compare the use of the same phonemes within multiple words they have heard.

We have already underlined how the phonemes that are identified as 'most difficult' are very often simply those that seem to be less familiar for the learner's listening and use. Learners' mistakes reveal that there is no easier labial sound than a velar sound, not a more difficult long vowel than a short vowel, or a consonant that is easier to pronounce than a vowel. The true problem is that speakers generally do not want to change their 'phonetic habits'. A sound that is perceived as anomalous or unusual could be rejected or misunderstood.

To avoid this, after practising listening comprehension, it is important to spend time working on reproducing sounds slowly and patiently. At the beginning, the learner may not be able to reproduce the sound perfectly because the centre of phonetic control, which is responsible for the movements of the phonetic apparatus,

is subjected to new stimuli and must therefore activate unfamiliar mechanisms. Making one's soundscape accustomed to new phonemes and phonological oppositions is a gradual, delicate process that certainly cannot be underestimated.

### 3. *The pronunciation course*

Any 'poor pronunciation' of English is due to a deviation from the standard pronunciation. This deviation contains information about the speaker's native language and their phonetic habits. This is particularly evident when pronouncing proper and place names, which speakers tend to pronounce in a way that is closest to the soundscape of their native language. An example of this is the Spanish name *Juan*. The entry of *Juan* in the *English Pronouncing Dictionary* of Jones (1991) reports as follows: «*Juan* /hwɑːn/, as if Spanish /dʒuːən/, US /hwæn/». The dictionary entry points out the fact that, while recognising the correct pronunciation of the name *Juan*, a speaker of English will tend to avoid pronouncing the unfamiliar velar /χ/ and substitute it with the aspirated /h/ or the fricative /dʒ/ that they are used to. The same name may therefore lead to the variations /ʒuan/ in French, /dʒuan/ in Italian, /yuan/ in Swedish, just to name a few.

In order to plan the teaching of spoken English to foreigners, it is necessary to have a preliminary understanding of the phonetics and phonology of the foreign. Rather than offering a course in English pronunciation, it would be more appropriate to offer a course in English pronunciation for native speakers of a certain language. These courses should include:

- a) a list of sounds that will be identified as 'new';
- b) a list of phonological oppositions in English;
- c) support in the form of registered, transcribed or printed material created specifically for the course, or carefully selected from existing handbooks, to practise listening to and producing 'new' sounds and significant oppositions.

#### 3.1 Suprasegmental traits

The theoretical study of English intonation has endured very intense development in history. From the end of the XVI century to the present day the literature on the topic has multiplied and created the premises, and often the basis, for the most recent studies on phonetics and applied linguistics (Zanola 2002; 2004). Now, we can sustain that research on the acquisition of intonation in language learning and on intonation as a universal linguistic feature, along with the volume of studies carried out on all levels by the various schools of theoretical and applied linguistics, have enormously contributed to improving knowledge on intonation in general and on English in particular. It is only thanks to gathering 'exact' data that studies on intonation have been able to progress. Despite this, problems in theoretical research have emerged for various reasons: because previous studies have not always stemmed from a quantitatively and qualitatively valid corpus; because some theories

were devised and built on subjective bases; because terminology is still an 'anarchic' field (Bright 1992; Crystal 2010, see the entry for *intonation*).

Nevertheless, intonation has always occupied a marginal role in teaching and learning a foreign language from a pedagogical perspective. Prosodic components in general have often been neglected, treated in a chaotic manner or presented as an appendix in the handbooks and lessons of English courses. At the beginning of the 1950's there was already a perceived urgency to go beyond merely teaching segmental and favour suprasegmental components. At the end of the same decade Kingdon (1958) reported that English phonetists were compelled to admit that the progress of their students in intonation was disappointing compared to learning the sounds of the language. Such disparity seemed to be a result of the fact that phonetics was taught on the basis of an exhaustive analysis of isolated sounds before combining them in words and sentences, while intonation was taught after a superficial description of contrasting intonations by reading a large number of sentences. These sentences were usually classified based on their tunes in the hope that this repetition would enable students to master and correctly apply them (Kingdon 1958, XV).

