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Integration of migrants, from language proficiency to knowledge of society: the Italian case

Abstract: This paper presents the first results of a research project realized by the Universities for Foreigners of Perugia and Siena that created materials designed to promote social awareness. The materials consist of 24 video clips of approximately one hour in total, which are available to download free of charge onto tablet, smartphone or PC, and are accompanied by texts in five languages.

Résumé : Cette contribution présente les premiers résultats d'un projet de recherche mené par les universités pour étrangers de Pérouse et de Sienne en vue d'élaborer des aides multimédias pour expliquer et comprendre la société italienne. Les aides consistent en 24 vidéos de 60 minutes environ sur la connaissance de la société qui peuvent être téléchargées gratuitement sur tablette, smartphone, PC ; chacune est accompagnée d'un texte en cinq langues.

1 Introduction

This paper presents the results of a research project carried out in Italy in 2015 and 2016 by a group of researchers of the University for Foreigners of Perugia and the University for Foreigners of Siena, with funding from the Italian Ministry of Home Affairs. The main objective of the project was the design and production of didactic and training materials on Knowledge of Society (KoS), addressed to migrants living in Italy and also to teachers and trainers involved in Italian language courses. The paper describes the Italian context within the more complex European situation, then moves to the analysis of the construct and content of the KoS materials and identifies some critical issues related to the fairness and ethics of a KoS test.

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2 The KoS in Europe and in Italy

A recent report of the Council of Europe (Pulinx et al. 2014) on the linguistic integration of adult migrants describes the linguistic and KoS requirements laid down by 36 European countries; 18 of them require KoS both for residence and for citizenship. Building on two previous surveys (2007 and 2009), the report summarizes the European context by analyzing data from a survey carried out in 2013. The Italian data frames a scenario where KoS content is offered by Italian language teachers in non-compulsory language courses and without formal assessment.

The Italian language courses addressed to migrants and the KoS tests afterwards were officially introduced in Italy in 2012, when the Integration Agreement came into force. Their origin is linked to that of the language requirements for long-term residence permits in particular to the law of 4 June 2010, which defines the procedures of the Italian language test: “for the issuance of a permit for EU long-term residents, the foreigner must possess a level of knowledge of the Italian language that allows him/her to understand sentences and frequently used expressions in current areas, at Level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference” (Masillo 2016: 210). The Integration Agreement is also linked to the agreement signed in November 2010 between the Italian Ministry for Home Affairs and the Ministry of Education, University and Research: “the latter developed official guidelines for test design and the assessment of performances of migrants. As explained in these guidelines, which contain basic test specifications and the required competence level (i.e. CEFR Level A2), the test must consist of three sections: Listening, Reading and Written Interaction. The Ministry of Education provided only these test specifications and guidelines which each educational center, located all across Italy, was to use to design their own tests and administer it” (ibid.).

Since March 2012, in order to fulfill the standards laid down by the Integration Agreement, KoS has been linked to knowledge of Italian at A2 level. According to the new guidelines, migrants who lack documentation confirming that they meet the requirements of the Integration Agreement must take a test to assess their proficiency in the Italian language and KoS. Considering the characteristics of migrants and their level of proficiency in Italian (usually very basic), the guidelines specify that the test must be oral, which recognizes the dominant role of the spoken language. As in the case of the Italian A2 level test, the guidelines also specify that the test should be designed by the teachers involved in adult education centers and administered by adopting specific strategies.

The content of the test refers to the following topics:

SECTION A: BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE ITALIAN CONSTITUTION AND THE ORGANIZATION AND MODE OF OPERATION OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS IN ITALY

Basic principles of the Constitution:

- The form of government in Italy: the Republic
- Guarantee of fundamental human rights and duties of solidarity
- Equal social dignity and equality before the law
- Right to work
- Freedom of religion
- Legal status of foreigners
- The Italian flag

Organization and mode of operation of public institutions in Italy:

- Authority and power of the state government
- Regions, provinces and municipalities: local government

SECTION B: LIVING IN ITALY, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE FIELDS OF HEALTH, SCHOOL, SOCIAL SERVICES, LABOUR AND TAX OBLIGATIONS

- Health: the right to health
- School
- Social services: the integrated system of interventions and social services
- Work: the right to work and labor rights
- Tax liabilities

SECTION C

- Rights and duties of foreigners living in Italy
- Rights and obligations attached to living in Italy
- The reciprocal rights and duties of married people
- Duties of parents towards their children according to the Italian legal system, also with reference to schooling
- Principal local projects that support the integration of foreigners and relevant regulations concerning health and safety at work

As we said, the test is a spoken test. It is conducted one-to-one: each candidate interacts with a test administrator and a second test administrator plays the role of observer (usually the test administrators are Italian language teachers). The test lasts for a minimum of seven and a maximum of 10 minutes, including the attribution of a level of proficiency. It consists of:

1. a brief presentation of the candidate, conducted by the test administrator;
2. on the basis of three different inputs (one for each of the three sections listed above), a spoken interaction between the candidate and the test administrator.

