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“TEACHER OF ITALIAN AS A NON-NATIVE LANGUAGE FOR LOW
EDUCATED USERS”. A NEW PROFESSIONAL PROFILE.¹

ADRIANA ARCURI
MARI D'AGOSTINO
EGLE MOCCIARO
University of Palermo

ABSTRACT: In last years, migrants' cultural features and age have changed and an increasing amount of people landing on Italian shores is constituted by unaccompanied foreign minors, mostly belonging to the category of LESLLA. This scenario imposes the definition of new competencies, suitable for the training needs of these new users. In fact, teachers of Italian L2 have to acquire literacy skills, which traditionally do not fall within their professional background. Moreover, these competencies should be markedly oriented in a strategic way, as the timeframe for learning is typically long for illiterate adults, in contrast with the urgent needs of pragmatic use of the language. The paper describes the new professional profile of the “Teacher of Italian as a non-native language for low educated users”, as it has been defined within the research and teaching experience of the School of Italian Language for Foreigners of the University of Palermo.

KEYWORDS: Italian L2, teachers' training, unaccompanied minors, strategic competencies.

1. THE LABEL AND ITS CONTEXT: AN INTRODUCTION

In last years, the School of Italian Language for Foreigners of the University of Palermo (henceforth, ItaStra) welcomes an increasing number of learners belonging to various categories of the low educated users, that is, users non-literate in their L1 or

1. The whole paper results from close cooperation of the authors. However, Adriana Arcuri is responsible for Sections 2.2 and 3.2, Mari D'Agostino for Sections 1 and 4, and Egle Mocciano for Sections 2.1 and 3.1.

who have experienced a very short educational period. A substantial part of these users is constituted by unaccompanied foreign minors (see Amoruso et al., 2015; Amoruso et al., 2016), that is, minors “who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so”, according to the definition given by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child².

The educational effort that, starting from 2011, ItaStra addresses to such learners (by means of dedicated courses, as well as other activities aiming at social inclusion) has imposed an upgrade of the analytical and methodological tools characterizing our research activity and didactic practice. A significant aspect of this reflection has involved teacher training and has resulted in the definition of a new professional profile specifically dedicated to low educated users, namely, the “Teacher of Italian as a non-native language for low educated users”.

The planning and the realization of such a new profile have been entrusted to the 2nd level Master in “Theory, design, and didactics of Italian as L2 and LS”, a postgraduate university course closely related to the ItaStra activities³.

The new profile is characterized by specific skills – above all, concerning literacy – which traditionally do not fall within the teachers’ professional background. Moreover, these competencies should be markedly oriented in a strategic way, as the timeframe for language learning is typically long for illiterate adults, in contrast with the urgent needs of use of the language. In addition, due to the migrants’ working needs and also because they undergo frequent relocations, it is hard for them to attend medium-long learning pathways. As a consequence, teachers have to learn how to design activities which, despite the short period of guided learning, may produce autonomous lifetime learning competencies.

In what follows, we will try to describe the features characterizing the professional profile of the “Teacher of Italian as a non-native language for low educated users”, according to the model tested at the University of Palermo.

This profile consists in a set of competencies that can be summarized as follows:

- a) “doubting”, that is, to be talented at problem posing before than problem solving, and used to verifying and rethinking their own patterns of behavior and patterns of action (cf. the notion of “puzzlement” described by Hanks, 2015);
- b) “constructivism”, that is, to be able to accumulate key knowledge and exploit it in a new way, as well as to focus on learners’ resources rather than shortcomings, such as the oral language skills at their disposal rather than their weaknesses in Italian language;

2. Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General comments* (General Comment No. 6 “Unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin”, par. 7 and 8, September 2005).

3. In particular, Master student-teachers’ training is largely carried out within the classrooms of ItaStra or in other educational contexts cooperating with it, such as family homes hosting unaccompanied minors (some of these experiences have been described in Arcuri et al., 2015). More recently, ItaStra and Master – whose relationship is actually made by a continuous exchange of information, experience, as well as people – have been engaged in a wide project involving the newly instituted CPIAs (Territorial Centers for Adult Education), to which they address training courses for both adult illiterate learners and teachers of Italian L2 (see D’Agostino & Sorce, 2016).

- c) “expertise” in Italian language (not merely a native speaker), acquisition processes, and theories of language;
- d) “decentralization”, that is, to be able in recognizing and accepting all kinds of difference between themselves and the learners;
- e) “research”, that is, to be able to face the lack of specific and tested materials, ready to check systematically the results of the educational action, as well as the assumptions on which the didactic action is founded, to falsify them whenever the systematic observation in the classroom forces in this direction.

While a)-c) can be considered general features of any teacher of Italian as an L2, d) and e) represent instead stricter requirements for the teacher of Italian for low educated users.