Kingdon's observation still stands true, as the teaching of English phonetics is all too frequently limited to the correct articulation of phonetic segments. The element of intonation has been underestimated for too long because it was believed that it could be acquired by simply listening and repeating, and therefore imitating, models of reference. MacCarthy (1978, 47) reasoned along these lines of thought in the 1970's, for instance, when claiming that intonation was still too hard to define in order to be somewhat relevant for native English speakers. The direct imitation of a good model was therefore more than sufficient and adequate repetition and imitation of the teacher were important.

Having experienced the problems associated with teaching a language, phonetists themselves recalled the importance of prosodic elements in the teaching context. This is what Léon and Martin (1972) sustained in those same years when pointing out that intonation is apparently the most difficult element when learning a foreign language. There are, in fact, good chances that faulty intonation will never be corrected regardless of the used methods (1972, 141).

### 3.2 Intonation and oral communication

Any haphazard approach to teaching intonation could compromise the achievement of the entire communicative process. Pike (1945) has taught us that intonation has a strong semantic component: the speaker tends to react more to the meaning that is conveyed through vocabulary because they perceive intonation as the means of the interlocutor's most authentic intentions. We report an excerpt from one of Pike's most famous passages (1945, 22):

If someone says, «Is breakfast ready yet?» the sentence is either innocuous or an insult according to whether it is spoken nicely or nastily – and if the insult is resented, the speaker defends himself by saying, «I just asked if breakfast was ready, and she flew into a rage». This illustrates the fact that the intonation contours, though fluc-

tuating like the speaker's attitude, are as strong in their implications as the attitudes which they represent; in actual speech, the hearer is frequently more interested in the speaker's attitude than in his words – that is, whether a sentence is 'spoken with a smile' or with a sneer.

If a non-English speaker does not even know the basic notions of English prosody, they risk not only being misunderstood when speaking in a foreign language, but even not understanding their English interlocutor. An error in pronouncing a sound does not necessarily hinder communication because a possible ambiguity may often be solved within the context of communication itself or through further information provided by the speaker. On the contrary, misplaced intonation may result in the interlocutor's interpretation diverging from that desired by the speaker (Hewings 1995).

Such a consideration further enforces the idea that, when teaching English, intonation should not be underestimated even in school textbooks, where it is often confined in brief appendixes. As a matter of fact, repeating aloud is the only technique of learning the most common intonational contours of the English language that is proposed in most of the available workbooks and schoolbooks.

### 3.3 Psycholinguistic considerations

Research on language acquisition in children confirms the fact that intonation plays a fundamental role in communication processes. According to these studies, children activate an imitative mechanism starting from their fifteenth or sixteenth month. They begin by imitating animals, cars and the sounds that are most familiar (doorbells, telephones, etc.). In this respect, the observations of Fronzaroli (1957, 53) are of particular interest:

Certain examples lead to think of the imitation of musical intonation. Frontali remembers that his daughter Nora repeated the alarm from a nearby factory with an *uuu* sound, and therefore a musical note, while the other daughter, upon hearing the call *Nora!* divided into two notes, where the first was higher than the second and the third an interval, tried to repeat the vowels and two notes together, thus uttering two consonants that were undefined and difficult to reproduce (*Our translation from the Italian original version*).

Through imitation, the child would supposedly achieve more articulate and dense forms of communication thanks to the support of suprasegmental, rather than segmental elements. According to Lewis (1936, 115) the period for imitation starts around the seventh month. Soler (1978), instead, argues that such a period starts at the ninth month. From the ninth month onwards, there is a decline in the child's babbling, accompanied by an increase in the production of sounds that more closely resemble those used by adults in sentence structure.

The immediacy with which a child approaches intonation is out of the question. The English phonetician Roach sustains that the only truly efficient way to learn the intonation of a language lies in the way a child acquires intonation of their first



language. Training in oral English should help adult learners acquire English intonation in a similar (though much slower) way (Roach 1989, 115).