The brief presentation is conducted using a series of open-ended questions in order to introduce the candidate. All the inputs of the spoken tests refer to the personal experience of the candidate, without generalizations or cultural, conceptual or speculative abstractions. In any case, the linguistic formulation of the inputs should be related to the A2 level of proficiency in Italian. The test must be an interview and not an interrogation, and the test administrator can use a variety of different inputs, such as pictures or objects, aimed at facilitating the oral interaction. The test administrator should establish a relaxed mood, maintain a highly cooperative attitude, and speak clearly and with an accent not far removed from standard Italian.

The test results may be:

1. High: The test is carried out in an appropriate way; the candidate interacts with fluency and rarely requires the test administrator to repeat; he/she gives appropriate answers even if in a short form and with some hesitation; he/she uses a basic lexical repertoire and simple structures, even if his/her speaking includes some lexical and morphosyntactic errors and intonation and pronunciation are in some cases influenced by his/her L1.
2. Good: The test is carried out in an appropriate way; the candidate interacts but sometimes requires help from the test administrator; he/she gives appropriate answers even if in a short form and with some hesitation; he/she uses a basic lexical repertoire and simple structures, even if his/her speaking presents some lexical and morphosyntactic errors and intonation and pronunciation are influenced by his/her L1.
3. Sufficient: The test is carried out in a way that is not quite appropriate; the candidate interacts with some difficulty but is nevertheless able to orient him/herself to the issues addressed; he/she often requires the examiner to repeat; he/she does not always give appropriate answers; he/she uses a basic lexical repertoire and simple structures, though his/her speaking presents some lexical and morphosyntactic errors and intonation and pronunciation are strongly influenced by his/her L1.

Achieving at least a *Sufficient* level in KoS also entails the achievement of A2 level in spoken Italian.

3 The Italian project

The introduction of a KoS test in Italy had to deal with the lack of materials that migrants could use to learn the KoS content. As we suggested above, before the Agreement KoS was scheduled only as content to be included as part of the Italian language courses provided by adult education centers and in some cases proposed as the content of specific courses delivered in the L1 of the migrants. Before 2012, the KoS test was not compulsory, and in any case it was a written test, and in some cases computer-based. In these circumstances, there was a total lack of materials for autonomous study/training.

The project carried out in 2015 and 2016 was started precisely to satisfy the needs of migrants whether or not they are attending a KoS course and/or an Italian language course (Machetti and Rocca 2015). The aim was to design didactic materials in KoS that would be linguistically appropriate and easily accessible. There are two kinds of material:

- a guide to the KoS test, addressed to migrants;
- a series of video-materials (accompanied by a text in five languages – English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Chinese) that illustrate the KoS contents.

The guide is intended to present, in a clear and concise manner, the Agreement's aims and illustrate the characteristics of the test (content, duration, assessment criteria etc.). The 24 video-materials (one hour in total) are designed on the basis of the KoS contents; their purpose is to support migrants and their teachers as they prepare for the KoS test.

4 Critical issues

Finally, we want to offer some reflections concerning the issues of fairness and ethics with regard to the KoS test, taking into account the Italian context and the impact of the test in that context (Shohamy 2007). The total lack of a culture of evaluation and assessment in Italy is an incontrovertible fact, and very influential considering the impact that the KoS test could have in this country.

One of the main problems is that the KoS test is exclusively instrumental; it exists in order to fulfill an obligation and lacks any other function. Another critical point concerns the choice of level A2 for the language test required for long-term residence and the construct of the KoS test: is this choice ethical? Does it run the risk, already evident in language testing, of marginalizing migrants by demanding a language proficiency level well below the threshold of full commu-

nicative autonomy? And finally: is a test aimed at assessing both proficiency in Italian and KoS valid and reliable?

Looking at the issue of impact, the question that remains open is whether the introduction of the KoS test will have a positive impact in the educational context. In fact, we wonder whether migrants who access the test will also be more strongly motivated to attend a language course. We cannot forget that in Italy a large number of migrants are socially and linguistically very disadvantaged: the opportunity to access a language course in Italian could represent a valuable opportunity for them.

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