The paper is organized in two parts: in section 2) we discuss the specific competencies that the teacher of Italian L2 for low educated users should possess; in section 3) the training path actually tested at ItaStra will be presented. In section 6 we propose a summing up.

2. SPECIFIC PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES

2.1. COMPETENCE 1: “DECENTRALIZING” TEACHER

The more the two poles of the didactic relationship “teacher vs. learner” share cultural features, the more the teacher’s “spontaneous” (that is, internalized) way of working will be suited to the learners; the more they differ, the more teachers need to introduce and experience new didactic elements to meet learners’ needs.

The differences at work in the relationship between teacher and learner mainly involve three cultural sub-domains, namely: presence vs. absence of a written culture, schooling culture and socialized learning, and variety of the linguistic repertoire.

In the case of non-literate or semi-literate learners, the fundamental distance lies in the presence vs. absence of a written code and, related to this, in the presence vs. absence of textual competencies concerning written texts, including the pragmatic dimension of the text, paratext, inferential strategies involving the wide domain of the textual implicitness, hence the shared encyclopedia.

Literacy also affects the cognitive level, as it conditions, more or less directly, our way to know and to represent the world, as well as to perceive spoken language; quoting Nicholas (2012: 268), “literacy has both the dimensions of reading the world and reading the word”. However, we will not deal here with the effects of illiteracy on “words”, that is, on the problems related to the phonological awareness and the ability in segmenting the phonetic continuum (the reader is referred to Amoruso et al., 2016).

Another aspect of culture directly affecting cognition is what can be called *socialized learning*. Any individual learns learning models and patterns within and through the processes of socialization (i.e., within social contexts, such as family, school etc.). Thus, learning models are conceived of as “socialized” or, in other words, they are social products. In the case of illiterate learners, the teacher deals not just with a *different* learning model (as in the case, for instance, of a German learner learning the Chinese language), but with the lack of a school learning model as a whole, as illiterate are, by

definition, low educated and, hence, lacking a school culture (e.g. awareness of student/teacher relationship, peer relationship, method of studying, endorsed learning styles, etc.). As learning models seem to influence learning styles, we can assume that non-formal experiences of learning favor learning styles far from the scholastic ones. Thus, "learning to learn" becomes one of the major goal of the didactic action. As Feldmeier (2008: 12) claims, it is essential "to make the learning process transparent and offer the learners tools for setting, planning, conducting and evaluating their own learning" or, in other words, for developing autonomy and responsibility on the learning process itself (Feldmeier, 2016: 93).

The first consequence of the cultural distance is that teachers for low educated learners have to make the effort of "defocusing" from their known cultural world to a greater extent than in other educational contexts. In other words, they should operate on their own styles (first, on the style of teaching, which is typically an after-effect of the individual learning style).

"Decentralization" also involves the recognition of a specific knowledge on the part of the learners, which is both a cultural (and experiential) baggage and a linguistic one. Very frequently, in fact, illiterate learners are endowed with a plurilingual oral competence, deriving from both the life context and the experience of migration. On this topic, Tarone & Bigelow (2012: 8) have observed that:

Interesting, and perhaps ironic to some, is the fact that very high levels of low print literacy frequently co-occur with very high levels of multilingualism.

Take the case of Burkina Faso where only 21% of the adult population can read and write. School life expectancy is 6 years for girls and 7 years for boys. However, Burkina Faso has 68 living languages, many which have fewer than 1000 speakers. While exact numbers of languages and speakers is disputable, we can assume that many people in Burkina Faso who are illiterate frequently learn each other's languages. [...] Clearly, multilingualism does not depend upon literacy or formal schooling, as many may believe in more monolingual contexts.

The case of Burkina Faso reported by Tarone & Bigelow particularly fits our description, as a large part of illiterate learners at ItaStra arrives from Sub-Saharan Western Africa.⁴ Within this area, numerous (non Bantu) Niger-Congo languages are spoken, belonging to different groups and subgroups and frequently coexisting within the same linguistic community. As Grandi (2008: 272-273) notes, we are dealing with heavily indented areas from a linguistic point of view, where the official language is in fact the native language only of a minority of the population. In this situation of marked multilingualism, it is quite usual that the repertoire of a linguistic community has an average of 15 languages. Any adult, indeed, speaks at least a "mother language" (which is, literally, the language spoken by the mother, in the frequent cases in which the father belongs to a different ethnic group or is emigrated due to work), possibly the language of the father (alongside the first language or even during the adolescence)

4. Especially from Gambia, Senegal, Benin, Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea Conakry, Guinea Bissau. Other major groups of low educated learners at ItaStra come from North Africa (e.g. Egypt) and Bangladesh.

and the vehicular language, used to communicate with neighboring villages; European languages of colonial legacy have generally an official status and are quite widespread as L2s, especially among the highly educated population (Adegbija 1994; Turchetta, 1996: 39-40; 2008: 495). These linguistic repertoires, which begin to take shape since childhood, increase over time in relation to the individual mobility, which may include the migration journey (Amoruso et al. 2015).