Crystal (1975, 125-158) points out that children who are unable to speak are still able to react to vocal intonation. In addition, they are able grasp and reproduce certain intonational patterns way before resorting to any grammar construction. This implies that grammatical elements are particularly significant in oral comprehension and production and that they are deeply rooted and innate in the mind of any child or adult speaker. Research in neurolinguistics also underline the importance of a language's suprasegmental aspects (Lenneberg 1967; Lyons 1970, 53-75; Danesi 1988).

As far as English intonation is concerned, it is important to heed the O'Connor's warning, as he exhorts teaching and learning it by forgetting, if possible, the intonation of one's native language. He claims in fact that English intonation *is* English, as it is not comparable to that of any other language. He mentions the example of *Thank you*, which may be uttered in two ways: starting with a high tone and ending low to show real gratitude, or starting low and ending high, which 'shows rather casual acknowledgement of something not very important' (O'Connor 1967, 137). In other words, if an English friend invites you to spend a weekend at their house and you respond with this second *thank you*, your friend would probably be offended because you seem rather ungrateful, if not downright impolite.

The incorrect use of intonation could lead to two results. In the first, in the best-case scenario, the speaker who uses unsuitable intonation is simply recognised as a non-native speaker by the native speakers. In the second case, which is unfortunately the most frequent case, the mistaken choice in intonation (which often occurs due to analogy with the speaker's native language) causes misunderstandings. An example in case is that of Agard and Di Pietro (1965, 59) centred on an Italian speaker who is trying to speak in English:

if a person says *Buongiorno* with the intonation which may accompany a cheerful *Good morning* in English, he risks conveying the additional meaning of: *Well, at long last! You're finally up.*

After all, lack of knowledge of the intonation of a foreign language may complicate oral comprehension in two ways: the listening does not understand the message, or they interpret it in the wrong way.

Teaching English intonation is therefore more urgent than ever. There is no reason why it should be overshadowed in advance because it seems to be impossible to teach it in a systematic manner, as occurs instead in English morphology, syntax or vocabulary. Understanding an English native speaker who is speaking to us means to grasp their underlying real communicative goals through their choice in rhythms, melodies and pauses. Intonation structures the statement from a holistic perspective, conveys the speaker's state of mind, translates their most hidden thoughts and reveals their hidden ambiguities and unexpressed will, guides the interpretation of the interlocutor, suggests preferential manners of understanding and interpreting an oral text by claiming much of what is said, but also not said. It is fundamental

to understand all this if one wants to speak and understand a foreign language and thus enter its 'soundscape'.

### 3.4 Sounds and prosody in ESPP

During their studies, a non-native English speaker will have to overcome the obstacle of pronunciation sooner or later. Jones (1972, 2-9) lists at least five types of inevitable difficulties for such students:

- a) the recognition of sounds and the ability to remember their acoustic qualities;
- b) the reproduction of sounds;
- c) the correct use of learned sounds;
- d) the distinction between long and short vowels, as well as stresses within a word;
- e) the sequence of phonemes in continuous oral speech that is as spontaneous as possible.

In particular, as far as the first difficulty is concerned, it is important to train and hone one's listening skills through systematic practice in listening to sounds, both isolated and within a context, because it enforces the memory of unfamiliar sounds and therefore enables one to:

- a) discriminate sounds among themselves, especially if they are similar;
- b) distinguish the acoustic qualities of 'new' sounds;
- c) easily recognise sounds of the English language.

As far as the second difficulty is concerned, we insist on the fact that learning English sounds, especially if they are 'new' for the learner, requires 'exercising' the phonatory apparatus. The learner must become aware of how lips, teeth and vowel tracts intervene in the process of phonation, thus making the shaping of a sound possible, especially if such a sound has never been produced by vocal organs.

In teaching and learning pronunciation nothing must be left to chance, let alone to improvisation. Every sound is *voluntarily* reproduced by a phonatory apparatus whose organs take on well-defined positions and execute extremely precise movements. Each phoneme is therefore perfectly reproducible by anyone in any foreign language. Both the trainer and the learner must be perfectly aware and, when necessary, trace back the path of sound production without fearing preliminary – and occasionally unpleasant – theoretical work.