As a rule, learners' repertoires are not part of teachers' linguistic competence and, as they cannot be used and controlled directly, they are not conceived of as expendable materials in the teaching acting. This is a false belief, as plurilingual competence, if properly used, may be a crucial resource in the construction of learning paths, regardless of the teacher's own competence. An example of this is given by the so-called "autobiographical method", illustrated by Di Benedetto et al. (2016).

If teachers cannot acquire a plurilingual control corresponding to learners' competencies, they are however asked to develop a "typological sensibility" that provides a set of criteria to guide them *within* learners' languages, including their Italian interlanguage, since, like any other natural language, an L2 fits coherently within the typological panorama. This sensibility is stimulated by means of dedicated courses on grammar and typology aiming at showing, on the one hand, the relativity of certain phenomena, which are central in some languages and peripheral or absent in others (e.g. the definite article or the geminate stop consonants etc.) and, on the other hand, the limits of cross-linguistic diversity, whose boundaries are drawn by the structures of human cognition (Mocciaro 2014: 102-103).

In sum, becoming aware of the cultural distances just described⁵ constitutes an essential prerequisite of the teaching action, referred to as the "reflective approach" (see 3.2).

2.2. COMPETENCE 2: "RESEARCHER" TEACHER

Our training model allows teachers to acquire techniques and methods to manage orality, textuality, reading and writing, and autobiographical activities.

On the bases drawn in 2.1, teachers' training is articulated around five pivotal points on which their teaching action should be founded.

The first point consists in structuring teaching situations at all the identified levels simultaneously (socialized learning, learners' cultural and linguistic competencies).

Second, in our approach, four areas of teaching action strictly interact and potentiate each other: orality, reading and writing, textuality, autobiography.

A third wide area of intervention embraces the domain of textuality. More in the spirit of De Beaugrande & Dressler (1981) and Coseriu (1997), texts are conceived of as "communicative units", rather than as mere linguistic contexts for single words to appear and be studied. The overall pragmatic value of texts will help learners to formulate

5. There are, of course, other cultural features deserving attention. Among these, an interesting direction of research could be the use of technological devices on the part of non-literate learners. This could allow teachers, on the one hand, to understand which strategies are used in absence of written abilities; and, on the other hand, to structure learning paths based on technologies (see also Naeb, 2016).

hypotheses and to make inferences about the meaning of words they cannot decipher yet, exactly due to the link with the context of occurrence. Based on this theoretical scenario, student-teachers' training involves an extensive use and the practice of pragmatic texts⁶ (e.g. descriptive texts, such as plaques, and regulative texts, such as road signs, prohibitions, instructions etc.). By structuring didactic situations based on real tasks, they guide learners to recognize the meaning of texts according to their pragmatic purpose and to use them depending on their own practical aims (to get to a destination, use a drug, etc.), even in cases they are not able to fully decipher the words occurring in these texts. A strong tenet of the area of textuality is the early approach to complex written texts, seemingly incompatible with illiteracy, in order to stimulate a precocious competence in *anticipating* the sense, when the decoding competence is not yet developed. In other words, we work on strengthening the top-down process (as anticipation is), when the bottom-up process is still scanty, so that when the decoding competence will reach the whole syllabic inventory, a strategic approach is already developed and it will be possible for learners to proceed straight along this way.

The fourth point concerns learners' competence of study tools, that is, attention is drawn to the structure and use of specific formats of texts which learners face for the first time and whose role and structure is anything but obvious (such as textbooks, school works, types of exercises, diaries, manuals, etc.).

Fifth, fostering assessment as a learning situation, that is, assessment should not only be used as a way to obtain information on the learning processes at work, but also for its own educational dimension. This can be achieved by sharing and discussing with the learners the evaluation results while simultaneously stimulating self-assessment. Through the recognition of their progress and difficulties, learners are oriented (for the first time) within their own learning processes and specificities as learners (e.g. cognitive styles, preferred methods, recurrent errors, etc.).

To sum up, based on the learner's profile we are dealing with, we have been testing a didactic action providing *strategic* competencies, so that, in a short time, non-educated learners can use the language as a real means for social interaction, in a way that their merely linguistic competence would not allow.

3. THE TRAINING MODEL

3.1. TRAINING CONTEXTS

The training proposal is articulated in three different contexts, whose addressees are quite different groups of student-teachers, namely initial training and two paths of in-service training, as represented in Figure 1.

6. Other types of texts are used within different paths of the training, e.g. the linguistic autobiography has a strong narrative characterization.

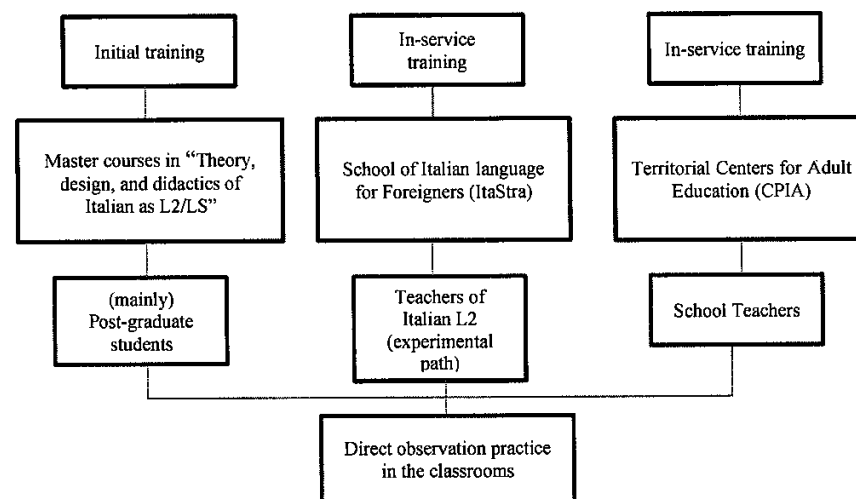


Fig. 1: Schema of the Training Paths for LESLLA Teachers.

Initial training consists in a postgraduate course, the 2nd level Master in "Theory, design and didactics of Italian as a second and foreign language" of the University of Palermo, mainly (but not only) addressed to postgraduate students.

The first type of in-service training takes place at ItaStra, where teachers with an already solid training in Italian as an L2 are involved in new experimental paths of both training and teaching.

The second one, instead, concerns the neo-instituted Territorial Centers for Adult Education (CPIA), having the task of guiding learners towards the obligatory educational degree (the first level of the high school) and the certification of the A2 level of Italian (Q CER), both essential steps to obtain a residence permit.

Despite many relevant differences in realizing the training action and its contents, obviously due to their different training needs, these groups are equally involved in a complex observation activity within the classrooms, although in the case of in-service training student-teachers act within their own classrooms.

3.2. WAYS OF TRAINING

Irrespective of the differences among the groups of training described in Section 3.1, the training model presents a few systematic features.

First, it uses a "reflective" approach, in the sense of Schön (1983). The reflective teachers we aim at are able to identify and recognize their own patterns of action and to modify them in order to reach a higher level of effectiveness. The reflective teachers consider themselves as learners, with specific cognitive features (e.g. cognitive preferences, studying approach, etc.) and a personal learning history (relationship with teachers and learned language, socialization in learning, etc.).

The second stable feature is auto-observation. This is an aspect of the reflective practice involving language: knowledge on second language acquisition, as well as internal plurilingualism, are acquired starting from tasks of auto-observation and auto-analysis as speakers of Italian as L1. In the same direction, students are asked to write a linguistic autobiography.

Third, the model is characterized by a strong interaction between linguistic and didactic training. In this case, the reflective practice embraces the core of the disciplines, and is aimed at individuating the link between theory and didactic practices, through the observation practice in the classrooms. The intertwining among didactic activities, linguistic theories, and theories of language acquisition produces a new kind of first-hand knowledge, particularly effective on the training level. This intertwining is realized within a “crossed” module accompanying all the other courses and allowing the actualization of such a reflective activity. We metaphorically refer to such a module as *tessuto*, lit. ‘woven’. The reflexive path has its final step in the realization of the “learning auto-biography”.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have presented two tightly related aspects that contribute to define the professional profile of the teacher of Italian L2 for low educated learners, namely: the features of this particular kind of learners, up to now little or by no means present in Italian classrooms, and the way in which teachers’ competencies should be shaped to meet the specific educational needs of such learners.

The description is based on the training experiences carried out at the University of Palermo, where, starting from 2011, new paths of research and experimental teaching aimed at low educated learners have enriched an already established training model for teachers of Italian L2.

In particular, we have developed – and tested – a model of strategic intervention aimed at balancing the specificities in learning exhibited by low educated adults and their urgent needs of social inclusion.

The results arising from the tests conducted so far of the model seem to confirm the validity of the teaching and training hypotheses implemented⁷.

7. Among these results, see ItaStra (2016-2017), a course of Italian for low educated adult learners, that reflects the methodology here discussed into, transferring it into a concrete teaching practice; the course is focused on strategic competencies and proposes an early use of complex texts (see www.pontidiparole.com).

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