### 4. *Knowing how to speak in public*

In starting with segmental and moving to suprasegmental aspects, our attention has hitherto focused on the role of the speaker's phonetic and phonological competence and paid special attention to contrastive non-English vs. English aspects. It is important to deal with these aspects before training in the art of holding the floor in public, or speaking in public, which is commonly referred to as *public speaking* (PS).

PS is a specific area in training English for scientific and professional purposes. By nature, it is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, and it is an ability that is at the base of oral communication in a broad sense. Significant application of speaking in public is experienced on an everyday basis by entrepreneurs, doctors, experts in the legal field, as well as researchers and scholars in general, who all often feel the challenging relation between effectiveness in speaking and the social construction of the messages they convey (Verderber, Verderber and Sellnow 2008; Ward 2004). Based on these premises, we believe it is essential to reflect on the awareness of the impact of oratory skills in professional contexts.

PS as a skill that is required by the job market has been a common topic in many blogs and websites over the past years (Zanola 2011). Nothing scientifically relevant emerges from these websites beyond general descriptions of the emotions and fears of orators when speaking in public (Bodie 2010; Egloff, Weck and Schmukle 2008; Hofmann and Di Bartolo 2000; Osório *et al.* 2013). Although the matter of speaking in public has been extensively dealt with from rhetorical, political and judicial points of view (Coopman and Lull 2008; Esenwein and Carnegie 1915; Kumar 2005; Lucas 1998; Strike 1994) or from the perspective of conversational analysis (Atkinson 1985; Hammond 1993; Nielsen 2004), this topic has received limited attention in relation to English for Specific Purposes (for more regarding the business context, see Crosling and Ward 2002; Freihart and Machzoomi 2012; for legal contexts, see Charnock 2002). The adjacent areas that have been explored over the past decades include the genres of 'conference presentations' (Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet 2003; Webber 1997) and 'presidential debates' (Bendinelli 2011).

#### 4.1 Towards a definition of public speaking

In the professional field, speaking well in public not only brings personal value but it also means suitably representing a company, an institution, an organisation or another person. Therefore, success is fundamental not only for oneself, but also – and especially – for those who are represented by the orator. It is also proportionate to the ability of being effective and efficient in presenting content that must be correctly interpreted and elaborated by the public (Cavalieri and Zanola 2020). The cornerstones of effective and efficient communication in public have been the subject of systematic studies in English studies for over a century, and we have defined them as 'elements of effective communication' elsewhere (Zanola 2011, 83-84). On that occasion, we referred to international business contexts in particular, where speeches address a culturally heterogeneous audience that uses English as a *lingua franca*.

The essential elements of oral communication in public in English have been extensively discussed in all the literature dedicated to PS, from the first theories in the Anglo-saxon area at the end of the seventeenth century (Barber 1830; Benhke 1898; Bell 1859; Comstock 1837 and 1844), to the first popularising publications in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century (Carnegie 1913; Esenwein 1902; Esenwein and Carnegie 1915), up to studies specialised in busi-

ness communication starting from the 1950's (Atkinson 1985; Aurner 1958; Kenny 1982; Lucas 1998; Strike 1994), and the increasingly frequent publications on the topic all around the world starting from the twenty first century in view of global English (Anderson 2016; Beebe and Beebe 2003; Bodie 2010; Coopman and Lull 2008; Grice and Skinner 2007; Fujishin 2018; Gallo 2014; Gartland 2007; Huang 2010; Osborn and Osborn 2006; Osborn *et al.* 2007; Patience *et al.* 2015; Zanola 2019). All this extensive bibliography repeatedly highlights that PS is effective if the speaker can:

- a) be memorable;
- b) be persuasive;
- c) be familiar with rhetorical figures (asyndeton, anaphora, rhetorical questions, hyperboles, repetitions, etc.);
- d) be able to manage eye contact in oral communication in general, and in a formal presentation in particular;
- e) be expert in body language and non-verbal communication;
- f) be able to suitably manage and use one's voice.

In the English-speaking area, specifically considering the importance of enhancing the oral skills for powerful communication, PS has been the object of study since the end of the sixteenth century. Some English treatises on punctuation dating back then (Hart 1569; Puttenham 1589) first stepped towards the definition of the written transcription of an oral text. In the seventeenth century, the study of English intonation and rhythm was purposefully strengthened to demonstrate the excellence of the English language (Butler 1634). The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries testified to the proliferation of treatises on the art of speaking in public in English all over Europe due to the rapid development of opportunities in contexts related to politics, economics, law, and theatre where the demand to speak in English was increasing (Oliver 1964). The nineteenth century was the golden age of the development of studies on intonation and gestures: in the second half of the century the first imposing study by Joshua Steele (1775) on English intonation made its way on the scene. This work opened a series of important frontiers on the prosodic features of the English language (Zanola 2002, 2004). It was followed, in turn, by *The Melody of Speaking* by Walker (1787), a markedly didactic treatise, and the Methodist Anglican Wesley's *Directions Concerning Pronunciation and Gesture* (1770). Through the following centuries, manuals were developed for professionals like doctors and lawyers, and PS became embedded in university curricula. However, popular PS books, especially from the US, have often simplified the discipline in ways that may not reflect academic depth, though they have spread globally. In truth though, the issue is not new within the history of contemporary rhetorics, if we retrace the rich literature that was produced between the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century thanks to the American elocutionists (Barber 1830; Behnke 1898; Bell 1859; Bernstein 1974; Burgh 1761; Chapman 1821; Comstock 1837, 1844; Mason 1748; Rush 1893).

At the present time, what characterises today's professional compared to speakers in the past is the increasingly complex competences and intercultural background that are required of them. Speaking in public in the job market implies:

- a) competence (the audience wants to feel that it is in good hands),
- b) interpersonal skills (the speaker must identify with the values and experiences of its audience and convey this connection),
- c) effectiveness (the communicative act must inspire trust, commitment and enthusiasm), and
- d) credibility (by means of proof and reasoning).

Moreover, emotion seems to have become an increasingly critical element of the persuasive act that is ingrained in oral performance. This has been demonstrated by recent studies on the way entrepreneurs speak in English (Zanola and Palermo 2013). That being the case, the conscious use of arguments and emotional language is a rather new challenge for the entrepreneurs that are active in international business contexts using English as the only *lingua franca*.

#### 4.2 Public speaking and the job market

The strategic importance of oral communication skills in the job market has been extensively documented in the literature on organisational leadership (Carnevale, Gainer and Meltzer 1990). It has been demonstrated that successful oral communication reflects a company's specific internal and external sources of influence. Within a company, in particular, communication is based on the understanding of the nature of the activities, aims, structures and manners in which they influence the decision-making process. This is something that graduates may not be aware of, as communication practices in the workplace are 'more censured'<sup>2</sup> than in academia. It is in this sense that a certain 'detachment' between the business world and academia in terms of future employees' acquiring professionally useful skills has long been observed.

In university courses or training for various professions (e.g., schools of specialisation, master classes, first and second-degree master's degrees, training courses), one of the main objectives should be that of illustrating the real communicative requirements and demands of the future workplace to learners. Carl Van Horn (1995), in summarising the results of a survey carried out on a sample of New Jersey graduate employees, recounts how oral communication is considered of vital importance to employers but how, strangely, it is also an area in which graduates lack preparation. Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, 78 and 84) report data on the type of PS training of more than 200 graduates in economics in Great Britain in the 2008-2010 period. For the most part, this category of young employees displays informal, improvised oral communication skills, which appears to strongly contrast the general requirement to work by objectives that is typical of the business world.

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<sup>2</sup> This expression was coined by Crosling and Ward (2002, 43).

Based on these considerations, the real challenge is to define the demands of oral communication in the job market. Such requirements are imposed everywhere and on all levels but are conditioned by factors inside and outside of the workplace, which influence the management approaches towards communication and the procedures underlying the organisation of communication processes (Chaney and Martin 2000, 6). Within companies, institutions, departments and workplaces in a broad sense, oral communication is influenced by the status of the parties, the purpose of communication and the means of communication. Successful communication also depends on the fact that the parties share basic knowledge and pre-suppositions, as well as on their linguistic and cultural identities (Hofstede 1984; 1991; Hofstede and Minkov 2012; Moran, Harris and Moran 2010; Bowe, Martin and Manns 2014).

### 5. *Conclusion*

The great evolution that all English language courses in academic institutions worldwide has undergone has received great attention both in the theory and the implementation of planning, completing and teaching (both in presence and remotely) syllabi in English for Specific Purposes (Bhatia and Bremner 2012). Nevertheless, in the case of English as the global language of the professions, it has been observed that multinational companies, for example, increasingly need to ensure that their requests to communicate efficiently in English in non-English contexts are satisfied (Hamp-Lyons and Lockwood 2009, 150). Moreover, according to Bhatia and Bremner (2012, 419), undergraduate and post-graduate students also often report being unsatisfied with their oral language preparation for work purposes, as most of them need assistance in managing professional interactions, some of which are academic and others connected to extra-corporate contexts. The perception of instructors in professional related areas generally enforce and complete such a claim. Such considerations enforce the opinion according to which EFL teaching needs to create suitable conditions to satisfy both the needs of the interdisciplinary demands of discourse analysis that are required of new students in academia and those of the workforce community aiming at multidisciplinary communicative expertise (Bazermann and Paradis 1991). This detachment between the professional world and the classroom needs to be handled more realistically and effectively (Bhatia and Bremner 2012; Zanola 2023).

As far as teaching programmes are concerned, the challenge lies in managing the tension between the demands of the job market and the teaching modules that are typical of academic training. A study by Crosling and Ward (2002, 53) has acknowledged the ability to deliver a presentation in public as one of the most common forms of oral communication that future graduates aspire to by decisively underlining how more research is necessary to determine the optimal balance between the responsibility of the university and that of the prospective company. Universities should extend generic skills acquired at school to skills, such as those required by



group presentations and discussions, individual presentations, the ability to critically approach an issue and hold one's ground in discussion, and to be assertive when presenting one's views (Crosling and Ward 2002, 54).

As Lucas (1998, 75) has underlined, the art of PS has represented the foundations of many university curricula in the United States over the past decades, and for good reason. According to a survey involving almost 500 companies and public organisations, PS has been classified as one of the most important qualities that are sought out by employers (Lucas 1998, 5). Such premises have led to including formal presentations in overseas university curricula (Kimberley and Crosling 2012) as a requirement in assessing for a work position. This has yielded excellent results in the oral performances of both native and non-native students during their studies and in the course of their later professional experience (Crosling 2000). Training and experience in PS have demonstrated having three benefits for students: they learn to prepare a presentation that is presumably organised according to a specific logic/reasoning; they explore keeping the audience's attention for a certain amount of time and how to argument a specific topic in an organic manner; they are compelled to work on honing clear eloquence about well-structured topic, on taking on proper body language and facial expressions and on their self-confidence.

Nevertheless, before achieving the overarching goal of attaining proficiency in public speaking in English, it is imperative for non-native speakers to undertake the steps outlined above, namely the study and practice of both segmental and suprasegmental features. The process of acquiring a second language necessarily involves time, concentration, and a gradual process of adaptation to the sounds and prosody of a language that is not the speaker's native language. It is crucial to note that no element is improvised, nor is it the result of the imitation of the moment. As adults, we have accumulated a lifetime of exposure to the sounds and rhythms of one or more languages that have punctuated our existence. Consequently, it is unreasonable to expect to become accustomed to one specific language in a few hours of a language course, however extraordinary that course may be, without first acquiring the patience to understand what is happening to us.

It is to be hoped that, in the future, the teaching of EFL to adults will place greater emphasis on the phonetic and phonological aspects of the language as fundamental elements for the authentic development of high-performance and broadly satisfying communicative skills, both personally and professionally.

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